

## Foreign Language Policies, Consequences, and Recommendations

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### Abstract

The U.S. job market increasingly seeks culturally responsive, multilingual employees a goal poorly aligned with U.S. higher education policies. This paper reviews recent K-16 enrollment in foreign language courses, with a focus on higher education. The individual and societal case for foreign language immersion throughout the educational pipeline in the will be detailed and compared to efforts abroad. Current policies and practice pitfalls as well as potential solutions will be discussed, including a shift from a language-literature approach to a proficiency approach fostered by context-rich dual degree programs. These recommendations aim to shape educational policies to encourage foreign language proficiency with an overall goal of creating agile, highly sought graduates who thrive in a continuously more competitive job market.

*Keywords: U.S. job market, foreign language proficiency, dual degree programs, foreign language enrollment, higher education foreign language policies*

### Current Trends: What is the Problem?

U.S. employers increasingly seek employees who are culturally responsive and multilingual. As such, it is important for U.S. postsecondary education to have policies in place that encourage students to gain these skills before they go on the job market. The U.S. demand for bilingual workers increased more than 250% in five years, from 240,000 in 2010 to 630,000 in 2015. This demand was not only for speakers of Spanish but for any language because of the increased opportunity for the employer to serve a wider range of customers (New American Economy, 2017). These data reveal that while it is possible and even common for graduates to gain employment without being multilingual, being multilingual significantly increases opportunities for meaningful employment. In addition to the benefit bilingualism brings to workers seeking employment, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) stated that there are also many cognitive benefits as well, including enhanced problem-solving skills, memory function, creative thinking ability, and improved attitude toward the target language and culture (Benefits Language Learning, n.d.).

Despite these employment and cognitive benefits, U.S. higher education institutions have had a steady decrease in students enrolled in language courses. Starting in 1998 there was steady increase in foreign language enrollment, until 2013 where overall enrollments dropped by 6.7%. This trend continued, and between 2013 and 2019 enrollments dropped another 9.2% (Looney & Lusin, 2018). Although these data illustrate the reversal in the proportion of students enrolled in languages in postsecondary education, they compared to earlier years. However, these data obscure more disconcerting trends. Specifically, when the overall educational trajectory is viewed it suggested that only a small proportion of K-12 students study foreign language and even fewer persist. In 2017, for example, 20% of K-12 students reported studying a foreign language (Devlin, 2018) and in 2016 the percentage of students at postsecondary institutions enrolled in a foreign language was 7.5% (Looney et al., 2018). In contrast to international statistics, a median of 92% of European students are studying a foreign language in elementary

and post-secondary schools, with some countries such as Luxembourg, Malta, and Liechtenstein having an average of 100% (Devlin, 2018). Devlin also notes that learning two foreign languages is a requirement in more than 20 European countries, thus it is evident that these high rates are not solely due to English being the lingua franca.

Given that only 7.5% of American college students are studying a foreign language, it is advisable to review the policies that may influence this outcome (Looney et al., 2018). Of the universities in the United States that require students to study languages as a graduation requirement, many only require beginner levels (one to two semesters). This trend has been persistent over the past decade; in 2009, 2013, and 2016 there was a 5:1 ratio of students in introductory to advanced language courses (Looney et al., 2018). Most students will obtain an introduction to a language but will not participate in advanced language study and, are not likely to gain significant proficiency. The consequence of this is that language students frequently leave college with no—or only introductory—foreign language abilities.

If the nation continues on this trajectory, U.S. graduates and employees will be unable to communicate with companies, institutions, or businesses outside of the United States and other English-speaking countries. They would also be increasingly more reliant on non-American interpreters, unable to compete in the job market, and largely unprepared for a world requiring global citizenship, communication, diplomacy, and multicultural understanding.

### **Solutions**

Research suggests there are multiple approaches that could be taken to help solve this issue. A solution that increases foreign language enrollment and also makes languages directly applicable to students' future careers is dual-degree programs. This has been a modern trend that is having a great impact on increasing enrollment (Redden, 2017). In these programs, students major in the field of their choice (e.g., engineering or business) along with a foreign language. Such programs allow students to study abroad or have internships abroad, where they gain interdisciplinary skills in their field in another country. This is a shift from the traditional model of foreign language programs called *language-literature*, which offer introductory grammar courses followed by literature courses (Redden, 2017). Dual-degree programs instead offer deep, relevant immersion promoting the overt intention to create a global citizen.

A 2007 report from the Modern Language Association warned universities of foreign languages' waning relevance and called for a complete restructuring of language programs (Redden, 2017). They urged departments to restructure away from a language-literature program and adopt interdisciplinary and dual-degree programs that prepared students for a wide range of careers in which they could apply their language knowledge. Based on a 2017 survey, only 39% of faculty and administrators worked to change their curriculum to fit this model, suggesting that universities are largely still providing students with outdated language instruction (Redden, 2017).

A dual-degree program is, indeed, a commitment. There are, however, other solutions to help increase students' foreign language skills. Currently higher education institutions tend to require a range of zero to three semesters of a foreign language, depending on the major and institution.

Given that students are taking a small portion of what is required for language and cultural proficiency, it is to be expected that they graduate without the ability to apply for jobs requiring multilingual and multicultural employees, opportunities that have been increasing exponentially (New American Economy, 2017). One solution is to replace semester, credit-hour requirements with proficiency-based requirements. Specifically, requiring a certain level of mastery of the language as opposed to number of courses completed.

Using semesters as a measurement bypasses what is really important. If a graduate needs to participate in a meeting with Spanish speakers, it is irrelevant how many courses he or she enrolled in; the proficiency level he or she gained during that time will measure success. If language requirements were to shift away from a semester model and towards a proficiency model, this would advantage heritage speakers by giving them credit for their abilities. It would also encourage non-heritage students to not skim through the required courses, but would instead require them to delve into the language and culture and apply it to their field of study in meaningful and applicable ways.

Many universities use the phrase “proficiency” but still link it to amount of courses taken (Neuman, 2017). Proficiency can instead be, and optimally is, defined as what students can do with the language (ACTFL, 2012). A proficiency level that a university requires could be one within the ACTFL proficiency range, which has four categories of *Novice*, *Intermediate*, *Advanced*, and *Superior*, which three sub-categories of *Low*, *Mid*, and *High* in each of these (except *Superior*). Depending on the institution or major, for example, a university may choose to replace the two-semester requirement with a *Novice High* or *Intermediate Low* requirement. This model would shift the priority to a certain proficiency level, then provide students with examples of how this may be obtained. These may include being a heritage speaker, participating in study-abroad immersion, taking as many courses as a student needs to reach that proficiency goal or some other creative approach.

Other policy solutions may include increasing bilingual education at the elementary and secondary education levels to allow higher education to build on those language skills in more complex settings, such as in conjunction with another major, such as business, fashion, art or engineering. As previously stated, current rates of elementary students studying foreign language is only 20% (Devlin, 2018). As with students at the postsecondary level, this can be compared to the amount of K-12 students in Europe who are learning *two or more* foreign languages at 60.2% and those learning one foreign language is 92% (Key data, 2012; Devlin, 2018).

Increasing the foreign language programs and/or immersion schools for children would help create bilingual speakers early in their education. This would also require an increase in instructors who are able to run immersion schools and foreign language programs. Therefore, an increase at the higher education level would create an educational climate in which it is easier to raise children to be multilingual.

## Conclusion

Requiring bilingual elementary education coupled with meaningful language proficient dual-degree programs in the United States may seem implausible but a similar conclusion has been reached in many European countries. The European Association for International Education (EAIE), for example, reported that the number of English-taught bachelor's programs increased from 55 in 2009 to nearly 3,000 in 2017 (EAIE, 2017). It could be argued that this is simply because English has become the dominant global language. Instead, the interaction is more subtle. These European educational policies and practices are directed by job markets and that English is the default language of business interactions (Michaud, 2012). Looking at American job market trends now, a similar pattern is following in the United States (New American Economy, 2017). With the amount of American jobs requiring skills in a foreign language nearly tripling within a five-year period (New American Economy, 2017), we are at a pivotal point in history in which the future job market informs K-16 priorities regarding the wisdom of language immersion in the K-16 curriculum.

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