

# How the Foreign Language Gap Can Be Bridged

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - November 1, 2014

In 2008, while campaigning for president in Powder Springs, Ga., then-Senator Barack Obama asserted, “We should have every child speaking more than one language.”

It was embarrassing that Europeans who come to America typically speak English, not to mention multiple European tongues, the candidate said with a laugh, whereas most Americans traveling to Europe can barely utter *merci beaucoup*.

Fluency in more than one language, the president-to-be explained, is a “powerful tool to get a job,” particularly in the field of international business. “We should be emphasizing foreign languages in our schools from an early age,” he added.

Influential Americans have long recognized that the United States is doing a poor job of teaching foreign languages. It’s been three and a half decades since Paul Simon, another Democratic senator from Illinois, wrote “The Tongue-Tied American.” If there had been more Americans “who spoke Vietnamese fluently, who understood their aspirations, culture, and political history,” he wrote, “maybe, just maybe, we would have avoided that conflict.” Or waged it more effectively.

Yet despite the damage done to the national interest by our incapacity to understand other people in their own tongue—and thus to grasp their culture and way of life—little has been done to fix the problem.

Two years after Obama’s reflections on this subject, Arne Duncan, the president’s handpicked choice to head the Department of Education, gave a speech at the Foreign Language Summit at the University of Maryland elaborating on the president’s campaign trail concerns.

“The United States may be the only nation in the world where it is possible to complete high school and college without any foreign language study—let alone with the mastery of another language,” declared Duncan. “Foreign language instruction in the United States “is spotty—and unfortunately on the decline.”

The passage of two more years brought additional grim assessments. In 2012, a Council on Foreign Relations task force, chaired by former head of New York City public schools Joel Klein and former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, issued “U.S. Education Reform and National Security.”

The CFR report stated that “The United States is not producing enough foreign-language speakers to staff important posts in the U.S. Foreign Service, the intelligence community, and American companies.” Consequently, it added, “the State Department ‘faces foreign language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest.’”

Today, another two years down the road, neither the Obama administration nor the GOP opposition appears to take the matter seriously.

The federal government does run commendable programs. For example, the National Security Language Initiative for Youth awards secondary school students scholarships to devote a summer or academic year to studying in a host country Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), Korean, Russian, Hindi, Persian (Tajiki), and Turkish. The Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange & Study Abroad Program enables high school students to spend an academic year living with a host family in a Muslim culture. And the Critical Language Scholarship Program offers college and graduate students seven-to-10-week programs abroad in “13 critical need languages.”

These worthy initiatives and others, though, fall far short of what Obama, Duncan, Klein and Rice all declared was urgently demanded by the public interest.

We need to revamp a K-12 educational system that touts multiculturalism while incongruously treating foreign language study as a boutique luxury item. We also ought to reshape college education, which once made learning a foreign language mandatory. It should do so again—and not by doubling down on the lax requirements commonplace today where foreign language study is still mandatory. These often do not demand that students acquire the ability to read a newspaper in their chosen foreign language or carry on a conversation in it about current events.

Unlike many policy questions facing the country, promoting serious foreign language study does not have a bright partisan hue. Or perhaps a better way of saying it is that liberals and conservatives both have ample reason to recognize the nation’s vital interest in promoting foreign language study. Those who are alert to the risks of entering into war foolishly or conducting it incompetently should place a premium on understanding our adversaries’ passions and opinions, which depends on mastering the language in which they feel and think.

Economic conservatives who believe American principles are best exported via robust free trade instead of government aid programs note that U.S. companies often scramble to find employees—in particular bilingual or multilingual executives—who would help them develop their international divisions.

And progressives who emphasize humanity’s shared interests and the moral imperative to resolve disputes among nations through diplomacy and international organizations should wish to enhance appreciation of other nations’ self-understanding, which again depends on

acquiring knowledge of their native language, in which they feel most at home and communicate most freely and precisely.

The necessary reforms cannot be accomplished all at once.

But we can usefully build on the federal programs already in place for older students. The Departments of State, Defense, and Education should each offer fellowships, contingent on maintaining a B+ average, to college students who commit to studying a critical foreign language all four years. The fellowship should provide for a year of work or study after graduation in a nation where the language is spoken. And each fellowship recipient should be required to complete the program by devoting two or three years of paid work to the department that funded his or her fellowship.

After, say, having studied Arabic language websites devoted to the fatwas of radical Islam for the Defense Department, reviewing Chinese writings on economic and political freedom for the State Department, or teaching high school Russian for the Department of Education, graduates will be free to pursue the careers of their choice.

Some may choose further government service. Others will opt for the private sector. All, it is to be hoped, will help to persuade the public of foreign language study's intrinsic value and abiding benefit to the nation.

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