

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS



## *POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. 24*

*Date:* June 26, 2012  
*From:* Terrence G. Wiley, Sarah Catherine K. Moore, and Margaret S. Fee  
*Re:* A “Languages for Jobs” Initiative

The promotion of foreign language instruction should be a national priority. In an increasingly competitive international economy, a workforce with more market-relevant foreign language skills is a strategic economic asset for the United States. Yet foreign language education is on the decline, particularly at the primary level when foreign languages are best learned. Federal policy is not stepping up. Recent federal efforts to promote foreign language instruction are not designed to have a broad-based impact and have been focused almost exclusively on achieving national security goals. U.S. economic competitiveness goals are equally important, but there are no comprehensive efforts to promote the instruction of languages, including Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, German, and Hindi, in local school districts where foreign language education must occur to improve proficiency more broadly. The federal government should launch an interagency “Languages for Jobs” initiative, with funding levels at least equal to security language programs. As part of the initiative, the Department of Education would develop foreign language education accountability metrics and primary-level immersion programming that leverages the country’s existing multilingual population.

### *THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS*

The global economy is shifting away from the English-speaking world. Since 1975, the English-speaking share of global GDP has fallen significantly and will continue to fall. The Chinese economy will surpass the U.S. economy in size soon after 2030. Latin America (Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking) and South Asia (Hindi- and Urdu-speaking) are growing strongly as well. Exports have accounted for half of postrecession U.S. economic growth, and future U.S. growth will increasingly depend on selling U.S. goods and services to foreign consumers who do not necessarily speak English. In a competitive global export market, there will be a premium on foreign language skills and international competency. It is an old adage that you can buy in any language, but you must sell in the language of your customer. Business services such as banking, insurance, and architecture are the fastest-growing U.S. export sectors, and selling these services requires

employees able to work effectively in non-English-speaking countries. In a survey of large U.S. corporations conducted ten years ago—when exports were less critical for the U.S. economy—30 percent responded that personnel with insufficient international skills prevented their companies from fully exploiting business opportunities. Eighty percent believed their sales would increase if they had more internationally competent staff.

The widespread use of English as the leading global second language, especially in business, does not offset the disadvantage faced by monolingual Americans. A 2011 survey of more than one hundred executives in large U.S. businesses found foreign nationals have an advantage in competing for international jobs. Three-quarters agreed that language skills made it easier for foreign nationals to work in the United States than for U.S. nationals to work overseas, leaving Americans at a significant disadvantage at a time when U.S.-based multinational companies are growing faster abroad than at home.

### *THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION DEFICIT*

The U.S. education system is not producing workers with sufficient broad-based foreign language proficiency. Foreign language instruction is often delayed until age fourteen and is optional. Unlike nearly every other content area, there are no national assessments in place for measuring foreign language proficiency. A smaller percentage of primary (15 percent) and middle (58 percent) schools offer foreign language courses compared to ten years ago—which is particularly worrying since foreign languages are often best learned at younger ages. The share of high schools offering foreign language courses fortunately remained relatively steady at over 90 percent. But still, as of 2008, just one in five public school students was studying a foreign language.

Compare this to U.S. economic competitors: For the vast majority of developed countries, foreign language education begins between the ages of five and ten, is mandatory, and is systematically tested along with core subjects. In Brazil, mandatory English instruction begins at eleven, in China and Korea at eight. Even English-speaking countries like the United Kingdom and Australia are lowering the age at which foreign language instruction begins and bolstering proficiency requirements.

The foreign languages offered in U.S. schools are also not well matched to the fastest-growing foreign markets. Spanish instruction is by far the most common, constituting 72 percent of all K-12 foreign language enrollment. Spanish-speaking Latin America's global market share is indeed growing. But an economic case can be made for more diverse language instruction. Brazil's economy is and will continue to be larger than Mexico's, yet fewer than fourteen hundred public school students a year are enrolled in Portuguese courses. India's economy will rival that of all of Latin America in coming decades, but even fewer (less than one hundred) public school students are learning Hindi. Mandarin Chinese, the language of what will be world's largest economy, is still only offered at 4 percent of high schools.

The federal government is failing to address U.S. market-relevant foreign language capacities. Non-security-related language programs have been budget casualties. Funding for the Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP), the only Department of Education program devoted to primary and secondary foreign language education, was terminated when its small budget of \$26 million was zeroed-out in budget cuts after the 2011 debt ceiling agreement. Meanwhile, federal accountability pressure to test core subjects (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act) has pushed state and local governments to funnel resources away from untested foreign language education. To the extent that state and local governments receive any outside help for foreign language education or programming, it tends to come not from the federal government, but from foreign entities, such as Germany's Goethe Institute or China's Hanban Confucius Institute.

Yet there are clear signals that the American public wants new investments in foreign language programming. Seventy-five percent of Americans believe all students should know a second language. A majority supports foreign language graduation requirements for high school. In a positive trend, the number of immersion schools—which are highly effective at producing foreign language proficiency—has steadily increased over the past forty years as other forms of foreign language education have fallen off.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the need to increase the foreign language capacity of the U.S. workforce, the federal government must reverse cuts to existing foreign language programs. Beyond that, the federal government should develop a comprehensive national strategy for assessing and improving foreign language instruction. The National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) of 2006 continues to support foreign language education for national security purposes through the Departments of State and Defense and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. But NSLI programs, many of which are limited to summer sessions, are not designed to support or coordinate foreign language education in local school districts. A broader approach to strategic foreign language instruction should be developed and should focus on languages that are critical for U.S. economic competitiveness, including Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, German, and Hindi.

The federal government should lead a broad-based national Languages for Jobs initiative, spearheaded by the Department of Education and supported by an economic competitiveness rationale to invest in the foreign language skills of young Americans. Specifically, the initiative should

- *be funded at levels at least on par with what has been spent on the National Security Language Initiative, or roughly \$100 million annually, which would support a combined effort across federal departments, including Education, Commerce, Labor, State, and Defense.* Positive results in foreign language education outcomes will most likely be achieved through an interagency effort that combines funding opportunities, resources, and staff around shared goals, outreach, and implementation.
- *develop and promote the use of common accountability measures for foreign language teaching and programs.* Once the assessments are in place, all foreign language programs receiving federal funding should be focused on demonstrating adequate levels of progress in students' language skills. Teaching quality and learning progress in foreign languages should be evaluated with the same rigor as math, reading, and the sciences.
- *develop and promote a foreign language immersion program that is integrated into core content learning and begins at the primary level.* After initial startup costs, immersion programs are no more costly than other language instruction programs. Support for teacher training should be included, since immersion language instruction is a more demanding skill.
- *promote the use of untapped heritage language speakers in foreign language immersion programs.* Approximately one-fifth of American children live in homes where languages other than English are also spoken, but heritage language retention is so limited that proficiency is regularly lost between the second and third generations. Foreign language immersion programs can leverage heritage speakers in the classroom while also helping them retain their language skills.

## CONCLUSION

Facing a global economic challenge, the United States must build a multilingual workforce prepared to thrive in today's world market. Doing so requires that the federal government engage in a comprehensive, interagency national initiative to improve foreign language education in the United States.

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