

Immediate and Long-Term Dilemma: American Ignorance in International Affairs and Foreign Languages

by

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Abstract:

To better address the problem of inadequate foreign language education in the United States, we must first examine the heart of the problem: insufficient knowledge of other cultures. If we can spark interest in cultural studies through implementations such as internationally themed schools, better teacher instruction, and proper and effective use of the media, there will be a drastic increase in American foreign language speakers. However, the main thing our society needs to focus on is foreign language and cultural education of uncommonly learned foreign languages such as Arabic, Russian, Farsi, Hindi, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. As the number of American speakers of these languages increases, the way in which we relate to other countries will substantially improve, alleviating much tension in the international world.

Education in the United States suffers from an inadequate and, to some extent, outdated approach to foreign language education. As a result, America is continuing a national trend of “educational isolationism,” a huge predicament in an era of extensive globalization and technological intercommunication.¹ Too few Americans learn the languages of countries significant in America’s foreign affairs, and, according to Dina Powell, Assistant Secretary of State for Education and Cultural Affairs,

[d]eficits in foreign language learning and teaching negatively affect our national security, diplomacy, law enforcement, intelligence communities and cultural understanding. It prevents us from effectively communicating in foreign media environments, hurts counter-terrorism efforts, and hamstring our capacity to work with people and governments in post-conflict zones and to promote mutual understanding.

¹ Michael H. Levine, “Putting the World into our Classrooms,” Policy Brief, *Progressive Policy Institute*, April 2005, <http://www.ppionline.org>.

Our business competitiveness is hampered in making effective contacts and adding new markets overseas.²

To address American educational deficiencies and their far-reaching detrimental effects, President George W. Bush has called for \$114 million in FY07 to fund his National Security Language Initiative (NSLI). This effort to “further strengthen national security and prosperity in the 21st century through education, especially in developing foreign language skills” is expected to “dramatically increase the number of Americans learning critical need foreign languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi, Farsi, and others through new and expanded programs from kindergarten through university and into the workforce.”³

The problem with this type of solution is that it does not fix the immediate and presently growing need for proficient speakers of languages that are currently crucial from a foreign policy standpoint yet rarely spoken in the United States. It also does not deal directly with many students’ vast lack of knowledge on other related subjects, such as geography. According to Michael H. Levine of the Progressive Policy Institute,

25 percent of our college-bound high school students cannot name the ocean between California and Asia. Eighty percent do not know that India is the world’s largest democracy. Young Americans are next to last in their knowledge of geography and current affairs compared with young adults in eight other industrial countries. The overwhelming majority cannot find Afghanistan or Israel on a world map, but know that a recent ‘Survivor’ show was shot in the South Pacific.

This type of ignorance, born of American isolationism, poorly educated students, and lack of cultural awareness, is the root of the problem at hand. If students were exposed at an early age to international cultures, careers in fields relating

² Dina Powell, “National Security Language Initiative,” Briefing, *U.S. Department of State*, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/58733.htm>.

³ *Ibid.*

to international relations and studies would be more likely to spark an interest in students, who might then pursue more than one foreign language that is useful to the students' intended lines of work. With keen understanding in intercultural relations and diplomacy comes the ability to make "informed decisions as voters about domestic issues influenced by global circumstances."⁴

In a speech at the Summit of U.S. University Presidents on International Education, President Bush explains the importance of learning a foreign language such as Arabic. He says that

in order to convince people we care about them, we've got to understand their culture and show them we care about their culture... Learning a language – somebody else's language is a kind gesture. It's a gesture of interest. It really is a fundamental way to reach out to somebody and say, I care about you. I want you to know that I'm interested in not only how you talk but how you live. In order for this country to be able to convince others, people have got to be able to see our true worth in our heart.⁵

President Bush indicates that the primary problem in American society today is cultural apathy, brought on by a lack of education. With worldly knowledge comes a sense of caring about cultural and international affairs, and this interest in other countries is the essential missing link. A crucial component to the problem is that most American students generally study romance languages and languages spoken mainly by people in developed countries. As Levine reports, "1 million U.S. students study French, a language spoken by 80 million people worldwide, while fewer than 40,000 study Chinese, a language spoken by 1.3

⁴ Michael H. Levine, "Putting the World into our Classrooms," Policy Brief, *Progressive Policy Institute*, April 2005, <http://www.ppionline.org>.

⁵ Bush, George W, "Remarks by President Bush to the U.S. University Presidents Summit on International Education," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/summit/58734.htm>.

billion people.”⁶ Schools still primarily only teach French and Latin, languages that are hardly the most important languages of modern society. By keeping these outdated educational policies in place, the United States is “in danger of putting itself at a competitive disadvantage.”⁷ Presently, international trade is responsible for at least one in every six American jobs, with these numbers increasing every year.⁸ Even current trade with Asia amounts to more than \$800 billion per year, a number, Levine shows, “that has surpassed our trade with Europe since 1979.”⁹ Without a strong educational background and deep understanding of the culture of these countries, the ability to speak the language might be virtually meaningless.

To adapt to the cut-throat global market and to “solv[e] new national security and humanitarian challenges, such as terrorism, AIDS, environmental degradation, and poverty,” students need to acquire a cultural as well as a language base.¹⁰ To carry out this task, major changes would have to be made in addition to those implemented by the National Security Language Initiative. Internationally themed high schools and universities should be put into operation within the next ten years. In the 1980s and 1990s, various themed schools were built, such as schools specifically designed for math, scientific research, technology, and performing arts. However, there was no implementation of schools with a combined focus on international and foreign language studies. Along with serious improvements upon cultural and foreign language programs

⁶ Michael H. Levine, “Putting the World.”

⁷ Michael H. Levine, “Putting the World.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

in already established high schools and universities in the country, internationally themed schools would give interested students proper specialized training in cultural studies and intercultural communication as well as intensive study in crucial foreign languages. These types of schools would be a significant addition to the educational system at all levels. Intensive study, especially of foreign languages, is proven to be substantially more effective when children are young, and so curricular changes in pre-schools and elementary schools are especially important. Further study through college and even through graduate school is necessary for students to develop a deeper understanding of foreign languages and remain up-to-date on international affairs and global crises. According to Levine,

[P]riorities should include: innovation grants to states and districts that integrate international content into high school graduation requirements; development of assessments of international knowledge and skills that compel teachers of all the major subjects to introduce more academic content about the world; incentives for small, more personalized schools of academic rigor; and the adaptation of existing technology initiatives, such as 'virtual high schools,' to bring international knowledge and language skills to rural and under-resourced schools.¹¹

These types of promotional offerings to schools would provide great incentive to enhance and accelerate the development of internationally-based programs. They would force schools to reevaluate their international academic offerings and even to set higher and more rigorous standards for these types of programs.

The types of incentives should not only be offered to high schools, but to universities as well. The continuation of global education within higher educational study further deepens students' abilities to analyze global interactions while also facilitating increased scholarship on international policy

¹¹ Michael H. Levine, "Putting the World."

and conflict. With America so involved in various worldwide conflicts – including those in Israel, Iraq and Afghanistan – America needs well-educated citizens who can help solve problems or even simply vote more knowledgeably on world issues.

Another step towards the advancement of an internationally knowledgeable society is to better educate the educators. Simply put by Levine, “Teachers cannot teach what they do not know.”¹² The Higher Education Act (HEA) is supposed to be authorized by Congress within the year. This act has the potential to lead to many great progressions in the modernization of teacher education, particularly Title VI, the section concerning International Education. One interesting component of this bill is that it does not necessitate the establishment of an International Advisory Board as an oversight function for language and cultural studies programs funded by the Department of Education. The reason is that the creation of such a board sparked much dispute when a prior Congress introduced it. There is also a highly controversial aspect of this act. A complaint process in concurrence with curriculum prerequisites will be implemented to protect “diverse and balanced perspectives” or “diverse perspectives and a full range of views.”¹³ This complaint process could certainly be construed as detrimental to academic independence in higher education, a value very highly regarded in American society. However, given that the majority of universities do not emphasize the study of global affairs or foreign language, the complaint process may be a small price to pay for government

¹² Michael H. Levine, “Putting the World.”

¹³ “Advocacy HEA – Title VI International Education Programs,” *College Art Association*, Oct. 2005, <http://www.collegeart.org/advocacy/000174>.

funding that will resolve gross educational inadequacies, that, if left unattended, could leave America intellectually, economically, and culturally behind.

According to scholar Marilyn Cochran-Smith,

In order to learn to teach in a society that is increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse, prospective teachers, as well as experienced teachers and teacher educators, need opportunities to examine much of what is usually unexamined in the tightly braided relationships of language, culture, and power in schools and schooling.¹⁴

To this end, it is imperative that thorough and modernized education training be implemented immediately to educate foreign language, international affairs, and cultural studies teachers who are new as well those who are experienced. The training of these teachers regardless of teaching experience would ensure that all teachers are updated on recent international, linguistic, and technological advancements globally. This type of information can drastically affect the teaching styles and techniques of a teacher and content of a class, changing the entire course of the internationally-based educational curriculum in the United States. Also, teaching with proven and advanced techniques for foreign language learning will give foreign language educators the background and experience necessary to establish their own successful methods. According to John S. Hedgcock of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, "Knowing how language works and how people use it is a first and indispensable step towards deciding what shall be taught, and is one of the components, along

¹⁴ Cochran-Smith, Marilyn, "Color Blindness and Basket Making are Not the Answers: Confronting the Dilemmas of Race, Culture, and Language Diversity in Teacher Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 32 (1995): 493-522.

with knowledge of the psychology of learning and the social and cultural contexts of learning, which feed in to how we teach languages.”¹⁵

Interestingly enough, the languages most often taught in schools are those that are most similar to English. For example, French, Spanish and other romance languages are among these popular few, in part due to their similar structure and grammar to the English language as well as their numerous shared cognates. The most needed languages today – Chinese, Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Farsi, Hindi and Russian – are among the most difficult to learn. Therefore, highly trained instructors are needed to teach these challenging languages in such a way that will appeal to students and make them interested in learning about the culture behind these languages. The only way to do so effectively while increasing fluency is to “start in the elementary years; include immersion experiences; be reinforced during summer breaks; draw from the untapped expertise of native speakers in many communities; be delivered by qualified teachers; be reinforced by cultural experiences such as travel abroad; and be supported by new technology.”¹⁶ While many universities offer travel abroad options for students, most of these opportunities are in Italy, France, Spain, England, Ireland, and Australia. These countries are far less relevant to modern global relations than many other countries, and they do not always offer immersion in a different language. In the case of England, Ireland, and Australia, there are virtually no language barriers for Americans, defeating much of the purpose of studying abroad. To solve the problem of ineffective study abroad

¹⁵ John S. Hedgcock, “Toward a Socioliterate Approach to Second Language Teacher Education,” *The Modern Language Journal* 26 (2002): 299-317.

¹⁶ Michael H. Levine, “Putting the World.

programs, universities should place more emphasis on programs in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe.

These solutions would be effective in generating interest and modernizing the education system, yet there is one other problem that President Bush and his administration do not address in their plan: we need fluent crucial foreign language speakers *now*. We don't have time to wait until American schools are updated for the next generation. For example, there is a severe scarcity of government, military and intelligence officials who speak Arabic and Hindi. Levine reports that "[t]he U.S. Departments of Defense and State, along with private-sector and university-based intensive language classes, are expanding to meet Americans' needs for learning non-European languages, however not nearly fast enough." There are still many problems with the way in which government programs designed to enhance foreign language learning are – or in this case are not – implemented. According to Levine, "this unsystematized patchwork of language instruction does not build consistent, usable language skills between levels of schooling, is not yet adequately focused on rigorous and realistic outcomes, and is still primarily teaching Spanish and French."¹⁷ These kinds of conditions do not address the immediacy of the language problem that America is facing.

Although it is proven that foreign languages are best absorbed by young children, the American government desperately needs speakers in this generation to help resolve conflicts and deal economically with, to name a few, China, North Korea, India, and Iraq right away. Therefore, we need to forego

¹⁷ Michael H. Levine, "Putting the World."

many of the benefits of teaching children and start teaching adults to speak these languages. We should, of course, maintain a focus on teaching younger children, yet there needs to be an even greater emphasis on foreign language education for adults in order to tackle the immediate shortage. This is where the need for higher education mixed with new technology comes into play.

One valuable tool to educate young adults is distance learning. However, according to the findings of the Progressive Policy Institute, progress of such a tool has been minimal:

Tens of billions of public and private dollars have been invested in the last decade to wire schools to the Internet, build educational Web resources, open the broadcast spectrum to new television channels, and provide quality media resources to families, schools, and communities. But the impact on children's and teacher's knowledge of other regions, languages, and cultures has been negligible.¹⁸

Since there are so many high school children who do not receive the opportunity to learn languages other than French and Spanish, government dollars should be invested in online courses in crucial languages. For even further success, Advanced Placement courses should be offered online for these languages. If students are receiving Advanced Placement credit for these courses, they will be more likely to take them. Already, there are programs such as the GLOBE science program, which connects schools around the country and the world with each other by offering courses from each school online to give greater widespread opportunity.¹⁹ The International Education and Resource Network

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Michael H. Levine, "Putting the World."

(iEARN) connects 15,000 schools in 100 countries through teacher-designed online courses that “meet high-priority curriculum needs.”²⁰

To address the immediate problem, these online language courses should also be readily available to all adults for free. This program should be government-funded for everyone, thereby furthering the opportunity for every adult to learn these languages through economic equalization. Universities should offer online language courses that would be available to students from other universities, and these courses should be government funded and possibly implemented through a governmental commission. Taxes dollars would most likely fund such a program.

One very important step the government needs to take is effective use of the media. Educational and government-funded television stations such as the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) should be further utilized to publicize the need for learning these crucial languages and possibly offer language courses on television at certain times of the day. The immediate problem is by far much more difficult to address, yet with resources such as the internet and the media, through the use of distance learning and public broadcasting, we can tackle this issue with greater speed and finesse.

It is true that language immersion programs desperately need to be implemented for younger children all the way up through high school. However, it is up to institutions of higher learning to make the difference and get students serious about pursuing crucial languages and cultural studies as a concentration and as a career path. Although government funding is a necessary step in

²⁰.Ibid.

facilitating the opportunity for schools to strengthen their language and cultural education, the extent to which these programs will be effective will be mainly determined on an individual basis. President Bush's National Security Language Initiative is designed to give funding for language programs in schools, yet it is up to the schools themselves to implement these programs effectively. Teacher education needs to be strengthened to give educators the skills and modernized technology necessary to effectively instruct their students. The publicizing of our growing need for crucial foreign language speakers is imperative to widespread interest. Students need to get serious about pursuing a career in international relations with the inclusion of language fluency, and it is up to the country as a whole to help them do so. It is no longer a matter of a mere career path. It is a way for the United States to strengthen national security by letting other countries know that we care about trying to understand them linguistically, politically, and culturally. While globalization is bringing the world closer together, there still are additional steps every country needs to take to understand the other nations. This is real interconnection. Reliance on other countries to do all the work required for cross-cultural exchange is an ignorant and foolish way of dealing with other countries, and it will eventually lead to massive international tension and further crisis.

In my own experience, knowing how to speak more than one language is an essential component to my connection with the rest of the world. When I studied in Russia, it was extremely difficult for me to get by at first. I had virtually no knowledge of the Russian language, which made my communications skills with other people extremely limited. I felt as if I couldn't help anyone, let alone

myself. Russians were frustrated when trying to communicate with me, as was I when trying to communicate with them. Yet, as I studied the Russian language and progressed in my knowledge of it while simultaneously becoming more in tune to the culture, I began to be able to speak to people more naturally. I found that I had connections with people on an emotional and friendly basis that I would never have known about if I weren't able to speak to them. Without that personal experience, I would never have been able to draw from it and expand on it as a student and as an educator.

Learning the language of another country is just the first step to generating intercultural human connection. We must first understand that we don't know everything and that keeping an open mind will further our knowledge of the world and how it works. It is time that America pulls itself out of its rut and starts generating a thirst for knowledge about other cultures. Without this thirst, there can be no genuine appreciation for intercultural communication, hindering international cooperation. Moreover, the Bush administration is aware of this growing problem among the American people and is taking measures to thwart it, but there is more that we can do to get to the root of the problem in order to address the immediate and long-term dilemma plaguing American society. It is a question of respect for other cultures and, more importantly, of keeping America safe and informed.

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