

Should School Districts Redirect Funds or Resources Toward Developing New Programs for Critical Languages?

After decades of barely recognizing the foreign language teaching community, the federal government has initiated several programs under the auspices of the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) whose goal it is to increase the number of foreign language speakers in the United States. This should be a cause for celebration; however, there seems to be several concerns that this newfound interest has engendered.

On a personal level, many teachers of traditionally taught languages (i.e. Spanish, French, German and Italian) are concerned that the constant struggle to keep their programs funded will become much harder and may result in the closing of classes and the loss of jobs as schools shift to teaching what are now being called “critical” languages. On the educational level, the funding seems to bypass the most basic source of instruction in foreign languages, that is, the K-12 institutions (NSLI, 2005). Little is being done to encourage school districts and universities to make 3/3/3¹ foreign language proficiency the norm rather than a rarity among its graduates. Finally, the principal goal of this new funding is to prepare the armed services to be more successful at “warfighting”² in the 21st century (The Roadmap, 2005). Given that many of us teach foreign languages in the hope of creating a world in which our citizens communicate more effectively, is there any common ground that we share with those who are implementing the United States Department of Defense (DoD) objectives?

These concerns are real and reflect the complicated world in which we live. It is in the interest of our profession, our students and our country to demand that the largest number of languages be taught to the greatest number of students. Moreover, the goals that the DoD has set out cannot be accomplished at the expense of current language instruction programs or without their cooperation. Nor can these goals be met without acknowledging and supporting the linguistic talents of the heritage communities around the country.

Historical Background

To understand the goals of NSLI, one must have some understanding of the goals of the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap (the Roadmap), the document behind its funding. This document describes the experience of

¹ Reading/listening/speaking ability at a professional working proficiency according to the Interagency Language Roundtable Language Skill Level Descriptions (ILR, 2006). This is the goal proficiency level required for language professionals in the military (The Roadmap, 2005).

² This word is used frequently in the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap to describe military warfare.

current military operations in relation to their lack of linguistic and culturally proficiency and is an outcome of the transformation that US armed forces are currently undergoing.

In response to the fall of the Soviet Union and the change in perception of who our enemies are since 9/11, the US has closed or greatly reduced many of the large international bases of operation around the world. Instead, the Pentagon has opted for establishing smaller “Forward Operating Sites” sometimes referred to as “lily pads” or “Cooperative Security Locations” along with sea-based launching pads. These are generally located in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and the former Soviet Republics. These countries have greater linguistic variety than the countries focused on during the Cold War era. Their location near oil resources is among the explicit criteria for selection. By 2010, the goal is to be able to put a combat-ready brigade into action anywhere in the world within 96 hours, a full division within 120 hours, and 5 divisions (some 75,000) troops within 30 days (Barnes, 2005). Combat-ready includes “greater [linguistic] competency and regional area skills . . . and a surge capacity to rapidly expand its [the DoD's] language capacities on short notice (The Roadmap, 2005).”

One of the lessons of recent military operations is that the military's objectives have been hampered by the lack of importance given linguistic skills and cultural knowledge. The Roadmap explains:

Language skill and regional expertise have not been regarded as warfighting skills, and are not sufficiently incorporated into operational or contingency planning. As a result, there is insufficient effort under the current “requirements” determination process to prepare for support of deployed forces . . . language skill and regional expertise are not valued as Defense core competencies yet they are as important as critical weapon systems.

The desired outcomes of the Roadmap include: personnel with the correct linguistic and cultural proficiency in peacetime and wartime operations; that the military understands and values these abilities; and that cultural education is incorporated into Professional Military Education and Development.

It is also important to define “critical” languages. This is not a set list of languages but rather an evolving concept. Currently, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi and Farsi are specifically mentioned in NSLI, however, “and others” is added to the description. Critical languages are those that the military sees as important to their goals. They are referred to in the Roadmap as “emerging languages and dialects.” This does not mean that the languages are newly developing but rather that the languages have “emerged” as those being spoken in countries whose military importance has “emerged.”

Personal Concerns

Being a foreign language teacher is different from being an English, Math, Science or Social Studies teacher. Your position at your school is secure only as

long as the principal or district deems it necessary to fund an effective foreign language program. As in the case of New York State, students are required to study only two years of a foreign language before they graduate. Students do not have to pass a test nor is there any monitoring by the State that identifies schools that do not provide this minimum requirement for every child.

In some cases, the middle school requirement of one year is disregarded under a broad interpretation of the Commissioner's Regulation 100.4(c)(5) that allows middle schools to provide academic intervention services instead of foreign language instruction. Some principals interpret this to mean that entire classes may be exempt from foreign language study. For this reason, some students, especially in New York City, do not study any language other than English in middle school. New York State, with 28% of its population speaking a language other than English in the home (Census, 2000(a)), has minimal graduation requirements for foreign language study and there is no mandate instruction for heritage speakers. This creates a very insecure environment for foreign language teachers and has an impact on retention of qualified teachers. This lack of stability also discourages interested college students from pursuing a career as foreign language teachers.

If the situation is unstable for teachers of the more commonly taught languages, it is abysmal for those who teach less-commonly taught languages. At the National Council on Less Commonly Taught Languages (NCOLCTL) 2004 conference, during the Round Table on the Status and Future of NCOLCTL the most important theme that emerged was that of job security. Most teachers worked as adjuncts at universities. They saw little chance of ever obtaining tenured-tracked positions or, at least, ones that paid basic benefits like health care. Some worked at as many as four universities in order to make ends meet. Others worked as volunteers for cultural organizations. While more commonly taught language teachers worry about losing their jobs, less-commonly taught language teachers wonder when they will actually get paid a living wage for their skills. We are all affected by the same attitudes that leave foreign language study out of the curriculum. We need to see each other as colleagues and support each other's right to a secure job with a living wage. That can only happen if there is a sea change in attitudes toward teaching foreign languages.

Educational Concerns

The NSLI has three main goals: to expand the number of Americans mastering critical need languages; increase the number of advanced-level speakers of foreign languages with an emphasis on critical languages; and increase the number of foreign language teachers (NSLI, 2005).

When I read how this initiative proposed to do this, I was left with an image. When my school was adopted by a "Friends of..." organization, we were told that it would help provide funds to improve the school. Teachers soon found out that those funds would not pay to reduce our enormous class size (34 students per class), for books, paper, supplies or even a badly needed copy machine but the organization would pay to send some teachers to the Amazon to

record sounds that could be incorporated into the music and English classes. What we really needed to survive on a day-to-day basis was in scarce supply but we were treated to extravagant development opportunities.

NSLI seems to have the same priorities. Looked at holistically, it almost seems as if the State Department believes that advanced level foreign language instruction is the norm, and even critical language instruction is happening all around the country. According to NCOTLCL, 91 percent of all foreign language students study French, German, Italian or Spanish. Nine percent of our students study a less commonly taught language that can include any number of the hundreds of languages spoken by the rest of the world. The students who might receive scholarships under NSLI are in short supply as are the programs necessary to produce those students. At the same time, the large majority of students who are studying European languages may not be eligible for these funds. In the same way, the funding to increase the numbers of foreign language teachers is assuming that there are enough programs that are capable of producing teachers of less commonly taught languages and that there are jobs for them when they graduate. Where are these programs? Where are these positions? The members of NCOLCTL would like to know.

Another gaping hole in the programs that are funded by NSLI is the lack of specific programs to help heritage speakers meet the rigorous proficiency standards set by federal agencies for employment. There may be some Spanish for Spanish Speakers courses at schools today but it is rare that a school will teach heritage courses in Chinese, Russian, Bengali, Farsi or any of the other languages that our students speak.

Political Concerns

ACTFL's Standards for Foreign Language Learning (National Standards) is, in many ways, a revolutionary document especially in the context of the United States. It asks students to not only be able to speak another language but also to demonstrate cultural understanding, to acquire information from sources in other languages, to develop insight into the nature of language and culture and to participate in multilingual communities (National Standards, 1996). A person who accomplishes these goals cannot be unchanged by the experience. What happens, however, when these students take one of the new jobs available to them? If we teach our students based on these standards will it make them good warriors? Will it make them good spies? Will it make them reliable translators? Can what we teach our students be used against the very people we are hoping they learn to appreciate? Or, can we actually put our students in danger of arrest and possibly worse?

The most striking statistic is that of fatalities among the civilian translators who have worked in Afghanistan and Iraq for the DoD since 2002. 172 civilian contract linguists have been killed. This is 2.6% of the approximately 6,500 linguists who work for the DoD (Elliott, 2006). These men and women are our colleagues and potentially our students.

Another danger is that the type of work assigned to a linguist may put one into a position in which conscience and loyalty to one's country come into conflict. Katharine Gun is a good example. Gun worked for Britain's General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the intelligence agency that intercepts and deciphers communications from around the world. She received a memo from the US National Security Agency that requested aid in a secret and illegal operation to bug the United Nations offices of several nations that could have been swing votes to determine whether the UN would approve the invasion of Iraq. She was horrified that her role in an illegal activity might have led to massive numbers of casualties. She became a whistleblower and leaked the information to the Observer, a British newspaper (Katharine Gun, 2006). She was arrested and charged with espionage. The charges were dropped, however, a few months later. She explained that she was a naïve graduate language student. According to Gun,

Most people don't know what goes on in the intelligence services . . . Certainly I had very little idea what went on in GCHQ. For me, it was a job, a chance to use my languages (Tyler, 2004).

Many others who have been charged with espionage and treason in the last few years have been linguists or translators. These jobs often require close contact with people deemed as enemies and the translators run the risk of being accused of being disloyal. Senior Airman Ahmed al-Halabi, a US Air Force translator at Guantanamo Bay detention center was arrested on several charges of espionage. One of the pieces of evidence against him was that he gave Arabic pastry to some of the detainees. Captain Yousef Yee, an Army chaplain at Guantanamo was also arrested on the evidence that he had invited Airman al-Halabi to dinner after he had conducted religious services on Friday evenings. Both men were later cleared of these charges (Lewis and Shanker, 2004).

In another case, Mohamed Yousry, a translator for lawyer Lynne Stewart, who represented one of the accused bombers of the Twin Towers in 1993, has been convicted of terrorism charges and faces 20 years in prison. Even one of the prosecutors in the case, Anthony Barkow, recognized that "Yousry is not someone who supports or believes in the use of violence" (Powell and Garcia, 2006). These are just a few of the examples of how being the linguistic intermediary in these times can put a person's life in peril. Do we want to encourage our students to participate in programs that will lead to jobs that might imperil their futures or possibly their lives?

A related issue is that of the role heritage speakers might play in fulfilling our country's linguistic needs. 19% of the population of the US speaks a language other than English in the home (Census, 2000(b)), however, there traditionally has been a lack of interest in their linguistic skills especially for federal agencies that require security clearances. In a workshop entitled "Foreign Service: Do You Have What It Takes" at the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Kathleen James (2004), Associate Dean at the Foreign Service Institute offered a clarification. A Heritage speaker, or anyone who has relatives who live outside the US, are considered poor security

risks because they could be easily blackmailed by someone who could put their family members in danger.

There are other obstacles that heritage speakers face when applying for federal jobs. They are often not able to pass the proficiency exams that federal agencies use. The nature of the exams might be one reason for this. According to Geoff D. Porter, a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at New York University, the Defense Language Institute Arabic exam tests only the Modern Standard Arabic dialect and not any of the spoken varieties of Arabic. This is the variety taught at most universities, however, it is seldom used in conversation (2002). Moreover, it is rare that a heritage speaker, who has grown up in the US, will receive any instruction in their heritage language at school. This leaves many heritage speakers with little or no writing proficiency in their heritage language while often having highly developed oral and cultural proficiencies (Scalera, 2003).

Finally, the politics of the assignment that a heritage speaker can be given may also cause a crisis of conscience. Cameron Murad explains that, although he is an Iraqi Kurd who supports the American military presence in Iraq, he is often met with hostility from other Iraqis whom he tries to recruit to military service (Elliott, 2006).

Conclusion

Is there any common ground between the foreign language community and the goals of NSLI? What we share is that we all want Americans to become more linguistically and culturally competent in languages other than English. Two questions come to mind. How do we get there and what will be the results of high levels of linguistic and cultural proficiency?

How Do We Get There?

Just as the federal government has changed the face of education under No Child Left Behind with broad-based expectations and restrictions of funds, it can make 3/3/3 foreign language proficiency a requirement for high school graduation and fund the programs needed to meet those high requirements. These programs can be in any language with extra funding to help begin programs and train teachers in less commonly taught languages. Traditionally taught languages should continue to be taught. There is still a shortage of people with high levels of proficiency in these languages. Moreover, the largest body of expertise in second language acquisition lies with traditionally taught language teachers. If they were left out of the process, or their numbers greatly reduced, the collective knowledge of the profession would suffer greatly.

Schools also should be required to identify their heritage speakers and create programs to enrich and support their skills. A program similar to the International Language Program in Canada, in which every heritage learner has a right to instruction in his home language, would produce geometric results. Finally, more research should be done on the instruction of third language acquisition (TLA). This area of research helps identify teaching techniques that

are particularly helpful to bilinguals when learning a third language. This research would be especially important in working with heritage speakers and would encourage students to not only reach 3/3/3 proficiency in one LOTE but also possibly two or more. With this new found need on the part of the government to have greater linguistic and cultural proficiency, the foreign language community should demand that funding priorities be established that can realistically reach those goals.

What Will Be the Results of High Levels of Linguistic and Cultural Proficiency?

If a new generation is taught to attain high levels of linguistic and cultural proficiency according to the National Standards in the largest number of the world's languages and heritage speakers are given the respect and support they deserve, how our country behaves in the international arena will forever be altered. The people who will make decisions about the fate of the world and those who vote for them will be better prepared to do so.

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