

Foreign Language Educators in K-12 and Postsecondary Institutions: Needs, Shortages, and New Directions

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Abstract

I. Introduction

In this paper, we review the essential data that our organizations have analyzed in order to sketch the state of language studies in the K-16 system. We construct a framework with which to view the information we present by describing needs and shortages as well as positive future directions and ways to achieve them. Our paper contains many encouraging signs, yet it doesn't avoid noting trends that cause concern. Above all, it is our hope that this paper will provide fellow language advocates with some resources to help us all achieve our goals.

Other industrialized nations take language education much more seriously than we in the U.S. do, especially at the elementary and secondary levels. France, Germany, Italy, and the U.K., as well as other countries in the Eurozone, all require the study of at least one additional language in order to obtain any kind of secondary school diploma, including a technical degree. The most commonly studied second language among our trading partners is now English; in the U.K. the languages most studied are those of neighboring countries, France, Germany, and Spain. English is mandatory for students in Japan beginning with the first year of middle school. Canada is officially bilingual, and China is aggressively mandating the study of English. Our nation is losing out on an opportunity to have a large percentage of the population able to speak a foreign language at high levels of proficiency. Further, in around 20% of the households in the U.S., a language other than English is spoken, but rarely is it cultivated in school. Both K-12

and higher educational institutions need to be better positioned to help students to achieve advanced literacy in their home languages.

II. Foreign Language (K-12) Teacher Needs and Shortages

There are three main areas of need identified in the paper relating to the K-12 level:

1. Increasing the number of teacher candidates for K-12 public school positions in a variety of languages from Spanish to Chinese;
2. Raising the language proficiency level of both pre-service and in-service teachers and language majors; and
3. Training teachers to integrate technology into language instruction.

Teacher Shortage

The U.S. Department of Education tracks on an annual basis the shortages that states encounter in hiring teachers. Current high-need fields designated by the department include bilingual education and foreign language. The data provided in the report summarizes the shortage areas for the 1990-2000 academic years and the 2013-2014 academic year. The latest data indicate that during the time period from 1990-2000, 23 states identified foreign language teacher shortages at the K-6 level and 35 states reported this shortage for grades 7-12. These numbers increased by the 2013-2014 academic year to 36 for the K-6 level and 39 for grades 7-12.

Raising the Language Proficiency Level of Language Majors and Teacher Candidates

In cooperation with the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, formerly NCATE), ACTFL developed teacher education standards for foreign language teacher preparation programs. As part of the standards vetting process in the profession, ACTFL

designated a minimal oral proficiency level target for teacher candidates as Advanced Low for most languages and Intermediate High for languages with a non-Roman alphabet, such as Arabic and Chinese. A recent study published in *Foreign Language Annals* indicates that just slightly over half of the teacher candidates are reaching the Advanced Low level on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Scale.

A similar study (by Elvira Swender) on the proficiency levels of undergraduate language majors found that approximately half were rated at the Advanced Low and higher levels and the other half scored at the Intermediate High and below. These statistics are alarming, since it is becoming more important for teachers to be able to deliver a standards-based curriculum almost entirely in the target language. Standards-based K-12 language programs are demonstrating that their students are reaching the level of Advanced Low; it is therefore critical that teachers function at the highest levels possible.

Training Teachers to Integrate Technology into Instruction

As we consider how little classrooms have actually changed to accommodate our twenty-first century learners, it is increasingly difficult for teachers to remain ahead of their students in engaging with new media. As we know, today's students are adept at using social media and accessing information at an amazingly fast pace. Our teachers are challenged to create similar learning environments within the confines of, for the most part, twentieth-century classrooms. It is critical that we equip K-12 language teachers to work with today's learners, not just by using the latest innovations in technology but also by practicing current second language acquisition methodology, which can in turn improve students' communicative competence.

III. Higher Education Foreign Language Faculty Needs and Shortages

Rising enrollments in languages other than English indicate that college and university students know they need to learn foreign languages. Yet language requirements for graduation have been decreasing in recent years, whereas entrance requirements have increased. Colleges and universities have been using adjunct professors to teach language courses; the percentage of courses taught by non-tenure-track faculty has risen to over 75% in some institutions.

MLA Language Enrollment Surveys document that since 1980, there has been a steady rise in enrollments (with the exception of a slight dip in 1995) to the most recent figure available: 1,629,326 in 2009. These numbers represent a slight rise in the percentage of language enrollments as compared to total student enrollments at colleges and universities, from 7.3% to 8.6%. For a variety of reasons (economic, defense, cultural, heritage), students want to learn foreign languages, but colleges and universities need to create sustainable models for course delivery in an articulated curriculum that takes students from first semester through advanced courses and beyond. In analyzing the enrollment data, one cause for concern is the relatively low percentage (an average of 22% over all languages) of enrollments in advanced undergraduate courses as a percentage of all undergraduate enrollments in those courses.

Another important subset is the number of enrollments in graduate courses. Looking at the last three decades, we see that there has been a decline in graduate enrollments, and in some languages it has been steep. The most notable exceptions to this trend are Spanish and Korean. While all enrollments are important, enrollments in critical languages are especially significant. The definition of “critical” varies—it can refer to languages deemed important to national security or to the languages of key trading partners. One critical language, Arabic, has had a very large increase in enrollments since the 2002 survey (10,584 in 2002, and 35,083 in 2009). The number of doctoral degrees in languages other than English as reported in the Survey of Earned

Doctorates corroborates the general trends in language enrollment numbers as well as in completed degrees at the undergraduate level.

Heritage Learners

Languages other than English spoken in American communities represent irreplaceable national resources. They also present serious challenges to administrators of schools and institutions of higher education. Over 57 million U.S. residents reported to the American Community Survey in 2010 that they spoke languages other than English at home, up from 47 million in 2000.

U.S. institutions of higher education are working to help strengthen English instruction for bilinguals and to maintain and strengthen heritage speakers' knowledge of their home languages. The field of heritage language studies has taken root in U.S. higher education through workshops, programs, institutes, and publications dedicated to teaching and scholarship. We need to ensure that heritage speakers are recognized as experienced language learners with cognitive, translingual, and transcultural skills worthy of further development and investment.

Internationalizing the Educational Experience of Undergraduates

Institutions of higher education have undertaken work to internationalize the educational experience of undergraduate students, and foreign language educators are often at the forefront of these campus initiatives. The ten high-impact educational practices recommended by the American Association of Colleges and Universities form a helpful list of categories through which to think about the challenges of internationalizing the undergraduate experience in a comprehensive way. These practices include:

1. First-year seminars
2. Common intellectual experiences

3. Learning communities
4. Writing-intensive courses
5. Collaborative assignments
6. Undergraduate research
7. Diversity/global learning
8. Service learning
9. Internships
10. Capstone courses

We include examples of practices that have been implemented in postsecondary institutions and also outline how effective assessment practices of student outcomes is essential.

Responding to Needs/Shortages through Delivery of Foreign Language Courses

The internet and new media have transformed the profession of language teaching and the practice of language learning. The mobile device has become a portable language lab. Colleges and universities are turning with greater frequency to these and other new instructional technologies that enable innovative models of delivery. Most foreign language courses are still taught primarily face-to-face, but an increasing number are delivered entirely online, and there is a move to more hybrid format courses.

Conclusion

Our decades of experience in education lead us to conclude three things: 1) the interest that students (and their parents) in the United States have shown for languages in schools exceeds our capacity to deliver; 2) effectively addressing shortages in language education depends in part on intelligent use of technology, tapping our nation's heritage linguistic resources, and preparing teachers with high levels of language competence; 3) federal funding must be adequate to the tasks we have outlined here. The last conclusion strikes us not only as

obvious, but also as recurring. How many times must we collectively document the needs and rationales for a more robust language infrastructure in the nation's educational system before sustainable progress happens? We remain optimistic for our students' sake.