

## THE U.S. FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEFICIT AND LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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**Abstract:** Within the framework of the U.S. foreign language deficit, the author addresses the case for Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), and more specifically, Business Language Studies (BLS), through an examination of the relevant literature and building on her own recent doctoral research study on foreign language as a global competency within the U.S. undergraduate Global/International Studies major. Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) is one way to effectively address the U.S. foreign language deficit, highlighting the opportunities that exist for young people with foreign language skills. The role of foreign language (and of the foreign language educator) in developing intercultural competence has been addressed primarily through the European literature. Implementation of the recommendations of 2007 Modern Language Association (MLA) report, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*, would increase the appeal of foreign language learning to the broader constituency of learners driven by career and professional goals. It is important for foreign language educators in the US to reach out and support the needs of all prospective foreign learners, and especially of those driven by career and professional goals, through a broad range of LSP and BLS programs. It is interesting to note that the collapse in U.S. foreign language enrollment, which occurred in the 1970s and 1980s and has never re-bounded in proportion to the impact of globalization, may be about to be reversed, based on the recent article by William P Rivers et al. on the level of 'grass roots' support for foreign language in the U.S. Lastly, the importance specifically of Europe and of European languages is stressed, as the EU is the world's largest economy, and Europe is the largest trading partner of the U.S. In addition, Europe plays a major role on the world stage, and European culture and lifestyle have global appeal.

**Keywords:** foreign language deficit; business language studies; languages for specific purposes; cultural intelligence; intercultural competence

### **1. The US Foreign Language Deficit and Languages for Specific Purposes**

Americans are among the least likely in the world to possess foreign language skills, or skills in a language other than English. This is not something that has occurred just recently, but the lack of foreign language skills among Americans is increasingly apparent in the globalized world.

Americans compete for jobs at home and abroad and often do not possess foreign language skills comparable to international peers. In terms of seeking employment abroad, foreign languages are desirable, even if the company/organization

conducts business in English, because much of the informal workplace "water cooler" conversations will generally be conducted in the local language, as will conversation at social outings or events.

An August 2013 Washington Post article on the Edward Snowden "black budget" leaks included a discussion of the foreign language proficiency at US security and intelligence agencies, reporting that only 903 are fluent in Chinese, and that only approximately 1,900 are fluent in all Middle Eastern languages combined.

The U.S. foreign language deficit has been a source of concern to government, industry, and to educators, as well as to the general public, and the current public conversation on the lack of foreign language skills has also included:

"America's Foreign Language Deficit," a 2012 Forbes blog post authored by the President of Cornell University

"Foreign Languages and US Economic Competitiveness," a 2012 blog post from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)

A 'Languages for Jobs' Initiative Policy Innovation Memorandum No. 24.," a 2012 blog post authored by the President of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) from the CFR

All of these highlight the urgent need to develop foreign language skills in the US. Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), an approach which expands the foreign language instruction paradigm, is part of a solution to the U.S. foreign language deficit, responding to the recommendation of "multiple pathways" to the major included in the 2007 Modern Language Association (MLA) report, Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World. Such an approach broadens the appeal of foreign languages to a wider cross-section of learners and benefits both the learner, as well as U.S economic and national security.

## **2. The Extent and Impact of the US Foreign Language Deficit**

Most Americans do not speak another language, and the percentage of college students who are enrolled in a course in a language other than English has decreased from 16% in 1960 to 8% at the present time, this at a time when globalization has made knowledge of other languages and cultures exponentially more important to our economic and national security, as well as to our own ability as individuals to effectively navigate our multicultural communities and to enjoy to the fullest the experience of and interaction with other cultures.

A 2001 Gallup Poll found that approximately 25% of Americans are capable of holding a conversation in a language other than English. However, after subtracting recent immigrants, their children, and other heritage language speakers, that number falls to around 10%. This is in contrast to Europe, where approximately 56% of the respondents to a Eurobarometer survey reported being able to converse in another language, and 28% reported being able to converse in two additional languages. Half of those Europeans who were proficient in one foreign language are actually proficient in two or more.

According to the Modern Language Association (MLA), 8% of American college and university students are enrolled in a course in a language other than English, and that figure is estimated at 1,682,627 in 2009, the most recent year for which figures are available. The most popular languages at the college and university level are Spanish, French, and German, all European languages.

According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), only 18.5% of K - 12 students are studying a foreign language, or 8.9 million students, were enrolled in foreign language courses in 2007-2008, the most recent year for which figures are available. The most popular languages at the K - 12 level are Spanish, French, and German, all European languages.

This is, again, in contrast to Europe where, according to Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2012, the overwhelming majority of students study foreign languages. In addition, students in the EU typically begin the study of foreign languages earlier, and with more class time devoted to foreign language than do students in the U.S.

In contrast to the United States, the European perspective offers an example of language policy and language planning. European Union policies of multilingualism and plurilingualism emphasize the importance of knowledge of both globally and locally important languages. The language policy, known as "MT + 2" (mother tongue + two additional languages) implies the importance of acquiring some knowledge of a locally important language and of a global language.

In Europe, English is generally the most popular foreign language, with correspondingly high achievement rates. In fact, to the recently-released EF English Proficiency Index -- Third Edition, the top 10 countries in terms of English-language proficiency are all EU member nations.

Since 2008, the U.S. fell to 7th place in 2012-2013 before re-bounding to 5th place in the World Economic Forum's current Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), following Switzerland, Singapore, Finland, and Germany, all with far stronger foreign language skills than the U.S. While the GCI takes into account a multitude of factors, it is interesting to note the difference in foreign language skills among the most globally competitive nations.

In addition, many American multinational corporations (MNCs) earn an increasing proportion of their revenues outside the U.S. The impact of a lack of foreign language proficiency on individual career prospects in the U.S. workplace and global marketplace, as well as on our economic and national security has been demonstrated in numerous studies, among the most significant being the 2009 report from the Language Flagship, What Business Wants: Language Needs in the 21st Century, the 2007 National Research Council (NRC) report, International Education and Foreign Languages: Keys to Our National Security, and the 2006 Committee for Economic Development (CED) report, Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security.

Although it may be tempting to think that the current public conversation about the lack of foreign language skills in the US is a result of 9/11, this is only partly true. The lack of foreign language skills in the US was already being written about in the 1940s, and in 1976, the Joint National Committee on Languages (JNCL) was founded as a group for foreign language associations.

However, it is the 1979 Strength Through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability: A Report to the President from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies that launched the current conversation. The National Council for Languages and International Studies (NCLIS) was founded concurrently, and JNCL and NCLIS are now affiliated. The report was followed in 1980 by the seminal book, The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis, by Senator Paul Simon.

The National Security Education Program (NSEP), administered by the Secretary of Defense, which includes support for foreign language education, was established in 1991 by Congressional legislation.

It is important to remember that the precipitous decline in foreign language study in the US did not occur recently. According to the MLA Language Enrollment Survey, at the college and university level, enrollment dropped from 16% of students enrolled in a course in a language other than English in 1960 to 8% at present, but this 50% decrease occurred primarily during the 1970s and 1980s, and enrollment has been relatively stable and have even slightly increased since that time. The real issue is that the world has changed, primarily due to globalization, and that foreign language enrollments in the U.S. have not re-bounded proportionately, in response to globalization.

However, the events of 9/11 did bring the U.S. foreign language deficit to the forefront of the national conversation, a series of government initiatives, including Senate Hearings, GAO reports, the Defense Language Transformation Roadmap, and the "critical languages" initiatives publicly demonstrated the importance of foreign language skills and the existence of a U.S. foreign language deficit.

Political figures from both major national political parties have introduced legislation, or otherwise supported foreign languages and international education, including President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush, and Senators Paul Simon, Daniel Boren, Norm Coleman, and Daniel Akaka. Most recently, in 2013, Senator Ralph Lautenberg and Representative Rush Holt, both of New Jersey, introduced legislation into the Senate and into the House respectively in support of foreign language education.

In April 2013, Clay Pell, grandson of Senator Claiborne Pell, was appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary for International and Foreign Language Education, a position the foreign language educators had long advocated to fill, only to leave in November 2013 to subsequently become a candidate for Governor of Rhode Island.

### **3. Foreign Languages and Higher Education**

The 2007 Modern Language Association (MLA) report, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*, is an inspiration for paradigm shift in foreign language education at the postsecondary level.

While not entirely without controversy, it advocated for the goal of "translingual and transcultural competence, for "multiple pathways to the major," for "transforming the two-tiered system," and for "strengthening the demand for language competence within the university." It went on to set forth "continuing priorities," first of which was collaboration with the K-12 system, and offered research and support "going forward."

The broader setting for this report includes sobering statistics on the educational trajectory of foreign language majors. . According to the 2007 MLA report, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*, only 6.1% of foreign language majors go on to earn a doctorate. According to "Numbers of U.S. Doctorates Awarded Rise for Sixth Year, but Growth Slower," NSF 10-308, November 2009, of the 48,802 research doctorates awarded in the U.S. in 2008, only 627 were in the area of foreign language and literature, and between 1998 and 2008, the figure had fluctuated between 643 and 627.

Educational institutions have many options in the potential implementation of the recommendations of the report, including adoption/expansion of foreign language requirements and enforcement of existing ones, and informal, co-curricular, and experiential foreign language experiences, possibly involving international students already on campus, or local communities of native speakers.

In its discussion of "multiple pathways to the major," the MLA report explicitly mentions translation and interpreting, and the concept of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) is implicit among these.

The usefulness of learning any particular language depends on the individual and on the reason for learning the language. A foreign language major, an international/global studies or area studies major, a pre-med or nursing major, or a business major may select one or more languages based on perceived usefulness in one chosen profession.

Colleges and universities can also encourage interdisciplinary partnerships among faculty to develop courses in languages for specific purposes (LSP). Although the list of possibilities is endless, it is easy to imagine French for culinary arts or dance students, Italian for music and art majors, Spanish for healthcare professionals, etc., but the idea is to bring the student's area of academic and professional interest together with one or more appropriate languages. A major area within LSP is Business Language Studies (BLS).

#### **4. Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) and Business Language Studies (BLS)**

The traditional foreign language curriculum emphasized written language and grammar and reading of the literary and other great texts in the target language. Courses designed to support specific interests have long existed, albeit on the periphery of the traditional language program.

However, if U.S. students are to be prepared for "the jobs of the future," and if we are to effectively address the U.S. foreign language deficit, it is necessary that a paradigm shift within foreign language education expand the goals of instruction to include foreign language courses and programs to support a wide range of professional, career, and cultural interests. In many parts of the United States, knowledge of Spanish and other locally important languages is useful in effectively navigating our multicultural and multilingual communities.

Opportunities for students with foreign language skills abound. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook, demand for translators and interpreters will increase by 42% between 2010 and 2020, faster than the average for all occupations. The median salary is \$43,300 (May 2010), with 58,400 employed (2010), and 83,100 projected in 2020. According to Common Sense Advisory's "The Top 100 Language Service Providers," part of its The Language Services Market: 2012, the language services sector stands at US\$33.5 billion for 2012.

The author's 2010-2011 research study, reported in her 2011 doctoral dissertation, *Foreign Language as a Competency in Education for Global Citizenship: From Mindset to Sustainable Skill Set*, concerned the role and status of foreign language within the undergraduate major in Global/International Studies.

Foreign language educators have actively advocated for the development of the LSP approach. In April 2012, the first International Symposium on Languages for

Specific Purposes was held at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and the second is scheduled for April 2014 at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

In 2012, Risner's video, "Are We Prepared for Jobs of the Future???" highlights the need for language skills among U.S. students, and

In April 2013, Crouse's article on "Languages for Specific Purposes in the 21st Century" examines interesting and creative K-12 initiatives. The ACTFL website, "2013 Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers," delineates principles which include, importantly for LSP, including language and cultural proficiency, as well as disciplinary knowledge. According to the ACTFL's Languages as a Core Component of Education for All Students, foreign language skill is described as a "resume differentiator

In addition, the Network of Business Language Educators (NOBLE) was established in 2009 with the goal of bringing together K-16 foreign language educators to collaborate in the development of foreign language skills for the 21st century workplace.

Beyond the foreign language education community, other reports have documented the need for foreign language skills in the workplace

In 2011, in *The Languages of Business*, the Bloomberg organization determined that English, Mandarin Chinese, French, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, German, Italian, Korean, and Turkish were the most useful languages in global business. The November 2013 report, *Languages for the Future*, commissioned by the British Council, identifies Spanish, Arabic, French, Mandarin Chinese, German, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Turkish and Japanese as the languages most important for the UK over the next 20 years.

The U.S. government has addressed the need for language skills among Americans for national and economic security through the federally-funded Language Flagship and the Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBERs) respectively. Both programs are vulnerable to Federal budget cuts.

The Language Flagship, part of the National Security Education Program (NSEP), and a partnership between the Federal government and higher education institutions, are programs intended to provide instruction in languages perceived as critical to national security. According to the 2011 annual report, there were 36 Flagship programs in Arabic, Chinese, Hindi/Urdu, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, and Turkish. The Language Flagship also produced the 2009 report, *What Business Wants: Language Needs in the 21st Century*.

The Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBERs), funded by the Department of Education, have been providing resources, support and programs since 1988. The goal of the CIBER program is to increase intercultural understanding and the global competitiveness of the US. It now includes 33 centers, the most recent group selected competitively in 2009. According to the report, *New Initiatives and Themes 2010-2014*, new degree programs and initiatives, re-thinking American business education, are the current priority. According to *Increasing US Global Competitiveness through International Business Education: 20 Years of CIBER 1989 – 2009*, annual funding from the Federal government equals \$12,757,000 (96). The Department of Education's FY 2010 Project Abstracts: Centers for International Business Education Program further breaks out the cost to average cost \$386,576 (2). Although over 30 CIBERs exist

at the present time, a proposed 40% budget cut has jeopardized many of these programs.

Languages across the Curriculum (LAC) is a movement which encourages students to develop their language skills in interdisciplinary courses and in experiences beyond the classroom. The Cultures and Languages across the Curriculum Consortium (CLAC), in existence since 2005, has expanded LAC to explicitly include cultural knowledge and intercultural competence, emphasizing K-16 collaborations, service learning, and study abroad. Both the CLAC website and a 2010 article, "Languages Plus," by Redden, highlight the multiple models which characterize CLAC and recall the "multiple pathways" recommended in the 2007 MLA report, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*.

### **5. The History of Languages for Specific Purposes**

In 1989, an article by George White, "U.S Executives Too Provincial, Study Finds," reporting on a survey conducted by Korn/Ferry International and the Columbia University Business School, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, reported results critical of the foreign language skills of U.S. executives at that time.

In 1991, Christine Uber Grosse and Geoffrey M. Voght authored the seminal article, "The Evolution of Languages for Specific Purposes in the United States." In 1992, "Foreign Languages and International Business," by Voght and Ray Schaub, followed, published by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). Grosse subsequently authored "Corporate Recruiter Demand for Foreign Languages and Cultural Knowledge," in 1998, and "The Competitive Advantage of Foreign Languages and Cultural Knowledge," in 2004. Grosse also published a 1982 article, "A Survey of Spanish for Business at AACSB Colleges and Universities in the United States," examining business Spanish in the curriculum.

A 1998 article by Arn and Rogers, "Language Requirements for Baccalaureate Degrees in AACSB-Accredited Schools: Deans' Opinions," found widespread (71%) support for foreign languages among the Deans, with a lesser degree of implementation of foreign language course requirements (54%).

A 2006 article by Moore, "Foreign Language Requirements For Business Students: An Update," demonstrates that although business students believe that FL is important, B-schools have not increased offerings or requirements. In her 2011 article, "A B-School Lingua Franca,?" Iannarelli points out that English is no longer the only language important in international business education and that the future is likely to require proficiency in several languages. A 2012 article, by Lee, "Bilingual jobs: Foreign-language careers on rise," emphasizes the extent of the need for employees with foreign languages skills, as well as the specific areas where the need is strongest.

Also in 2012, the *Modern Language Journal* (MLJ), the flagship journal of the Modern Language Association (MLA), published a focus issue on languages for special purposes, which featured a reprint of the article by Grosse and Voght, among others. It also featured an article by Michael Scott Doyle, "Business Language Studies in the United States: On Nomenclature, Context, Theory, and Method."

## 6. Discussion

The literature has demonstrated that foreign language skills are needed if U.S. companies are to remain globally competitive through reports such as the 2009 Language Flagship report, *What Business Wants: Language Needs in the 21st Century*, and the earlier reports mentioned above. In addition, the US government and military have demonstrated that there is a clear need for an increase in foreign language skills if the nation is to remain secure.

Foreign language skills are needed in the hotel and tourism industry, in multinational corporations doing business in the US and abroad, and in public and health services serving multicultural and multilingual communities here at home.

Hospitals and other medical facilities routinely employ staff fluent in a variety of languages and often subscribe to online or telephone translation services for well over 100 languages. Hotel and tourism workers all over the world study and learn a variety needed languages in order to better accommodate tourists and other visitors and to earn additional compensation. Schools all over the world serve students of diverse backgrounds, and effective educators at all levels recognize the importance of linguistic and cultural skills by the practitioner in the classroom. Each specific region and industry has its own subject areas and vocabulary needed, but the principles of communicative and cultural competence needed are the same.

Issues for the learner involve the selection of a foreign language, the time to begin foreign language learning, and the approach to foreign language instruction. The target language may be related to career and professional needs or location where the student envisions his/her career. Language may also be chosen because it is a heritage language or because it is easier to learn and closer to the student's native language. A language may be chosen because of a specific interest or because it is a locally or globally important language. An early start, and continuous progressive foreign language learning, and an immersion or immersion-like setting are best.

Issues for the educational institution include organization of foreign language instruction and related activities on campus or through study abroad. An interdisciplinary approach to instruction, with designated courses across the disciplines team-taught by a professor from the discipline and a foreign language professor, would be a workable approach, and it is easy to imagine French or Italian, in a art class, any number of languages in a political science or history class on a specific country or region, etc.

These courses could be designated with a special course code such as LI, language-intensive, as many courses already are with designations like WI (writing-intensive) etc., across the curriculum, with an agreed-upon number required in the student's major. An interesting article, written in 1998 by Mark Clayton, "Learning French While Dancing? Students Make the Leap With Panache," describes the use of French in a dance class at Bennington College.

Another approach is to embrace a double-major, with students majoring in a relevant foreign language along with their chosen major. According to a 2009 article by Lule, "Creating the Global Studies Curriculum – A Space for the Local?," this was explored, but not implemented, at Lehigh University, due in part to the challenge of the credit load of a double major on the undergraduate curriculum as a whole.



Challenges include difficulty in locating foreign language faculty with both the linguistic and professional knowledge to provide effective instruction in business and other specialized language courses. If educational institutions do not provide these courses, prospective students may well seek instruction elsewhere, in the for-profit sector, where instruction tends to be driven by a purely instrumental communicative approach rather than by an interest in the target culture.

Another challenge is reluctance of U.S. students to learn another language. The author's doctoral research was on the role and importance of foreign language skills in International/Global Studies undergraduate programs in the US, with case study findings that, although the idea of foreign language skills had strong support, curriculum requirements rarely exceeded the intermediate level, with the process, or "struggle," to learn another language the primary goal for English-speaking American students in the major.

## **7. Future Directions**

The JNCL-NCLIS and its member organizations continue to advocate for foreign languages and for foreign language education in the U.S.

In a 2012 presentation, *The Language Enterprise in the US: The Public and Private Sectors*, William P. Rivers, Executive Director of JNCL-NCLIS, addressed the scope of the language enterprise, which includes educators and language services providers, and public and private sectors, all in support of the needs of the globalized world for language skills. In "How Big is the Language Enterprise in the US?" he placed the value of the private sector at \$15 billion per year, and estimates the public sector, including Federal, State, and Local government at \$10 billion per year. In his conclusion, "Looking Ahead," he includes the predicted growth of the private sector, the need for effective advocacy at the local level, the predicted stability in many U.S. government programs, the increased collaboration among sectors, and increased JNCL-NCLIS engagement with the private sector. In a Fall 2013 article, "Language Votes: Attitudes Toward Foreign Language Policies," Rivers and his co-authors demonstrate that 'grass-roots' support for foreign language education far exceeds the level of government support it has been accorded.

Recent foreign language initiatives in the U.S. include the Fall 2013 conference on Languages for All?: The Anglophone Challenge, was held at the University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Languages (CASL). The tag line for the conference was "It's time to shift the discussion from 'Why should we learn a second language?' to 'Why aren't we learning languages?'" and focused on the global anglophone reluctance to learn foreign languages.

## **8. Concluding Thoughts**

Many believe that English is the global lingua franca, and the United States does not have an official language, or a language policy. For these reasons, foreign languages and the importance of foreign language skills may not be at the forefront in the awareness of many Americans. In order to increase interest in foreign language skills among Americans, a social marketing campaign for foreign languages is needed. Such a campaign would include outreach to bilingual and

multilingual celebrities in sports, entertainment, and the private and public sectors, in the hope that they would serve as language "role models."

When globalization and "critical languages" have been taken into account, Europe still matters, greatly, and so do European languages. As McCormick has written, in *Why Europe Matters*, in addition to being the largest economy in the world, Europe and its languages and cultures represent the next step in the evolving process of our interconnected world.

Foreign language study may always reflect changing economic and geopolitical realities, but at this time, Europe remains the most important trading partner of the US. According to *Facts & Figures: Why the Transatlantic Relationship Matters*, from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "together the United States and the European Union account for nearly half of the global economic output, with each producing more than \$16 trillion in GDP. Total U.S.-E.U. commerce -- including trade in goods and services and sales by foreign affiliates -- tops \$6.5 trillion annually and employs 15 million Americans and Europeans."

Stephen Brockmann says it best, in the conclusion of his 2008 article, "A Defense of European Languages." "Above all it is important for us to understand that a really massive increase in focus on foreign languages and cultures -- and there can be little doubt that we need such an increase -- will necessitate not shifting resources from "old" languages to "new" ones but rather enhancing foreign language study overall. The United States has seen enough either-or, zero-sum thinking about foreign languages; it is time to change our approach."

#### **About the Author**

My area of research is the US foreign language deficit, and my publications include *The U.S. Foreign Language Deficit and Our Economic and National Security* (Mellen Press, 2013), *The U.S. Foreign Language Deficit and How It Can Be Effectively Addressed in a Globalized World* (Mellen Press, Dec. 2013), "The U.S. Foreign Language Deficit -- Why It Matters and What We Can Do about It." (*Language Magazine*, June 2013, [http://languagemagazine.com/?page\\_id=6466](http://languagemagazine.com/?page_id=6466) and a TEDx Talk, "The U.S. Foreign Language Deficit: What It Is; Why It Matters; and What Can Be Done about It." (Sept. 2013) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CZ7zu5Aeu0>

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