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Foreign language study in the United states: questions and problems

Language policy experts are familiar with the contradictory impulses that push communities towards insistence on the use of their own language with their allophone neighbors and towards accommodation with their neighbors through the use of their neighbors' languages. Thus, in the context of the European Union or the United Nations, the government of France insists on the prerogatives associated with the status of French and wherever possible employs it as a diplomatic lingua franca when engaging with speakers of other languages, but French diplomats accommodate themselves to certain speakers of English in order to conduct business with their anglophone counterparts. In recent years, in the case of France, we have seen a weakening of French insistence on the exclusive use of French in numbers of domains. Thus, increasingly French participants in international scholarly conferences choose to deliver their papers in English, papers written in English are highly regarded in the assessment of the productivity of French scholars, and the learning of English in general is more widespread in France than ever.

While we may argue that this process of anglicization is inevitable, the speed with which it is taking place is a result of a trade-off: speakers of French are increasingly deciding to follow the route of accommodation rather than the route of differentiation, recognizing that they are less and less able to control the choice of language in a given domain and also recognizing that their own language is less and less understood by foreigners and hence the substance of their message is less and less conveyed to their audience. Faced with a choice

between the marginalization of their message and the marginalization of their language, they choose the latter. As a result, the process speeds up and French loses ground, primarily to English, all the faster.

We may argue that this textbook case of language shift is essentially an unequal battle between two languages. The inequality springs in part from the behavior of non-native speakers of French and English, who, faced with a choice, are increasingly choosing to invest in the learning of English rather than French. These two languages, traditionally recognized as the principal *lingua francas* of international discourse, at least in the west, have been shifting relative positions for the past hundred years or more, as the economic power of the United States has eclipsed that of France and as economic activity has become increasingly internationalized. Thus English has established itself as the primary language of international communication and French is rapidly shifting from international currency to become the national language of a nevertheless economically powerful international player with a rather fragile francophone network that includes French-speaking Canada, so-called francophone Africa, and various other foci of French influence.

On the other side of this trade-off are the English speakers. They come in several different categories. There are at the core the native speakers of English. Around them are grouped a considerably larger number of highly competent non-native speakers, some of them in parts of the world heavily influenced or formerly dominated politically by Britain or the United States (anglophone Africa, India, Israel, the Philippines), some of them members of an international elite that includes speakers from all parts of the world who use English on a regular basis as one of their repertoire of languages and who may have studied or lived in the United States or another English-speaking country. This large group of non-native speakers, now larger in number than native-speakers, can be expected to have a larger and larger influence on the linguistic development of English.

Around this second group is a third less clearly defined group of individuals who use English in a relatively restricted context, or are non-elite members of communities where English is used in some measure as a *lingua franca* (India, for example). Finally, and beyond them again, are those learning English, partly in informal settings, but particularly in schools all across the world. The only countries in the world where English is not a major item of instruction in the schools are English-speaking countries (though one might add parenthetically that in-migration into those countries is producing a rather different population of young people whose English-language needs must be addressed through the education system). Non-English-speaking countries must invest heavily in English-language learning in order to remain competitive, and this puts a significant burden, both in financial terms and in the school day, on schools in these countries. This is time and money that often governments can ill afford because economic conditions already disadvantage them in comparison to the educational investment in Britain or the United States. The process of English acquisition is hastened by the avalanche of English-language-based cultural products – films, television programming, videogames, music, books – available throughout the world in increasingly open markets, and by the expanding network of the Internet. The existence of these cultural products creates a strong incentive to master English, which makes the task of language teachers easier, and enhances the likely results of their labors.

Under such circumstances, there is precious little need for the average native English speaker engaged in average international activities to acquire any other languages at all. Indeed, in a situation in which speakers of other languages are accommodating to the use of English in

international discourse, the use of languages other than English by established English speakers will only lessen the momentum toward the domination of English. Philippe Van Parijs has described the process whereby a single lingua franca is selected for discourse in an apparently multilingual setting: if the group wishes to include everyone (the desire for inclusion is the key element here), they choose the “maximin” solution – they accommodate themselves to the individual with the minimum language repertoire. Thus if four people speak French and have some knowledge of English, and one speaks English but has no appreciable knowledge of French, English becomes the lingua franca. Of course, if the English speaker has nothing to offer to the dialogue and if the French speakers control the discourse, the desire for inclusion may fade and the other members of the group will revert to French.

In the larger worldwide discourse of affairs, English speakers have a great deal to offer – a massive economy, a huge cultural base, significant political leverage, scientific knowledge. They also have a marked liability – a relative inability to speak other languages. Workforce surveys in Europe consistently show the United Kingdom and Ireland as having the least linguistically proficient workforce. Studies of language learning in schools show that English speakers spend less time over shorter periods learning foreign languages. Elsewhere in Europe, the learning of foreign languages at the secondary level is nigh-on universal, and at the primary level it is extremely widespread. In ninety percent of the cases, the language being learned is English. Although numbers of countries require pupils to learn two foreign languages (among them Denmark, Cyprus, Germany, Lithuania and Poland), the number of pupils learning languages other than English has declined in recent years.

What is true of elementary and secondary schools is equally true of higher education. English has made marked inroads into higher education not simply as a foreign language but as a language of wider communication. In part in order to compete with English-speaking universities, more and more European universities are offering courses through the medium of English both to attract students from abroad (including other European countries) and to prepare their own students in what is regarded as the scientific lingua franca. This trend began in the 1980s in the Netherlands and Germany but has now spread to much of Europe and beyond. Again, we see a classic case of language shift: more and more assessment processes for departments and teaching staff privilege scholarly articles written in English over those in other languages. Many citation indexes are English-language-based and therefore favor articles in English – thereby giving the impression that the English language dominates scientific citation, whether this is actually the case or not. Thus, built-in biases hasten the process of anglicization.

Advocates for the learning of foreign languages in the United States accordingly face huge odds in their efforts to promote language learning. The arguments that they use fall into several different categories:

Cognitive arguments. Learning a foreign language involves mastery of a communicative code different from one’s own. This is a valuable exercise in heightening cognitive skills, in understanding the arbitrary nature of signs, and in mastering the manipulation of systems. Arguably, such a process should start early, in the lower elementary grades – and not necessarily with a view to mastery of a language, but rather the development of an awareness of the relativity of languages. In my own experience, such emphasis on differences among

languages, and on languages as systems, is relatively lacking, in part because of the narrow training of language teachers. Indeed (and this is a more general point), without a cadre of truly competent language teachers, little is achievable at any level. For the most part, language teachers, if they are competent at all, are competent in a single language or a number of discrete languages: their training gives little attention to the notion that by acquiring one foreign language one can learn skills that can be applied to the acquisition of others.

Cultural arguments. The United States is primarily a country of migrants. In order to understand its culture, one needs to understand the cultures of those who made it up, the ideas and concepts that flowed into the country from other parts of the world, the history of its constituent peoples. Furthermore, the United States is only one nation among many: it is important, if only for comparative purposes, to understand how other nations have come about, what values they espouse, how they live their lives, and how their worldviews and priorities differ from those of the United States. One understands oneself better if one knows where one came from. This cluster of arguments is the most widespread in the discourse of language advocacy in the United States. While the teaching of so-called heritage languages (teaching the languages of former immigrants to their descendants) may be reinforced outside school in the minority communities from which some students come, for the most part there is little reinforcement outside the classroom – far less reinforcement than the average non-English-speaking student learning English in, say, a European country will find outside the classroom. The problem is exacerbated by the widespread assumption, right or wrong, that in the rest of the world “everyone understands English.” Reinforcing this is the continuing widespread view of immigrants and others that their first priority is to learn English, with the result that their own languages may be degraded or excluded in their family lives. According to this view, a foreign language is a handicap to be eliminated, not an asset to be maintained.

Practical arguments. Although the English language is dominant in the United States, many minority languages are spoken. There is a good chance that young people will benefit in employment and in other ways from acquiring one or more of those languages, Spanish most particularly, but also such languages as Portuguese or Chinese. The future of the United States will depend, in part, on its ability to manage difference among an increasingly mobile population. Furthermore, as the United States interacts with its neighbors and trading partners (French Canada to the northeast, Mexico, Europe, East Asia, Brazil), a knowledge of their languages may benefit Americans and may give them an advantage as they seek employment or seek to do their jobs better. The focus of these arguments on practical experience brings one face to face with an obvious truth: most of the “foreign” language spoken in the United States is non-standard. The city manager, or superintendent of schools, or hospital official, who has studied Castilian Spanish will be at an advantage over those who have not, but not a particularly big advantage. For the most part, language teachers have not come to terms with the issue of non-standard language and its usefulness in the classroom or its effect on assessment. Schools do not do well in the teaching of language for immediate practical use.

Arguments from national priorities. In today's integrated world, the globalization of crime and violence advances in step with the positive aspects of globalization. For reasons of national security, the United States must be well equipped to understand the languages and the attitudes of friends and opponents. Without a strong reserve of language capability, the country will be caught short by outbreaks of hostility or of violence in distant parts of the world, or by the need to make new friends and alliances. Such arguments from national policy play particularly well with funders in Washington, who, aware of the need for language readiness, are eager to invest in programs to achieve it. For their part, language teachers are eager to play to arguments that will produce funding and accordingly may give too much support to the notion that language teaching in schools can do much for language needs in government or the armed forces. But the volatility of international affairs makes it impossible to predict where language needs will next arise. In the past few years, Somali has come and gone, Pashtu has peaked and is declining, Kurdish has risen, Vietnamese has fallen. By the time the learner has acquired the language, its relevance has evaporated. Even major languages pass through peaks and valleys of popularity as world affairs shift. One could certainly make the argument that Arabic will maintain its importance as a language skill for years to come, or that Chinese will – but tell that to the Russian speaker laid off from the State Department or the local university.... In this area, as in the first of our four clusters of arguments, the best way of building language skills is by assisting the linguistically talented in developing language-learning skills in general or in the context of a family of languages, so that they can readily acquire a working knowledge of a language in minimum time. It also goes without saying that the United States should overcome its ambivalence about employing immigrants with native competence in these languages.

Clearly, in the design of an educational program, these four clusters of arguments point in contradictory directions. It is worth noting that more or less none of them point to actual mastery, or at least that the most convincing arguments for school-based instruction do not. A tiny minority of students passing through American schools can be said to have mastered their foreign language or languages. Nor do these clusters of arguments offer much guidance on which languages to teach. Given that the U.S. education system is highly decentralized, with many curricular decisions being made at the local level, local priorities are likely to dominate. For example, areas with large numbers of Chinese immigrants are likely to be those whose schools offer Chinese – though schools in affluent areas, where parents want their children to enjoy an advantage in global employment, may also see Chinese as an attractive option, perhaps unaware of how little Chinese their children are likely to acquire in the disjointed schedule of isolated hourly segments that is typical of most schools. Furthermore, again because of the decentralization of the system, children who move from one area of the country to another are likely to be left high and dry if they choose a less commonly taught language, and this dislocation may put them at a disadvantage in acquiring even the limited knowledge of a language required for entry to the more selective universities.

But the biggest single problem faced by advocates of language learning is simply the dominance of English on the world scene. It is hard to convince parents that foreign language matters, or that it will be useful, or that in itself it is an educationally useful skill. Fortunately, as the United States' role in the world has grown, so too has the political awareness of language teachers, who over the past few years have become considerably more

sophisticated in articulating the arguments for learning language. In the space of a few years, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the principal professional organization of language teachers, has gone from a minimally staffed office in an outer suburb of New York to a well-organized and politically engaged operation in Washington. The year 2005 was declared the Year of Languages in the United States, and politicians and business leaders flocked to endorse it, among them President Bush himself. The idea was copied from similar efforts in Europe, to be sure, but it would have been inconceivable a few years ago.

There are still segments of the population that remain suspicious of foreign-language knowledge (there is little doubt that John Kerry's fluency in French did him no good in some sectors during the last presidential election). They perhaps harbor unarticulated feelings, derived from the notion that nationhood and language are near-allied, that fluency in other languages compromises national loyalty. They also perhaps believe, in line with my opening argument, that the use of foreign language constitutes a concession to the power of foreigners when Americans should "stand tall" by speaking their own language. Such inhibitions have prevented language from gaining a significant position in educational legislation in Washington: it is not one of the basic skills included in the No Child Left Behind Act, which has unfortunately distorted educational priorities across the country (or focused them, depending on one's point of view).

Despite all of this, overall enrollment statistics present a remarkably healthy picture. According to ACTFL statistics, at the secondary level (including high school, i.e. grades 7-12), in the year 2000 some seven million students (33.8% of total enrollment) were engaged in study of foreign languages, up from 32.8% in 1994. At the high school level (the final four years of schooling), the percentage was 43.8%, up from 41.9% at any one time. At the elementary level (K-6), however, the percentage declined: down from a tiny 6.4% to an even tinier 5%. Spanish was the dominant language: 68.8% of all language enrollments at the secondary level (7-12) were in Spanish, an increase of 3.0% over 1994. French was down 1.3% and German and Latin slightly down. Italian, however, was up by a huge proportion: 38%, though on a small numerical base.

The ACTFL survey of elementary and secondary education was incomplete: because of the extreme decentralization of the system, collecting solid statistics is very hard, and comparative numbers over time are even less reliable, because of changed collection methods or criteria. The Modern Language Association, which collects data from the tertiary, university level, is considerably more reliable because the data are more easily collected from a smaller and less diversified base. Here we see some encouraging developments. Tables 1a and 1b, below, show gains for almost all languages between 1998 and 2002, with significant gains for Spanish and with a marked increase for Italian, which is on its way to catching up with German. Percentage increases among minor languages may be less significant, but the gains for Arabic are notable, as are the significant increases in Latin, Greek and Biblical Hebrew. There may be many reasons for these shifts, but a significant revival of language learning at the college level seems to be underway, at least for some languages. The ACTFL statistics for the early years of schooling could suggest that the gains are essentially cyclical: there are drop-offs at the elementary and lower secondary levels. But these numbers are open to multiple interpretations.

Table 1a
Fall 1998 and 2002 Foreign Language Enrollments
in United States Institutions of Higher Education
(Languages in Descending Order of 2002 Totals)

Language	1998	2002	Percentage Change
Spanish	656,590	746,267	13.7
French	199,064	201,979	1.5
German	89,020	91,100	2.3
Italian	49,287	63,899	29.6
American Sign Language	11,420	60,781	432.2
Japanese	43,141	52,238	21.1
Chinese	28,456	34,153	20.0
Latin	26,145	29,841	14.1
Russian	23,791	23,921	0.5
Ancient Greek	16,402	20,376	24.2
Biblical Hebrew	9,099	14,183	55.9
Arabic	5,505	10,584	92.3
Modern Hebrew	6,734	8,619	28.0
Portuguese	6,926	8,385	21.1
Korean	4,479	5,211	16.3
Other languages	17,771	25,716	44.7
Total	1,193,830	1,397,253	17.0

Table 1b
Fall 1998 and 2002 Foreign Language Enrollments
in United States Institutions of Higher Education
(Languages in Alphabetical Order)

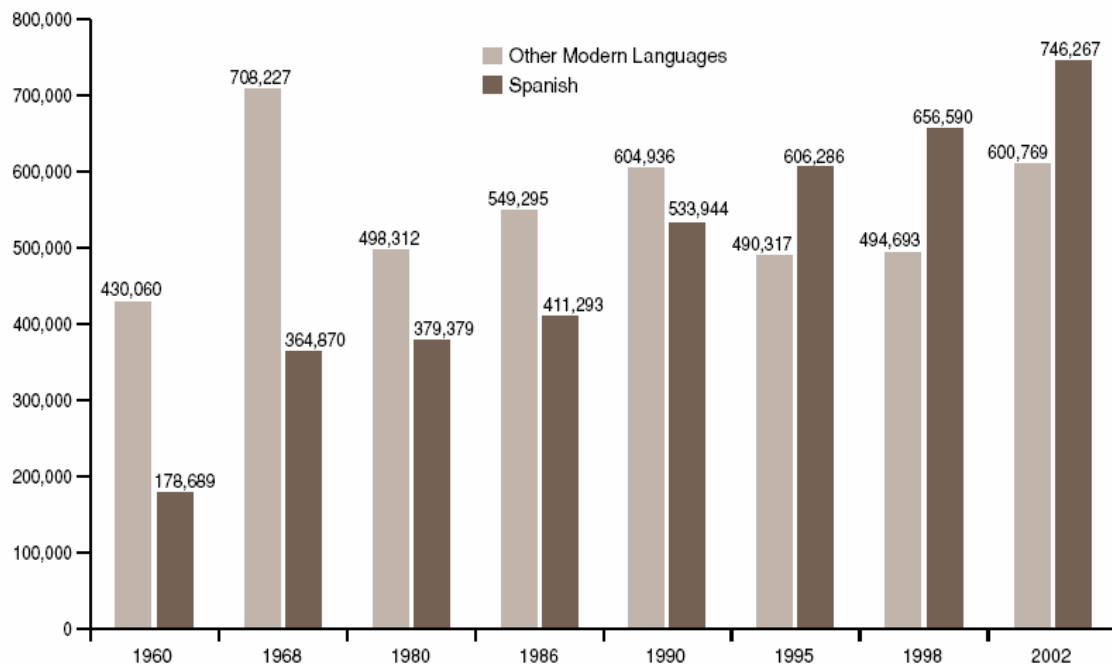
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[Source for this and the following tables and figures: Elizabeth B. Welles. 2004. Foreign language enrollments in United States institutions of higher education, Fall 2002. ADFL Bulletin 35/1-2: 7-26]

As a corrective to the picture of linguistic diversity that these numbers would seem to present, let us glance at the rise in Spanish enrollments over time, which show significant growth over all other languages, such that Spanish instruction now exceeds the teaching of all other foreign languages combined.

Figure 2

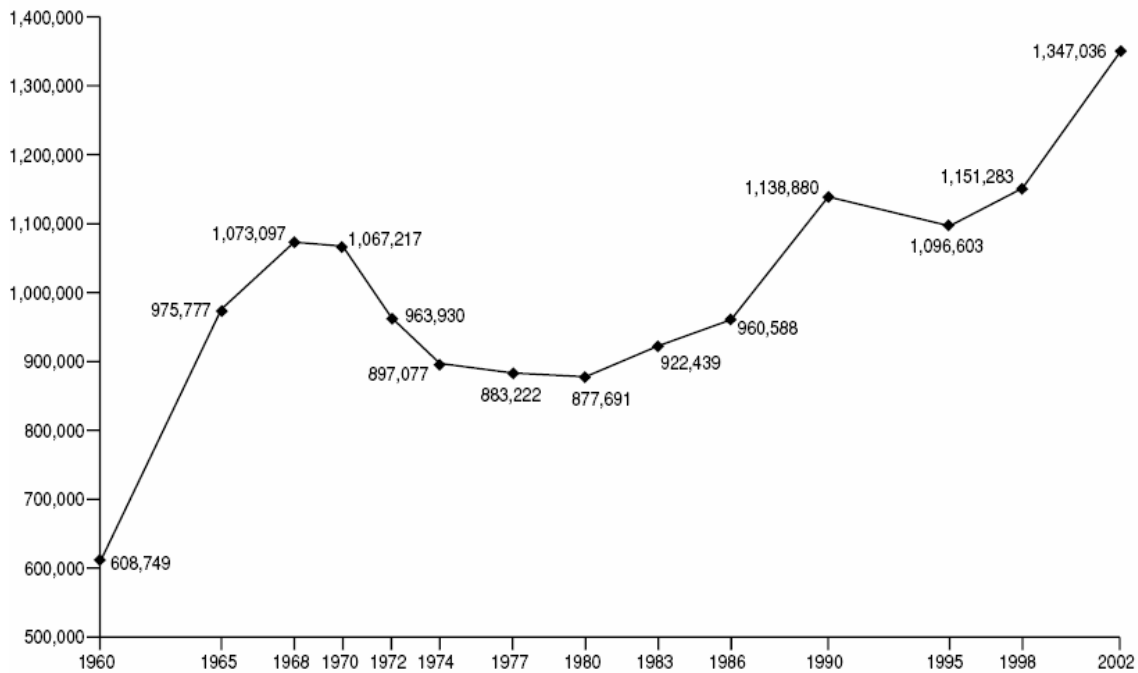
Enrollments in Spanish Compared with Those in All Other Languages, except Latin and Ancient Greek, by Year



If we look at longer-term trends at the tertiary level, we see a steady rise in absolute numbers, though if these numbers were rendered as percentages of students studying at the tertiary level the changes would look significantly different: the figures for 1960 represent 16.1% of the total student population, while those for 2002 are a mere 8.6%. Nonetheless, while the overall student population did increase in the years 1998-2002, it did so at a much more modest rate than the increase in foreign language enrollments. And 8.6%, the percentage for 2002, is the highest since the survey of 1972, so in thirty years.

Of course, none of these enrollment numbers tell us anything about what students are actually learning in the classroom, which in many cases is undoubtedly quite minimal, but, all things being equal, they are encouraging nonetheless.

Figure 1
Foreign Language Enrollments by Year, Excluding Latin and Ancient Greek



While no one of my acquaintance is announcing the disappearance of the Ugly American, and while the numbers contained in this paper, if compared with those for Europe, would be puny indeed, we should not be quite ready to give up on the alternative answer to the French dilemma – the building of a genuinely multilingual community across the world, in which communication between languages is balanced by the flourishing cultivation of linguistic diversity.