

Which Foreign Languages Should Students Learn?

No one selection can satisfy all the purposes for studying a foreign language, but *any* choice can broaden one's perspective and enhance one's personal and professional life.

The need for foreign language skills has once again captured the attention of the public and our nation's leaders. As more and more students consider enrolling in foreign language courses, they are faced with making a choice. If they can study only one foreign language, which one should it be?

The answer depends on why they are studying it. Today there are a variety of purposes for learning languages: economic, political, social, and individual. These purposes and their implications for language choice are discussed below.

To Communicate in the Marketplace

"The Sputnik of the 1980s is economic competition," writes John Jennings (1987), counsel to the House Committee on Education and Labor. Over 20 percent of the gross national product is derived from international trade. Agriculturally the U.S. economy is heavily linked to exports: 30 percent of U.S. grain production is marketed abroad; 40 percent of U.S. farmland grows crops for export (more U.S. farmland feeds the Japanese than does Japanese farmland!). Our manufacturing economy is also tied to international trade: 20 percent of U.S. manufactured goods are sold abroad; one in six manufacturing jobs is related to international activities (Choate and Linger 1988).

Since competitiveness depends, in part, on our ability to communicate effectively about our products, it should come as no surprise that foreign language proficiency is gaining the attention of the business community. Reports of American business abroad, for example, have highlighted the disparity between the number of Japanese salespersons in the U.S. who speak English (about 10,000) and the number of American salespersons in Japan who speak Japanese (fewer than

1,000). In fact, the Japanese have already identified Third World markets of 20 years from now and have started to introduce the appropriate languages in their schools (Lewis 1987).

Effective marketing includes communicating with prospective buyers, requiring both knowledge of their language and an understanding of their culture. Anecdotes of advertising gaffes abound, such as the Budweiser ad that transformed the King of Beers into a queen. We face the same adver-

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tising challenges within our own borders, as businesses target sales campaigns at our increasingly affluent ethnic minorities. Lack of language skill can be a disaster, as in the case of an enterprising T-shirt company, which, hoping to capitalize on the Pope's visit to Texas, printed thousands of T-shirts with his picture and the caption "La Gran Papa." *El papa* is the correct term for the Pope; *la papa* is a potato.

While the economic incentives for learning other languages are evident, which languages these should be is less evident. Many people believe that Japanese is, and will continue to be, the language of economic competition. However, speculation that Japan's Pacific Rim neighbors are encroaching upon her economic hegemony might lead us to encourage today's students to gain skills in Korean or Malay-Indonesian. Current and future markets for American goods and services might lead to other conclusions. With over one billion potential consumers in China, Mandarin is a good bet for tomorrow's businessmen and -women. In fact, potential market size alone may be a factor in the relative importance of a foreign language (see "Most Commonly Spoken Languages," this page).

Foreign language course offerings and enrollments in U.S. secondary schools, however, do not yet reflect such economic realities. While 86 percent of all secondary schools offer Spanish (the 4th most commonly spoken language in the world), fewer than 2 percent offer Mandarin (which ranks 1st), Russian (5th), or Japanese (10th). And, even though schools may offer a variety of languages, student enrollments concentrate in the languages traditionally favored in our schools. Of all students enrolled in foreign language courses in secondary schools in 1985 (the most recent year for which national statistics are available), 58 percent were studying Spanish, 28 percent French, 8 percent German, and 2 percent Russian (Dandonoli 1987). Enrollment in Chinese and Japanese, sadly, was so low that these and other languages were grouped in the category of "uncommonly taught languages," which accounted in total for

Most Commonly Spoken Languages

1. Mandarin
2. English
3. Hindi
4. Spanish
5. Russian
6. Arabic
7. Bengali
8. Portuguese
9. Malay-Indonesian
10. Japanese
11. German
12. French

Source: *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* (1989), pp. 224-225.

only .4 percent of all secondary school foreign language enrollments.

While the foreign language enrollments of 1985 may not reflect economic imperatives for the coming decades, one glimmer of hope should be noted: in the brief period between the 1982 and 1985 surveys of secondary school foreign language enrollments, the number of students studying less commonly taught languages increased from approximately 12,000 to approximately 20,000, a trend that is continuing.

Even more important than economic competitiveness, however, is economic cooperation. We need to learn the languages of other countries so we can work with them, not just compete with them. Rather than just compete with Japan's automakers, GM and Chrysler also participate in cooperative ventures to produce and market new automobile models. Firms based in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Japan, Venezuela, and France are among the 10 companies with the largest foreign investments in the U.S. (*Forbes* 1987, p. 146). According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Canada, Japan, West Germany, Mexico, and Taiwan were the top five trading partners of the U.S. last year. Our collaborative relationships with these countries might influence the priority rankings we give to the language and

cultures we should know. Thus, while German may rank 11th in terms of market size as reflected in number of speakers, in the practical terms of today's trading relationships, German is an important language for schools to teach.

Clearly, if we are to respond to these economic challenges, the number of schools offering the languages of current and potential consumers must increase dramatically. Increased enrollments in these languages obviously will depend on increased availability of courses. (Where we will get teachers and materials to implement such courses is the subject of another discussion.)

In the National Interest

While economic competitiveness may be the watchword of the '80s, political global interdependence is no less a reality. In the "smaller," more interdependent world in which children entering school today will live and work, the ability to communicate with those with whom they share the globe will be a survival skill. International trade aside, foreign language proficiency and cultural knowledge will contrib-

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ute to improved international communications and diplomacy.

The political implications of a linguistically incompetent America are far-reaching and frightening. It is both alarming and surprising to note, for example, that it is possible to enter the U.S. Foreign Service without fluency in a foreign language. Of the hostages held in Iran, for instance, only 6 were proficient in Farsi, the language of that country (Southern Governors' Association 1986, p. 18). Other nations attain direct access to intelligence and information about our country from public media, but the U.S. requires translators and interpreters. Linguists have noted, for example, that Khrushchev's threat to "bury us" was a misinterpretation of the Russian *overcome*. Not surprisingly, one American diplomat has noted that negotiating through interpreters is like "hacking one's way through a forest with a feather" (Evans in Peter 1977, p. 121).

While at one time French was de rigueur for a career in diplomacy, today the world negotiates in many languages. The United Nations' original list of five official languages (English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese) has been expanded to include Arabic. All of these arguably are languages of political significance, with obvious implications for the well-being of our nation.

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In addition, our proximity to and necessary continuing involvement with Latin America would make Spanish the choice of many. Political alignments with Germany, Japan, France, and other nations around the globe might also affect one's choice of a foreign language, as might the continuing role of the Soviet Union and China in global politics.

And yet world events may move too swiftly for schools to readily meet the linguistic demands of politics. For schools (or students and parents), selecting a foreign language on the basis of the political importance of a language-competent America, choices may be based as much on predictions

about the future as on today's realities. Which nations will play a leadership role in tomorrow's world, which will be critical in supporting our national interests, or which may pose a threat to our security? These and other questions underlie decisions we need to be making today.

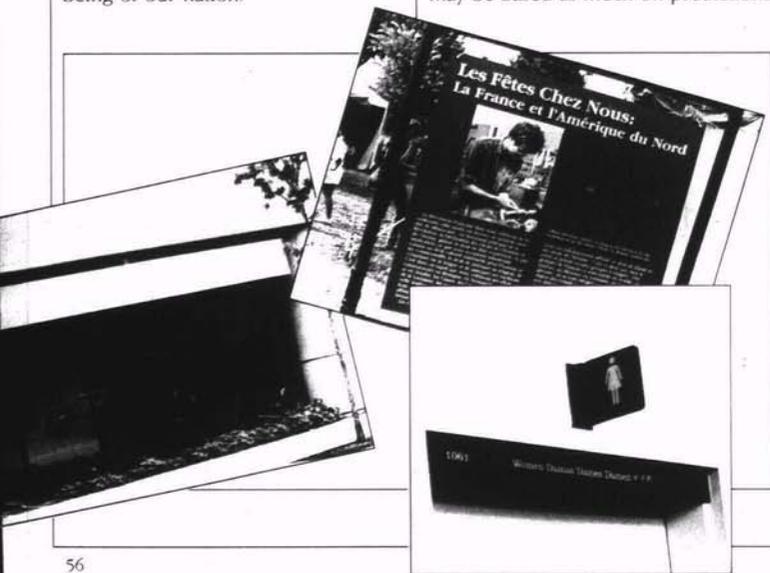
To Live in a Multiethnic/Multilingual Society

Melting pot, mosaic, or salad bowl, the U.S. is a country of immigrants. As immigrants have settled and learned English, they have nonetheless maintained justifiable interest in the languages and customs of their forebears. Milwaukee and Cincinnati point proudly to their strong German heritage, Louisiana to its Francophone roots. It is not uncommon in these communities, and in others proud of their ethnic roots, for students to seek the languages and cultures associated with a rich and meaningful past.

Nowhere is the social significance of language more evident than in the recent continuous increases in Spanish language enrollments. As Hispanics become an ever-increasing minority in the U.S., more and more students realize that knowledge of Spanish will facilitate good relationships with neighbors and provide a valuable ancillary skill in jobs.

As schools grapple with decisions about which foreign languages to offer, then, consideration of the social context in which such study will take place is an important factor. Are there ethnic roots in the community that make a specific language appealing to students and parents? For example, in California, Texas, and Florida, over two-thirds of the secondary students enrolled in foreign language are studying Spanish.

We must be cautious, however, in promoting specific languages solely on the basis of their utility in the local social milieu. The use of Spanish is proliferating in the U.S., but it is not a major community language everywhere. Since few of us can predict where our students in today's highly mobile and transient society will reside in later years, it is equally difficult to predict their future language needs. As we have seen, the language needs of this country in the economic and



political arenas are extensive: no single language can address them all.

For Intellectual and Personal Benefits

Perhaps no argument is stronger for studying foreign languages than self-interest. Evidence that foreign language study has cognitive and academic benefits, coupled with its potential for personal enrichment, provides a strong incentive for learning other languages.

Studies of second language acquisition in childhood (both in natural and in school settings) have shown that cognition is enhanced as children acquire an additional language. Several studies have shown increased (1) metalinguistic awareness (the recognition of language as a system and a communication device) (Hakuta 1984, Ben-Zeev 1977); (2) reasoning ability (Ben-Zeev 1977); (3) verbal intelligence (Peal and Lambert 1962); and (4) cognitive flexibility and divergent thinking (Landry 1974).

The academic benefits of foreign language study, though, have been both misrepresented and rightfully acknowledged. Traditionally, study of the classic languages was undertaken to discipline the mind, despite the fact that little evidence has existed to show that the presumed transfer effects actually occur. Study of Latin does, however, enhance students' understanding of grammar and considerably expands their vocabulary knowledge by recognition of English derivatives of Latin; so does study of modern foreign languages such as French, German, and Spanish (Cooper 1987, Masciantonio 1977).

Studies have also examined the relationship between foreign language study and achievement test scores in English. Students who study a foreign language in elementary school score higher on standardized tests of reading/language arts than do matched subjects who do not take a foreign language (Rafferty 1986, Garfinkel and Tabor 1987). Secondary students who have taken a foreign language do better on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test; students who have taken a long sequence do even better. In fact, five years of foreign language study were associated with higher ver-

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bal SAT scores than five years of any other academic subject (Cooper 1987).

Whether in the national interest or in self-interest, pragmatic reasons for foreign language study should not overshadow humanistic ones. Foreign language study has traditionally been included in classical education because foreign languages enrich the mind, opening the eyes to new worlds and new ways of thinking. They also enhance appreciation of the literature and the history of other cultures. Whether traveling abroad, viewing the latest winner at the Cannes film festival, or re-visiting *La Bobème*, appreciation of aesthetic and leisure activities is enhanced by direct linguistic access unfettered by the inexactitudes and cumbersome mechanisms of translations or subtitles. For students and parents trying to decide which foreign language to study, personal enrichment, then, may be an important criterion.

If schools initiate foreign language programs or course offerings for the intellectual benefits to be gained, almost any language is the right choice. While the studies reported earlier were carried out in contexts where French and Spanish were the most frequently offered languages, there is little reason to assume that the gains observed were directly attributable to the particular language studied. Teachers hypothesize that as students learn new ways to process information through abstract symbols (i.e., language), their cognitive functioning and awareness of language as a system for representing meaning increase. Surely, study of any language should yield similar results.

Language and thought are inextricably interwoven. Debate persists over whether language molds and shapes

how we see the world or whether it is merely a lattice that frames but does not obstruct our perception of reality. Since languages differ in how they encode and organize the world around us, they also contribute significantly to how we think. For example, the study of languages with stringent rules about changing what is said according to one's relationship with the person to whom it is said may cause us to think about interpersonal relationships differently. Similarly, languages that distinguish between generic wholes and their parts ("I like candy" vs. "I want candy") may be stored in different representations in our mental syntactic maps. To the extent this is true, foreign language study contributes significantly to cognition. The choice of *which* foreign language to study might be determined by consideration of which languages provide the greatest opportunities for students to explore organizations of linguistic data different from their own native language.

Which Foreign Language? Other Considerations

To this point, discussion of which language to study has focused on the purposes for language learning. Although these purposes should be the primary consideration in selection, a little pragmatism is in order as well.

Most of the purposes for learning foreign languages cannot be achieved by short-term efforts. The economic, political, social, and intellectual benefits are, in most cases, gained only when students achieve advanced levels of both foreign language proficiency and cultural knowledge. Most foreign language educators would agree that two years of study barely scratches the surface of what students need to know and be able to do. One or two years of study can bring students no closer to competence in those languages than 1st and 2nd grade mathematics instruction can prepare students for careers in engineering. When initiating language programs, schools, therefore, should consider level-to-level articulation. An elementary school foreign language program should logically lead to continued articulated study at the middle school, high school, and college.

Decision makers in schools initiating a language program or a course offering should also consider the human and material resources available. We are entering a period when a shortfall of foreign language teachers is anticipated. In some languages and in some areas of the U.S., that shortfall is already here. For some school districts, teachers of Latin, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese are nearly impossible to find. The low incidence of study of these languages, combined with the shortage of teacher candidates across all languages, paints a bleak picture for the future. We can't train future speakers of these languages without teachers; we have few teachers of these languages in the present because we failed to train them in the past. Creative solutions to recruiting and training teachers (such as "5th year" teacher preparation programs, international exchange programs, and direct teacher recruitment abroad) may offer short-term solutions to these problems. Similarly, lack of student interest in languages other than the Big Four—Spanish, French, German, and Latin—has made commercial publishers leery of initiating projects for materials in languages with low enrollments. Available resources, then, must also influence decisions about which languages schools will teach.

The Issue of Choice

The issue of language choice has become more pressing as schools initiate new programs. Which languages to offer and promote becomes a serious matter for schools as states mandate foreign language requirements and as schools and students move to comply with them.

In reality, it would be difficult to make a "wrong" choice. As students learn foreign languages, they also learn *how to learn* languages. Successful foreign language students use these language learning strategies more frequently and extensively than less successful learners. These strategies can be identified and taught to students (Oxford-Carpenter 1985, Chamot and Kupper 1989). Work in progress focuses on materials to train teachers to teach them directly to students (Chamot, personal communication, 1989). Many students, obviously, have discovered these strategies intu-

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itively, independently of instruction. For these students, learning additional foreign languages is facilitated by their knowledge of how to learn language. All students can benefit from new approaches to foreign language instruction that emphasize what students can do with language over what they know about it.

No Better Time

It is almost a cliché to talk about "today's students living in tomorrow's world." Nevertheless, in the world that today's kindergartners will inherit, we can confidently predict that the ability to communicate openly with their neighbors, both locally and globally, will be even more crucial than it is now. Over time, this crucial ability can be achieved: teaching methods today stress foreign languages as a tool for meaningful and purposeful communication, as a means of getting to know other people and other cultures.

From the standpoint of the nation and of the individual, and within the context of foreign language teaching today, there has never been a better time to study a foreign language. Which one? It depends. □

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