Improving Students’ Capacity in Foreign Languages

By Myriam Met

It might seem strange for a foreign language educator to begin an article by conceding that English is quickly becoming a widely used language around the world. About 6% of the world’s population speaks English as its primary language. English is widely spoken as a second language in countries where it has official status along with another language, and it also serves as a lingua franca among speakers for whom no other language is mutually known. In all, it is estimated that about one-fourth of the world’s population has some degree of competence in English. [1] Given that so many people around the world speak or are learning English, why should Americans bother to learn foreign languages?

Why Learn Other Languages?

The answers are numerous. Some are obvious; some less readily apparent. As globalization increases, so does the volume of Americans doing business overseas. And, although it is true that a significant percentage of foreign nationals speak English, many do not. For example, about 40% of Europeans report they are able to use English. [2] But, more important, that leaves a sizable number of Europeans who cannot. And if globally only one-fourth of the world’s population reports some degree of competence in English, it means that a rather significant number of people have no skills in English at all.

These statistics highlight the challenges for American businesses as the United States makes the transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a service- based economy. It should be obvious that selling services is more likely to be successful when those who are purchasing services feel understood by (and understand) the service provider. Despite evidence that multilingual societies enjoy advantages in international trade, [3] data show that over half of U.S. professionals in the service industries who work in multicultural environments (whether within the U.S. or overseas) lack the language proficiency needed. [4] And while the U.S. education system pays little attention to foreign language skills, 16 of 19 other countries reported in a recent survey that foreign language learning is either widespread or compulsory by the upper elementary grades. [5]

Beyond the global economy there are other compelling reasons— related to our national security and well-being— why languages are important for Americans. Our ability to promote peace around the world depends on efforts in diplomacy, arms control, international law enforcement, emergency preparedness, and health. Our security also improves as we make progress toward achieving humanitarian goals and p romoting prosperity and democracy around the world. Such efforts tend to put service providers in touch with the very populations least likely to speak English as a native language or to have learned it in school. If we are to be effective in providing humanitarian services, thereby promoting peace and the common good, we must be able to communicate with those we wish to assist.

National security also involves defense against terrorism, and in this arena, languages are critical: those who aim to harm the U.S. domestically or abroad rarely communicate in simple, clear English. The most powerful intelligence-gathering tools in the world are of little use if, once collected, documents cannot be understood by those reading them or if conversations that are overheard are unintelligible to listeners.

While this critical need for foreign languages is real and pressing, some would argue that our schools are unlikely to be teaching the languages needed for national security and that by the time today's students are graduating, different languages may be needed because it is difficult to predict what languages will be critical to our security in the future. These arguments are true and valid, but they miss an important point: students who have already gained significant skills in one foreign language have the ability to learn other languages more quickly than students who have never had foreign language training. Therefore, if our schools were to produce graduates with viable skills in one foreign language, we could more readily cross train these students to meet unforeseen, acute needs for other languages as they arise.

National security and business may be important, but not necessarily sufficient, reasons to learn languages from an early age. Realistically speaking, it is unlikely that every one of our students will find a future in international commerce, humanitarian aid, or national security— but it is also realistic to acknowledge that we can't predict what today's young learners will be doing tomorrow.

Regardless of future endeavors, every child can benefit immediately from starting to learn a language early and continuing through schooling. There is accumulating evidence that learning additional languages — particularly from an early age — has cognitive and academic benefits. Mental flexibility, the ability to shift easily between symbol systems (such as mathematics and literacy), improved abilities in divergent thinking, metalinguistic awareness, and, occasionally, higher scores on measures of verbal intelligence are correlated with early language learning.[6]

In addition, studies consistently show that 1) there are no negative effects on test scores when schools "take time out" of the day for foreign language instruction; 2) young language learners often outperform their peers who are not studying foreign language on standardized achievement tests; and 3) even when there is no difference in academic achievement between students studying language and those who are not, the former learn more, simply because they gain foreign language skills in addition to everything else the comparison group also learns.[7]

Everywhere in America, even in the most rural communities, there is a need for cross-cultural education. As a result of recent waves of immigration to the U.S., Americans in cities and towns across the country come into direct contact with cultural and linguistic diversity every day. Cross-cultural understanding is clearly valuable to the social fabric of our schools and communities. Further, our students need to have the skills to interact across cultures in acceptable ways and, more important, the capacity to continue learning throughout life as they engage in novel cross-cultural encounters both domestically and abroad. Students can acquire the skills needed for lifelong successful cross cultural interactions in the foreign language classroom.

Access to Foreign Language Learning

There is good news and bad news about foreign language education in the U.S. The good news is that research has identified the critical features of program design that make a difference in student learning, and the better news is that there are many programs in operation — many of them long-standing and well established — that embody those features. The bad news is that not enough students are able to study foreign languages at all. But the worst news is that opportunities for foreign language study frequently reflect the socioeconomic conditions of our communities.

According to the most recent data available on foreign language learning in our schools, approximately one-fourth of the nation's elementary schools offer foreign languages. This is not to say that one-fourth of all students study languages, but rather that the option for some students exists in only one out of four elementary schools. Like many other academic advantages, language learning opportunities are less common in urban public schools (25%) than in suburban private schools (65%). At the middle school level, 78% of private secular schools report that more than half of their students study foreign languages, compared with 51% of public middle schools that report a majority of students studying a foreign language. [8]

For heritage language students who come to school with proficiency in a home language other than English, there are relatively few opportunities to maintain and extend those skills while they are learning English. Indeed, it might appear that our schools seek to substitute English for the linguistic resources heritage learners bring to school, instead of building on or enriching those resources.

Best Practices

Schools that offer foreign languages should ensure that their programs incorporate the features that research has shown to make a difference in language learning. Of these, the most self-evident is adequate time. [9] Learning a language takes a long time. Students cannot begin a language in high school, study it for two years, and be able to use it for real-life purposes any more than they can take two years of beginning mathematics and be prepared to be engineers. The average high school student gets approximately 150 hours of language instruction per year. And if experience has shown that a total of 300 hours of instruction spread over two years has proved woefully inadequate for high school students to develop any usable level of proficiency, then it is not surprising that elementary school students who receive 30 to 60 minutes of instruction per week are not demonstrating bilingual fluency at the end of one, two, or even five years. Students who receive 60 minutes weekly of language instruction in K-5 schools have accumulated fewer contact hours than high school students do in two years. As most educators know, time-on-task matters.

But time is not the only important factor. Student engagement may be even more important. Students need to carry out meaningful, motivating, purposeful tasks that allow them to use language as a tool for understanding others and for communicating their own ideas. [10] Whether instruction is delivered by teachers or through technology, it must foster this kind of active cognitive engagement if language growth is to occur.

One approach that is increasingly popular is content- based language learning. In this system, subject matter drawn from the school curriculum may be delivered through the medium of the foreign language, reinforced through the language, or practiced in the language. For example, in immersion programs, half or more of the school uses the target language as the medium of instruction. In total immersion, students even learn to read in the target language first and in English second. Immersion teachers are regular elementary school teachers who teach the same curriculum as other teachers; they just don't do it in English. Interestingly enough, data on the performance of immersion students indicates that they equal or surpass their peers on standardized tests, even when they have learned subjects like mathematics entirely in another language. [11] Two-way immersion programs, in which native speakers of English and heritage learners are schooled together, have demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement for students who need to learn English, high levels of academic performance for English speakers who learn content through the medium of a foreign language, and strong skills in both languages. [12]

In another content-based approach, foreign language teachers (or classroom teachers) use the foreign language instead of English to teach one or two subjects. Some schools have offered art, music, or physical education in the foreign language; in others, all science is taught only in the foreign language. These programs have found ways to increase student contact time with the foreign language while only minimally decreasing the amount of time allocated for other subjects in the curriculum. [13]

Foreign language teachers may also use subject matter as a vehicle for practicing language skills. For example, students can practice the past tense of verbs by creating timelines of significant events studied in a social studies course. To practice clothing vocabulary, students may calculate the percentage of students in class wearing white, blue, or black shirts. This approach to content-based instruction can be especially valuable in middle schools where interdisciplinary team-teaching is favored.

The content-based approach incorporates several important features. As noted above, the first is time. Beyond time, the variables of engagement and purposeful language use are also addressed. Students have real-life reasons to want to understand what is being said and to make themselves understood, and they use language to communicate about topics that are engaging and motivating.

Another characteristic of high-quality programs is their attention to articulation — a seamless continuity of learning progress over time. Too often, students find themselves repeatedly learning the same beginning- level content. Such repetition is often the result of insufficient time allocation during a single school year— students cannot learn or remember enough to make noticeable progress within a school year, so teachers feel compelled to start from scratch every year. In some schools, in addition to inadequate contact time during instruction, there are lengthy stretches between class sessions or cycles. For example, students may see their foreign language teacher just once a month, or they may have foreign language daily, but for only nine weeks of the school year. While language learning experiences such as these can be valuable, their value is increased exponentially when attention is paid to continuous learning and progress toward language proficiency.

Best practices in language education address one additional programmatic feature — cultural interaction. Such interaction provides students with opportunities to gain cultural understanding and skills in knowing how and what to say to whom. This exposure is best achieved through direct contact with native speakers, either face-to-face or through technology.

Building on Best Practices

Anyone who works in or with the public schools knows that there is a critical shortage of the most important resources needed for high-quality schooling: time, money, and qualified teachers. There are ways to introduce or expand foreign language instruction that account for those shortages. Time, for example, can be addressed through content-based approaches such as immersion or integrating language with subject- matter learning. The issue of additional costs can also be minimized by immersion programs, because the classroom teacher is the foreign language teacher, and foreign language instructional materials simply replace materials that would otherwise be purchased in English-language versions. Technology as a supplement to teacher-delivered instruction (or as a substitute for it) can give students a jumpstart on the road to proficiency. Whichever solution a district uses, the key to long-term success (and making the investment of funds and of student time worthwhile) is to keep front and center the critical design features discussed above:

- Time: sufficient contact time to ensure language learning;
- Intensity: engaging tasks that motivate learners to expend effort and persist in challenging work;
- Interaction: extensive opportunities to hear (or read) language used by others and to use language with others in meaningful and purposeful ways;
- Authentic tasks: real-life reasons to use language as a tool for communication;
- Continuity from year to year; and
- Cross-cultural learning.

Getting Started

For those interested in initiating or expanding foreign language learning in their local schools, here are some suggestions for how to go about it.

Step 1. Decide that if you’re going to do it, you will do it well. This means committing sufficient resources — both short- and long-term— to make your investment worthwhile.

Step 2. Determine the target audience. This involves more than identifying school buildings or grade levels. For example, will all students participate, or will participation be voluntary?

Step 3. Explore the options. There are abundant program models and designs. Some are more effective than others. Some are more expensive to initiate and sustain than others. To help make an informed decision, program planners can consult print resources,

veteran language educators, and organizations with expertise in the field. Remember to think about sustainability over the long term when considering human and financial resources.

Step 4. Build it and they will come. Experience has shown that there is a great deal of pent-up demand for foreign language instruction in elementary school. Most voluntary programs have substantial waiting lists. Because young learners are usually successful language learners, they tend to be confident and motivated enough to continue into middle and high school. Thus early language programs can play a role in increasing secondary enrollments as well.

If it is time to put the "world" into a world-class education, then it is time to make foreign languages a greater priority for the U.S. education system. American students are well behind their counterparts in other industrialized nations (as well as in a significant number of developing ones) when it comes to knowledge of other languages and cultures. If we really mean to leave no child behind, we should not be content to leave our students behind those in the rest of the world.

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NOTES

1 For further information, see The British Council.

2 International Research Associates and the European Union, 2001.

3 Halliwell, 1999.

4 Lena & Reason Moll, 2000.

5 Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian 2001.

6 For a review of the research, see Deborah W. Robinson, "The Cognitive, Academic, and Attitudinal Benefits of Early Language Learning," in Myriam Met, ed., *Critical Issues in Early Second Language Learning* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman Addison Wesley, 1998).

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7 Penny Armstrong and J. Rogers, “Basic Skills Revisited: The Effect of Foreign Language on Reading, Math, and Language Arts,” *Learning Languages*, vol. 2, no. 30, 1997, 20- 31.

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8 Branaman and Rhodes.

9 For a review of studies on the time required to attain intermediate or advanced levels of proficiency, see Alice Omaggio Hadley, *Teaching Language in Context*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 2001).

10 Myriam Met, “Foreign Language,” *Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement*, (Arlington, Va.: Educational Research Service, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004).

11 For reviews of the literature on foreign language immersion, see Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg, *Languages and Children: Making the Match*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2004);

Met, “Foreign Language”.

Robinson, op. cit.; and M. Swain, “Additive Bilingualism and French Immersion Education: The Roles of Language Proficiency and Literacy,” in H. G. Reynolds, ed., *Bilingualism, Multiculturalism, and Second Language Learning: The McGill Conference in Honour of Wallace E. Lambert* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1991).

12 Kathryn Lindholm-Lear y, *Dual Language Education* (Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 2001).

13 Curtain and Dahlberg, op. cit.; and Myriam Met, “Making Connections,” June Phillips, ed., *Foreign Language Standards: Linking Theory, Research, and Practice* (Lincolnwood, Ill.: National Textbook Co., 1999).