

Feature Article

One Strategy for a National Foreign Language Framework: Begin at the Local Level

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When Russia launched its Sputnik satellite in 1956, the United States government took that as a wake-up call to vastly improve the teaching of math, science, and foreign languages. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) passed by Congress in 1958 declared that the teachers of those three subject areas were vital to the national defense of the country and as a consequence, because I was a French teacher, I received an exemption from the draft and began my 41 year career as a teacher of French.

As I read the 2009 paper *Building the Foreign Language Capacity We Need: Toward a Comprehensive Strategy for a National Framework*, by Jackson and Malone (1), I was reminded of the up-and-down ride that the teaching of foreign languages has undergone in our country and of the bittersweet relationship that has existed between Americans and foreign languages. For the past 50 years, various surveys, national panels, and presidential commissions have all concluded that the United States is deficient, if not negligent, in the importance it places in foreign language education and the need to create a bilingual or multilingual populace. Consider the following statements that encourage the inclusion of foreign languages in our schools:

1. Our gross national inadequacy in foreign language skills has become a serious and growing liability. It is going to be far more difficult for America to survive and compete in a world where nations are increasingly dependent on one another if we cannot communicate with our neighbors in their own languages and cultural contexts. (2)
2. To confront...twenty-first century challenges to our economy and national security, our education system must be strengthened to increase the foreign language skills and cultural awareness of our students. America's continued global leadership will depend on our students' abilities to interact with the world community both inside and outside our borders. (3)

In spite of those stated goals the situation has not improved. The paper states that surveys conducted by the Modern Language Association, the Center for Applied Linguistics, and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages indicate that from 1961 until 2007, enrollments in foreign language classes K-16 have not changed significantly. As alarming as those statistics seem to be, the paper offers hope for the future and leads one to consider some important factors as to the viability of the proposed goals. It presents a comprehensive picture of the status of foreign language education in the United States, gives the rationale for the need of skilled foreign language speakers, and offers recommendations for a national foreign language learning framework.

The formulation of a national foreign language framework depends very much for its success on the local level programs. This article will list conditions prevalent at the local level that need to be addressed if we are to establish a national rationale for foreign language proficiency in America and offer solutions for its implementation. To be successful on the national level requires great changes at the local level.

Recommendations toward the Creation of a National Foreign Language Framework

The structure of the local system of education, as it now exists, will make the attainment of a National Foreign Language Framework difficult if not impossible unless some changes are made to the impediments listed below that will lead to proficiency in foreign languages. A key step is the creation of a K-12 Director of Foreign Languages at the local level whose responsibility would be to facilitate the recommendations listed below.

1. *The lack of articulation between elementary, secondary, college, and graduate programs*

In most towns, the different aspects of the school system act independently of one another and it is often the case that the high school foreign language department does not recognize the validity of elementary and/or middle school programs and requires that those students be placed in beginning foreign language classes. In some cases, different textbook series are used and different languages are taught at the different levels.

Recommendation: Create the position of K-12 Director of Foreign Languages to oversee the articulation between the different levels and to coordinate all staff development programs.

2. *The principle of local autonomy over our schools Vs national goals*

Americans prize the principle of local autonomy. Schools are under the control of locally elected school boards whose members usually do not come from the field of education. Because of the economic climate of the times, many school boards and superintendents are in the business of cutting the school budget and operate under a “less is more” philosophy.

Recommendation: Invite school board members and superintendents of schools to attend foreign language conferences and in-service workshops so they gain a better understanding of current foreign language teaching best practices.

3. *The lack of a common goal within the foreign language teaching profession*

Most foreign language teachers have little contact with their colleagues in neighboring towns and many are not given the opportunity to attend any national or state foreign language association conferences due to the unavailability of funds. In spite of continuing research in the area of foreign language learning, the mainstay of the profession continues to be a grammar-based curriculum that leads very few students to achieve the level of communicative proficiency needed to attain the goals described in the paper.

Recommendation: The local teacher’s contract stipulates that attendance at foreign language teachers’ conferences, supported financially by the school system, is a crucial part of the system’s staff development program.

4. *The unresolved problem of class size*

Large class sizes are not a problem to the old “grammar-translation” approach to the teaching of a foreign language because that focus is on learning the vocabulary and the grammar of

the language. However it is difficult to produce skilled speakers who have a high level of communicative proficiency in large classes because the larger the class, the less the opportunity for individual practice and immediate feedback in the speaking skill.

Recommendation: Local adoption of the Modern Language Association belief that “a competency-oriented language curriculum needs to incorporate learning opportunities that focus on language and cultural content and functional ability at all levels, from beginning to the most advanced.” The smaller the class size, the easier to achieve competency and functional ability in all skill areas.

5. ***Block scheduling and semester courses Vs year-long courses in high school***

Foreign language acquisition is made more difficult under block scheduling because it breaks the continuity of exposure guaranteed by year-long courses. Under block scheduling a student enrolls in a foreign language either in semester 1 or in semester 2 but not in both and the duration of a course under block scheduling is usually 80 minutes per day times 90 days while year-long courses are 50 minutes long per day times 180 days.

Recommendation: If proficiency is the goal, then an effort must be made at the local level to prefer year-long courses to the semester courses of block scheduling.

6. ***The bag of tricks approach to improving teaching methods***

The workshops offered at foreign language conferences or staff development workshops often fall under the category of a “bag-of-tricks” approach to the teaching of a foreign language. There is very little offered toward the development of a “philosophy of foreign language teaching.” Teachers return to their classes happy with the handouts that they accumulated which offer advice on making their classes more interesting.

Recommendation: Include more philosophy of foreign language teaching and learning workshops, as well as sessions on language learning and the brain, at state and national foreign language conferences and in local staff development workshops.

7. ***The lack of intensive training in foreign language teaching***

In most cases, aspiring foreign language teachers are required to take a one-semester foreign language methodology course and one-semester of practice teaching with a weekly seminar discussion. To complement this experience, some schools have established a mentor program to help the novice teacher. In most cases that help comes in the form of classroom management, discipline control, and effective lesson planning.

Recommendation: Increase the methodology course from one-year to two-years and include principles of foreign language teaching and learning in practice teaching seminars and local in-service programs.

8. ***The fear of things foreign in America***

The current antipathy towards “illegal” immigrants is a product of xenophobia. The fact that Spanish is America’s second language and that Hispanics make up the largest minority group in America creates the fear among non-Hispanic Americans that their culture is in danger of

disappearing or at least of being assimilated into the minority group. It has given rise to the English Only movement that advocates that “everyone who lives in America must speak English” and that bilingualism and biculturalism are somehow unpatriotic.

Recommendation: Establish a local education campaign that focuses on other languages as well as Spanish showing the advantages of multilingualism and multiculturalism for our country.

9. *The multitude of programs at the elementary level*

Foreign languages in the elementary schools has many different faces: Total Immersion, Two-Way Immersion, Partial Immersion, Content-Based FLES, FLES, and FLEX.

Recommendation: School systems should adopt an immersion-type elementary foreign language program that will devote the requisite number of hours needed to achieve a high level of communicative proficiency at the end of the K-12 cycle.

Conclusion

The fate of foreign language inclusion as a core subject into the curriculum of our public schools rests in the hands of those responsible for them: school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents. National commissions and blue ribbon panels can set the goals and perhaps provide the rationale and the funds, but unless everyone at the ground level gets on board, those recommendations become wishful thinking. The addition of a K-12 Foreign Language Director in local school systems would facilitate the implementation of a National Foreign Language Framework.

References

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3. *The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security*. Committee for Economic Development. 2007

About the author

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