

Beyond a Bridge to Understanding

The Benefits of Second Language Learning



BY MARTHA G. ABBOTT

Even before having children, Jimell Sanders was intent on ensuring that her local school would be able to offer the opportunity of early second language learning. A health systems specialist at the U.S. Department of Defense in Washington, D.C., Sanders grew up in a military family and attended school with bilingual and multilingual peers. She observed firsthand the value of speaking a second language. But when she began researching language programs within her school district, she encountered a lottery system with lengthy waitlists to enter schools offering dual-language programs. She immediately set about working with her neighborhood school to supplement

its language offerings. After gaining approval and support from the mayor and the chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools, Sanders's local school, Charles H. Houston Elementary—a Title I school with a majority African American student population—started an English/Spanish dual-language program, where her daughter is now enrolled.¹

Nearly a decade later, Sanders looks back with pride on her community activism. By helping to establish the DC Language Immersion Project, a grass-roots organization that advocates for language learning in schools, she successfully increased educational opportunities in her community.

Today, growing legions of parents are advocating for second language learning in their local schools. Like Sanders, these parents do not consider second language acquisition a skill that's just "nice to have" but one that is vital in an increasingly global environment. This environment requires Americans to equip themselves with languages that will allow them to interact not only with those outside our country's borders but also with those in our local communities whose first language is not English.

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The Anglophone Struggle

The perception that English is the worldwide language of business has handicapped our ability to make second language learning an integrated component of the K-12 curriculum. But the lack of viewing bilingualism as an inherent part of schooling in the United States has also led to a national mindset that English is good enough to get along in the world (even though 75 percent of the world's population does not speak English).² And because we view bilingualism as outside the norm, learning another language is perceived as being difficult and something that one is either good or bad at doing.*

There is, however, a growing call from business leaders claiming they cannot expand their businesses abroad because of a lack of language competence and cultural awareness among their employees, despite a growing demand for bilingual speakers.³

It has been challenging to move the United States forward in closing the linguistic gap. The demand for speakers of Arabic, Urdu, and Pashto following the attacks of 9/11, and President Bush's announcement of the National Security Language Initiative in 2006 to prepare professionals with language skills for federal roles, largely went unheard. Since then, the government's capacity to fill positions that require language capabilities has not sufficiently grown.⁴ Despite efforts such as the National Security Education Program, which funds students at the postsecondary level to pursue their areas of academic interest while learning a language deemed critical by the U.S. government, our efforts continue to fall short. While accurate enrollment data are challenging to report, as not all states collect K-12 language enrollments, the latest figures project that only 20 percent of K-12 students are enrolled in language study,⁵ and only 7.5 percent of students are enrolled at the postsecondary level.⁶ These low statistics point to a growing need to build our nation's language capacity. They also recently led to a congressionally commissioned report and a national public awareness campaign, *Lead with Languages*, seeking to improve this critical situation.

The report, *America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century*, was released in early 2017 by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.⁷ It was commissioned by a bipartisan group from both the Senate and the House of Representatives to examine the following questions: (1) how does language learning influence economic growth, cultural diplomacy, the productivity of future generations, and the fulfillment of all Americans, and (2) what actions should the nation take to ensure excellence in all languages as well as international education and research, including how we may more effectively use current resources to advance language learning?

The commission that undertook the study honed the findings into five broad recommendations:

1. Increase the number of language teachers at all levels of education so that every child in every state has the opportunity

to learn a language in addition to English. With 43 states and the District of Columbia citing shortages in the area of language teaching,⁸ the crisis is real. As a result, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), of which I am executive director, has teamed up with Educators Rising to encourage middle and high school teachers to form afterschool clubs that will encourage young people to consider a career in language teaching.

2. Supplement language instruction across the education system through public-private partnerships among schools, government, philanthropies, businesses, and local community members. The report encourages local communities to leverage their resources to expand access to language-learning opportunities. For instance, Chicago Public Schools has implemented an Arabic language program, guided by the Center for



Arabic Language and Culture, with support from the local Arabic-speaking populations, local and international businesses, and Qatar Foundation International, to enhance classroom learning.⁹

3. Support heritage languages already spoken in the United States, and help these languages persist from one generation to the next. Census data show that, generally, by the third generation, immigrant populations almost entirely lose fluency in their heritage language.¹⁰ As we seek to build our nation's linguistic capacity, it is essential that heritage speakers (i.e., those who have a cultural or familial tie to a language other than English) be provided opportunities to continue to develop their native language while learning English. Programs in schools and local communities can help raise awareness among heritage speakers of the important connection between becoming fully bilingual and biliterate and career and job opportunities, which are rapidly expanding for bilinguals.

4. Provide targeted support and programming for Native American languages, as defined in the Native American Languages Act. The use of Native American languages in schools, whether as the language of instruction or in addition to an English-based curriculum, must be actively encouraged and supported so that these languages can not only survive but thrive. For example, the nonprofit organization Sealaska Heri-

*For more on the history of bilingual education in the United States, see "Bilingual Education" in the Fall 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/goldenberg_wagner.

tage trains teachers in local languages and partners with Juneau schools to teach southeast Alaska native languages, such as Tlingit. Also, the Maine French Heritage Language Program sponsors afterschool language and cultural activities in Lewiston and Augusta for students from families with French-speaking backgrounds.¹¹

- 5. Promote opportunities for students to learn languages in other countries** by experiencing other cultures and immersing themselves in multilingual environments. Both in high school and college, students need to be offered the opportunity to study abroad without facing hurdles in meeting graduation requirements or in fulfilling federal financial aid requisites.

Changing Mindsets

The release of any national report must have other support mechanisms to have the intended impact and not simply fill another slot on the proverbial shelf. For this reason, my organization, ACTFL, launched a public awareness campaign at the same time *America's*

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Languages was released. The Lead with Languages national campaign is building awareness among parents, students, and the public at large of the need for culturally and linguistically competent young people and of the important connection between learning languages and long-term personal benefits, including enhanced educational and career opportunities.

We have seen demand for bilingual employees in the United States double from 2010 to 2015,¹² and such demand will certainly continue to increase in the future. As such, Lead with Languages is encouraging students to take those first steps toward developing foreign language competence.

It is never too early to start this journey. For instance, 8-year-old Tobias shared his interest in languages when he submitted a video in a competition for one of 25 \$1,000 scholarships ACTFL sponsored to Concordia Language Villages—a language and cultural immersion experience in which students live in the Bemidji woods in Minnesota in the summer, simulating an experience abroad. Young Tobias explained that just as his favorite television show centers on a fisherman who has adventures traveling around the world, his dream also requires language skills: “I want to be a snake catcher, and there’s snakes all over the world in different

places, and I need to learn different languages if I want to talk [with people there]. And one of the places I want to go is France, because they might fish there, too.”¹³

Establishing the mindset that learning other languages is part of growing up elsewhere around the world is important to beginning a student’s language journey. Heritage learners are quick to see the importance as well. In his application for a Concordia scholarship, one awardee said, “I’m Cuban American. ... As glad as I am to live in my country, I’d like to learn the language that runs in my blood.”¹⁴

But it’s never too late to learn a language, as older students found out when Lead with Languages ran a contest called “Your Story on the Rails,” in which five college students studying or engaging in projects abroad won 15-day first-class Eurail passes to facilitate their journeys. For some students, this experience became truly transformative. That was certainly the case for Andy, a rising college sophomore from a small town in Pennsylvania. His rural upbringing had not prepared him for international travel, and he found navigating cities like Geneva, Switzerland, extremely challenging and even scary at times. Andy chronicled his journey in his blog posts, which allowed others to witness his transformation. For example, he described his first experience conducting a research interview completely in German, and he shared how learning a foreign language helped him speak with strangers and come out of his shell.

Andy is proof that the journey toward becoming a competent language speaker and world traveler is worth enduring those uncomfortable moments he described on his blog. He has become comfortable and empowered enough in different environments that he took a course in Gambia and Senegal during his winter break and studied abroad at the University of Vienna for the Spring 2018 semester.

Teachers of foreign languages know firsthand the importance of enabling students to experience the feeling of being comfortable with being uncomfortable. Yo Azama, a teacher of Japanese at North Salinas High School in Salinas, California, and a former National Language Teacher of the Year, describes the process he sees his own students going through as they embark on the journey toward global competence:

I think curious learners, whether young or old, take themselves far and beyond their comfort zones. Once they become curious, they are usually busy focusing on the topic—so without realizing it, they seem to reach well beyond their perceived capabilities. ... As a teacher, I try to be mindful about providing opportunities to spark their interest, even if it means pushing my students out of their comfortable, usual ways of thinking. Initially, students might find the new concepts strange or uncomfortable, but soon after, they find there are endless possibilities for the used-to-be-the-only-way perspective, which frees them from their prior narrow perspective.¹⁵

Showing students how language learning can tie into career aspirations is also critical. ACTFL believes that no matter what sector of the work world students find interesting, language skills will be an asset. That is why one aspect of the Lead with Languages campaign encourages students not currently studying a language

to pursue one. For example, through our “Japanese with Manga” contest, we asked high school students to submit drawings of manga comic characters for the opportunity to win free online tutoring in Japanese. The winners were manga enthusiasts who had never studied Japanese but were drawn to learning the language thanks to their love of manga culture. As one student who entered the contest declared, “Learning Japanese is important to me because I would like to live in Japan one day and become a manga artist.”¹⁶

Empowering students to speak up for language education can also help change public attitudes. Both the Lead with Languages campaign and the *America’s Languages* report feature powerful testimonials from students and young people who are vested in gaining proficiency in languages other than English. For example, Dana Banks, formerly the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Lomé, Togo, earned her bachelor’s degree in political science from Spelman College, followed by several advanced degrees, fellowships, and assignments overseas with the Department of State. Proficient in French, Haitian Creole, and Thai, Banks attributes her international success to her extensive international education: “My education aided me in understanding other cultures. ... I think it’s important for Americans to have the knowledge and foreign language skills of other cultures, because the world is indeed interconnected through the Internet, through advances in travel and communication—the world is moving at a fast pace.”¹⁷

Making Progress

One exciting phenomenon taking hold in the United States is the establishment of the Seal of Bilingualism,* which is affixed on the diplomas of high school students who graduate with proficiency in two or more languages. This initiative began in California in 2012, and currently 30 states use some form of the designation to encourage students to pursue bilingualism and to recognize the bilingual competence of their students.

As states have set language proficiency requirements to obtain the seal, classroom instruction has changed from a strict focus on the traditional grammar-based approach to learning a language to an equally important focus on developing communicative competence. Linda Egnatz, a high school Spanish teacher in Lincolnwood, Illinois, and a former National Language Teacher of the Year who was integrally involved in the passage of Seal of Bilingualism legislation in her state, says it has given many students clearly identified targets for successful language learning:

Creating a pathway to proficiency with benchmarks has resulted in the growth of intrinsic motivation among students. Simply stated, students *want* the recognition and are actively working toward it. For the first time, students and parents grasp the time element required for language acquisition. My school is in its fifth year with the Seal of Bilingualism, and each year our upper-level retention rate has grown significantly. Students proudly use the hashtag #2bilit2quit!¹⁸

As teachers such as Egnatz understand, and as the Lead with Languages campaign strives to make clear, there are direct cognitive, academic, and social benefits that must be elevated in the discussion of why language-learning opportunities should be available for all students. One program model at the elementary school level rapidly gaining traction is dual-language immersion. In such programs, students are taught half of the curriculum in English and half in another language. In most cases, the language teacher in dual-immersion programs is a regular member of the faculty, so there is no additional budget line item for the program. Some states, such as Delaware, Indiana, and Utah, have invested state funding in establishing dual-immersion programs, realizing that growing a bilingual citizenry will bring economic benefits to their states by attracting interna-



tional businesses in need of bilingual employees, as well as U.S.-based businesses looking to expand operations abroad. For the 2016–2017 school year, the New York City Department of Education made a significant push in this area by committing \$980,000 in federal funding to 38 new K–12 bilingual programs serving more than 1,200 students.¹⁹

Regardless of the program model, research points to early experiences in learning additional languages as contributing to closing achievement gaps among all populations, from special needs students to English learners to minority populations.²⁰ Academic gains have been documented in all subject areas, including English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, by students who have participated in language programs.²¹ Research shows that learning a second language increases students’ ability to problem solve and makes a positive impact on memory, executive functions, and the ability to focus and multitask, among other benefits. And bilingualism decreases cognitive decline in adults and delays the onset of Alzheimer’s disease.²²

With our increasingly diverse population, and given the research on language learners’ enhanced empathy, awareness of diversity, and tolerance of differences, as well as their greater sense of social justice, increasing the number of language learners is critical for societal reasons as well. Given all the

*To learn about the Seal of Bilingualism, visit www.sealofbilingualism.org.

evidence, administrators and policymakers must ensure that second language learning is central in the curriculum of every school. □

Endnotes

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