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). 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.

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. 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, and only 7.5 percent of students are enrolled at the postsecondary level. 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. 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, 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.

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. 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-

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There's 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
[w]ith 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 begin-
ning a student’s language journey. Heritage learners are quick to
see the importance as well. In his application for a Concordia schol-
arship, 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
c 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 empow-
ered 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, Cali-
ifornia, 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 curi-
ous, 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 pos-
sibilities for the used-to-be-the-only-way perspective, which
freed 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

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Languages was released. The Lead with Languages national cam-
paign is building awareness among parents, students, and the
public at large of the need for culturally and linguistically com-
tent young people and of the important connection between learn-
ing 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 cul-
tural 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

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Changing Mindsets
The release of any national report must have other support mecha-
nisms 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

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.
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.”

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.”

**Making Progress**

One exciting phenomenon taking hold in the United States is the establishment of the Seal of Biliteracy, 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 biliteracy 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 Biliteracy 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 Biliteracy, and each year our upper-level retention rate has grown significantly. Students proudly use the hashtag #2bilit2quit!

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 international 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.

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. 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. 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.

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

Endnotes
17. Quoted in American Academy of Arts & Sciences, America’s Languages, 16.