

STATEMENT

*FEDERAL INVESTMENT IN THE ACADEMIC AND EDUCATIONAL SECTOR:
PRODUCING THE EXPERTISE, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS FOR WORLD
LANGUAGES*

by

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to the

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce,
and the District of Columbia

on

*“Closing the Language Gap: Improving the Federal Government’s
Foreign Language Capabilities.”*

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Senator Akaka, Senator Voinovich, and Members of the Subcommittee: I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today to present my views, experiences, and research results on the current state of foreign language learning in the U.S., and on improving the Federal Government's Foreign Language Capabilities in the year 2010.

Following summary remarks based on a more detailed report of research and survey results, which I would ask permission to introduce into the formal record of these hearings, I would welcome any questions or comments.

For the past 30 years, I have worked extensively in research, training, and assessment of the foreign language skills of Americans at key junctures in our educational system, including the evaluation of K-12 programs, at college entrance testing, and the assessment of language gains connected with overseas immersion learning of a large number of university-level students preparing to enter careers in government, teaching or academic fields. Most of my work has focused on the study and teaching of Russian, but over the past six years, I have worked extensively with colleagues in Arabic, African, Chinese, Persian, and Turkic languages with similar interests and responsibilities.

Currently, I serve as elected president of the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL), an umbrella organization composed of 75 different national, regional, and state-level professional associations with combined memberships of more than a quarter of a million professionals at all levels of the educational system. I also serve as a member of the K-16 Foreign Language Standards Collaborative, the World Languages Committee of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), the College Board Academic Advisory Committee for World Languages, and as immediate past chair of the Council of Language Flagship Directors.

As President of American Councils, I oversee programs focused on advanced and professional-level language acquisition at overseas universities and immersion centers funded by the U. S. Department of State and the National Security Education Program of DOD, which contribute to the preparation of more than 1,500 Americans annually at the school (NSLI-Y/State Department), undergraduate overseas summer institutes (CLS/State Department) and undergraduate/graduate DOS/Title VIII, USED Fulbright-Hays, and DOD NSEP“Flagship” Overseas Programs in Arabic, Chinese, Indonesia, Japanese, Turkic languages, Persian, Russian, Swahili, Yoruba, and several others. Concurrently, smaller but critical investments in teacher training in these languages, including overseas immersion training, is made possible by federal support through DOS (ISLI, TCLP), ODNI (Startalk), and the USED/s FLAP and Fulbright-Hays (GPA) programs. Private sector teacher development initiatives supported by Asia Society and the College Board for the study of Chinese, in particular, are also contributing to the development of the nation’s K-12 teaching capacity and infrastructure.

Many of the participants in the above programs, probably more than half, select study in these demanding training programs because they expect to enter into government service upon completion of their studies. Because students combine their professional level language and cultural proficiency with concurrent study in other majors (international relations, government, business, security studies, engineering, or economics), they are well positioned to go on to a broad range of positions in government, including DHS, DOD, ODNI, State, Commerce, Justice, Energy, EPA, branches of the military, and now also in the National Language Service Corps.

And that brings me to the first observation I would like to share with you today: to the extent that Americans undertake the study of the major world languages in extended course and

program sequences that provide adequate opportunities for overseas immersion study (preferably at younger ages, as well as in the university), **they may now expect to attain full professional level proficiency in those languages, and the real possibility of using their language knowledge to enhance their study and future career in an increasingly globalized U.S. workforce.**

By contrast, in my generation, it was extremely rare to find professionals outside academia and a small number of positions in government with comparable levels of language. Most of us began our study of critical languages at a relatively late stage, and had little if any opportunity for critical overseas immersion study and regular language maintenance support.

The major shift in preparing U.S. citizens in world languages has begun only recently, but its effects are clear and measurable – and cannot be overstated. A longitudinal study, appearing in the current issue of the refereed journal *Foreign Language Annals* (Spring 2010), addresses the issue of the foreign language learning career of American learners of Russian, taking into account the relative contribution of K-12 study, summer, semester, and year-long immersion programming, as well as a range of individual learner variables. The subjects for the study include (for the first time) participants in the NSEP Language Flagships, as well as at-large students supported at the Flagship level by the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Department of Education's Fulbright-Hays programs.

This paradigm shift dates from 2004-2005/ Policy decisions taken by the U.S. government, discussed previously at the 2003 Maryland Conference on Language and DOD's Language Roadmap, both produced under the leadership of former Undersecretary of Defense Dr. David Chu, who is present here today, officially raised the bar for federal employees in language-specific positions to ILR Level 3, or ACTFL "Superior" level or higher. DOS has

also called for training beyond level 3 for critical diplomatic postings. Similar high expectations of language and cultural competency are increasingly present today in both the academic and business worlds, as well. DOD's landmark initiative became the model for the most important cross-agency language training effort since NDEA – the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), launched formally by the White House in January of 2006.

In addition to providing much-needed support to teachers in U.S. domestic programs at the K-12 level, NSLI offers essential overseas immersion opportunities for American learners of the critical languages at key junctures in the educational system through the (NSLI-Youth) for secondary school students; the Critical Language Scholarships (CLS), an intensive summer institutes overseas program for university students; supplementary language training for Fulbright scholars; and the Language Flagship Program, with its year-long overseas capstone program designed to bring students from ILR Level 2 (advanced) to Level 3 (professional/superior) or higher.

MEASURED OUTCOMES FROM OVERSEAS IMMERSION

Domestic study alone has rarely been shown to produce professional-level linguistic and cultural competence in a foreign language in the U. S. educational system. As a result, it is relevant for policymakers and educators alike to be familiar with the research on the impact on language gain of different durations and levels of overseas immersion training. The relative contribution of overseas immersion at different points along the language learning career to language proficiency development for Americans is the subject of the 2010 FLA study, noted above. The research addresses to what extent duration of immersion affects language gain in the overseas setting? How does the impact of a semester or year of study for a student with pre-program proficiencies in the Advanced range compare with the same duration of

immersion for a student whose starting point is in the Intermediate range? Do multiple immersion experiences contribute to overall language gain?

To respond to these and related questions, American Councils has maintained records over the past 25 years pertaining to the general academic and in-country language performance of more than five thousand American undergraduate and graduate students who have undertaken summer, semester, or academic year language training programs in Russia under its auspices.

The population is significant for today's discussions because it represents the leading edge of American college graduates who go on to enter government service. Over the past 15 years, the average age of participants has dropped very slightly from 22.2 years to 21.9, while the level of undergraduate student participation has gradually increased to 78 percent of the total subject population, along with increasing numbers of non-majors or double-majors taking part. Women now account for 60.1 percent of the total population of American Councils participants; approximately 22.5 percent of the subjects began their study of Russian in high school.

The present analysis is based on data relating to 1,881 students who studied in two-month, four-month, and nine-month AC programs in Russia beginning with the fall semesters of 1994 through the spring semester of 2009, including five consecutive Flagship groups who studied under AC auspices at St. Petersburg University, beginning in 2004-5. The participants represent 226 American colleges and universities, ranging from small private liberal arts institutions to large public research universities, with no single institution accounting for more than five percent of the total participant population.

I. PREDICTORS OF GAIN IN SEMESTER AND ACADEMIC YEAR PROGRAMS: RESULTS

Of particular note in the analysis are the clear relationships between second language gains and other variables such as program duration, initial level of proficiency, listening comprehension, previous immersion, early learning, and control of language structure. Listening proficiency emerges as a critical predictor variable for speaking gain at the Advanced and Superior levels, the academic year and Flagship programs. It stands to reason that students at these levels must be able to comprehend clearly and monitor effectively the feedback they receive from native speakers in the form of re-castings and informal corrections in daily discourse, if they are to raise their oral proficiency to the next level. Unfortunately, the research also indicates that listening comprehension is the least developed linguistic skill of those who begin their study of languages at the college level. For those who start at the K-12 level, listening comprehension, by contrast, is likely to be more highly developed.

Learner control and awareness of language structure prior to study abroad is correlated positively with second language gain in all modalities during study abroad. Moreover, language structure re-emerges at the Advanced and Superior levels as salient for effective communication and appropriate levels of rapport-building with native speakers at those levels. AC students regularly report surprise at being held to a higher standard of language production and performance as they approach the Advanced/High and Superior levels, even by their long-time contacts and professional associates overseas. Improper word choices or inappropriate collocations, which would not have attracted notice at the 1+ or 2- level, become salient for native speakers at higher levels (Fedchak, 2007). Structural errors can undercut confidence and undermine trust among native speakers for the non-native speaker operating at or near the professional level.

It is noteworthy that gender has receded for students at the Intermediate High level and

above as a predictor of gain on the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), unlike the findings of Brecht, Davidson, Ginsberg (1995). The reasons for this shift may lie in the gradual changes that have taken place in gender roles in Russian society since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also in dedicated training in self-management and strategy selection provided by AC to its departing groups with special attention to female participants, particularly those who elect to spend the full year in Russia. Clearly, more work in this area remains to be done, especially for female students at the early intermediate levels of study.

Effective study-abroad programs make use of both linguistically supported and unsheltered activities in tandem with improved metacognitive learner and teacher preparation in self-managed learning, learning strategies, and “identity competence” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 150).

High school instruction, it should be noted, in light of the fact that 27.8 percent of the informants had studied Russian in high school emerges as significant statistically as a predictor of reading and listening gain, and approaches significance as a predictor of speaking gain for the academic year and Flagship models. As noted above, listening competence, in turn, is critical for the development of professional-level speaking proficiency.

Initial level of proficiency also has an impact on gain within the study-abroad environment (see Brecht & Robinson, 1995). For example, of those participants entering the academic year program with 2-level reading skills, 81 percent crossed the threshold to 3-level proficiency in reading, as compared to 44 percent of those in the semester program, and 39 percent of those in the summer program.

The development of speaking proficiency is most often cited by study-abroad students as their primary motivation for studying language overseas. Students with an initial oral

proficiency of 2 (Advanced) have about an equal chance of remaining at the 2 level after one year of study, of advancing to the 2+ level, or of attaining the 3 (Superior) level of proficiency. Chances of attaining level 3 in the course of a single semester, by comparison, are approximately seven percent. What is also clear is that students aspiring to attain the highest levels of oral proficiency should take advantage of every opportunity, stateside and overseas, to develop proficiency in the language prior to the critical long term of study-abroad instruction.

An exception to this pattern is represented by the Overseas Language Flagship program in Russian at St. Petersburg University, which accepts students on a selective basis for a highly intensive program of immersion study focused on the full development of professional language skills. With weekly contact hours and direct language utilization measured at 65-70 hours per week (and higher), the nine-month Flagship program has produced six graduating classes of U.S. students with post-program proficiencies at 3, 3+, and 4 (in both the ILR and European Union [CEF] frameworks) in three skills, which are increasingly the expected outcomes for Flagship participants.

Comparable outcomes have been measured using multiple systems of language assessment by the Arabic Overseas Flagship Programs in Alexandria (Egypt) and Damascus (Syria), the Chinese Flagship in Nanjing, and the Persian Program in Dushanbe (Tajikistan).

Obviously, existing language skill measures should not be seen as exhaustive statements of cross-cultural competence, but they represent nonetheless a good level of consensus across government and academia regarding constructs viewed as important for operating effectively in a professional environment in a second language and culture. Multiple studies of the long-term impact on personal lives and professional careers of overseas immersion learning of critical languages provide considerably further validation of study-

abroad learning (Davidson & Lehmann, 2005).

Research has shown that language learning in the overseas immersion environment holds enormous potential for meeting the linguistic and cultural training needs for the government work force in the 21st century. But to function effectively, it must be properly integrated into K-12 and undergraduate curricula and adequately supported by faculties, administrators, policymakers, and funders. In short, a sustained effort across government and the academy in support of world languages and cultures will necessitate a concomitant approach to overseas language immersion study, as well. The above data make it clear that such a concerted effort is possible and can succeed, but the commitment required of students, universities, and society at large is great. I would like to present some key elements of the highly successful Flagship programs:

- Articulated school-to-college proficiency-based programs and curricular sequencing e.g., the K-16 outcomes-based standards for foreign languages in the U.S.;**
- Dedicated programs for heritage language learners at the school and college level;
- Internet-based language learning (through LangNet and other sources) available to support language students from the professional schools, heritage learners, and students requiring content-based approaches to foreign language learning;
- Intensive summer immersion institutes (stateside) for non-beginning students engaged in developing language skills beyond 0+, 1, and 1+ levels;
- Effectively supported study abroad immersion language programs for non-beginning students engaged in developing language skills beyond 1, 1+, 2, and 2+ levels; and
- Stateside university-based advanced level and content-based courses, taught in the target language, to support language maintenance and language development at or near

the 3 level for learners returning from substantial study abroad programs and/or previously trained heritage speakers.

Flagship programs exist today for many of the critical modern languages. Most are housed within major research universities (Arizona State, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, Texas, Wisconsin); others within smaller institutions that have made particular commitments of resources and faculties over time to advanced language study, such as Bryn Mawr College (Pennsylvania) and Howard University (Washington, DC).

II. CENSUS OF LESS COMMONLY TAUGHT LANGUAGES IN U.S. SCHOOLS IN 2009

Critical to this discussion of U.S. national capacity in the critical languages is a discussion of the state of language instruction in American schools. Currently, there are 3,500 high schools in the U.S. that offer instruction in the less commonly taught languages. I cannot emphasize enough the critical importance of developing a pipeline of young students who begin foreign language instruction at an early age. It is important that the funding that is invested in language programs, such as the Language Flagship, is invested early – from the stateside FLAP and overseas NSLI-Y programs to the Language Flagship – so that we have an established system in place that produces foreign language speakers at the highest levels of achievement, at levels 3, 3+, and 4. As a result of these programs, we are indeed producing speakers that do achieve at these high professional levels.

American Councils has conducted a nationwide survey of less commonly taught language instruction in U.S. high schools to identify those schools, and to collect basic data on instruction in order to support ongoing efforts to strengthen critical foreign language education.

The survey was sponsored by the National Security Education Program/The Language Flagship and American Councils for International Education. Data collection was conducted

by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center, Washington State University. Data from this survey were supplemented and cross-checked against information obtained from the Asia Society, Center for Applied Linguistics, and the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota.

The response rate for the survey of U.S. high schools was 91.8 percent. I would like to present several findings our survey for Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, and Persian:

Chinese: The results of the survey indicate that Chinese language instruction is quite widespread within school systems in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. We identified approximately 1,962 schools and school districts offering Chinese classes, with an estimated enrollment of over 117,300 students. We estimate that over 2,000 full- and part-time teachers of Chinese – of whom 62 percent are full-time, and 38 percent are part-time teachers – are currently engaged in K-12 school systems across the country. The majority of schools (60 percent) offer between one to three levels of Chinese, and another 16 percent offer up to four levels. The number of years of Chinese language instruction offered by high schools was spread over four years. Slightly over one quarter (27 percent) offered two years of Chinese.

Russian: We estimate that as many as 16,000 students are enrolled in Russian classes throughout the U.S. K-12 school system, with up to 400 full- and part-time Russian teachers. We identified about 539 schools and schools districts offering Russian in 46 states, although about half of these districts have five or less schools.

Arabic: We estimate that 17,350 students are enrolled in Arabic classes in high schools in 47 states, as well as community and mosque-based schools, with an estimated number of up to 500

full- and part-time teachers of Arabic. Only 14 states were identified as having more than ten schools offering Arabic classes.

Japanese: Japanese language instruction is widespread across the nation, where we have identified 1,013 schools in 47 states and the District of Columbia.

Korean: In 48 schools across 17 states, we estimate that about 3,700 students are enrolled in Korean language classes. Slightly less than half of these schools (23 schools or 48 percent) are located in California.

Turkish: We identified 16 schools in 11 states that offer Turkish language classes, with about 600 students. Most of these students are located in Ohio, with 47 percent of students, and California with 25 percent, and where we have two and three schools, respectively.

Persian: We identified a total of 118 students of Persian located in eight states and 13 schools. New York and California had three schools each; the remaining states reported only one program. About two-thirds of these schools reported that they offer afterschool and Saturday classes, while approximately 30 percent reported that they offered year-round classes.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The latest research on critical language acquisition provides support for several basic assumptions underlying the formation of policy regarding the present “language gap” in the federal government’s foreign language capabilities:

A. Americans are now achieving professional-level proficiency (ILR-3 or higher in multiple skills) in these languages thanks to the NSEP Flagship Program and its many feeders.

B. Americans are interested, as never before, in learning the critical languages, as is evidenced by the notable growth of K-12 programs in Chinese, Arabic, Japanese and Russian

across the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

What is needed, then, is a mechanism for drawing greater public attention to the successes and proof of concept for US success in this area that now exists, so that more students in institutions of all kinds can pursue long-term study of world languages, just as their counterparts in other parts of the world are doing in unprecedented numbers. That mechanism, both informational and financial, would address:

- 1) The general lack of knowledge, particularly at state and local levels, of how to plan and implement language training careers from early childhood through tertiary levels of the educational system that will larger numbers of our citizens to the 3-level, and also enable them to maintain that language through their professional lives;
- 2) The need for increased federal support of proven models of long-term language proficiency development on the level of ESEA, as well as through specific programs activities with proven track records, such as FLAP, the “NSLI” complex of programs inaugurated during the past decade; the support of high quality pre- and in-service teacher professional development for those with responsibility for world languages at all levels; and the availability of standards-based assessments at grades 4, 8, 12 (such as AP) and 16 to permit learners and their teachers to demonstrate measureable progress in world language study.
- 3) Continued or increased funding to support essential overseas immersion programs for students and teachers at the high school, undergraduate, and Flagship levels of training on site in the target country and culture where the language is native;
- 4) The need for more “content-based” course offerings at the university levels to bring greater diversity of content and access to target-language materials in a range of disciplines in

connection with a gradual re-focusing of college-level language training toward the advanced and superior levels, as increasing numbers of undergraduate students, including heritage speakers, demonstrate capability of pursuing work at the advanced level;

- 5) The support of continued research in the field of world languages and language acquisition, particularly the need for greater understanding of the processes of adult second language acquisition and the assessment of language competencies at the advanced- and superior levels of proficiency

Currently, students who participate in the Flagship Programs, whether or not they have had the opportunity to study the language in school, have the real possibility of attaining 3-level proficiency by the time they are ready to enter the workforce upon graduation. This is clearly a model that should be disseminated generally, for it guarantees a capacity and an on-going source of well-educated US speakers of all the major critical languages, even while the larger educational system is adjusting to meet the new demands for high-level linguistic competence in virtually all government agencies and professional fields. Unfortunately, Flagship programs are available only on 22 American campuses at the present time, usually in no more than one or two languages per campus. The Flagship model, which serves government language capacity directly, should now be expanded, at least to the size of Title VI, which has provided the building blocks of language and area expertise at our major research universities, that has made the Flagship programs of recent years possible. In this respect, Senator Akaka's legislation (S 2010) in support of a National Foreign Language Coordination Council would provide a much needed national strategy that would advance much that has been recommended above.

Moreover, the newly drafted “Excellence and Innovation in Language Learning Act, sponsored by Representatives Chu, Holt, and Tonko, represents an important further step in the consolidation of policy and support for world languages at the K-12 level.

This concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to answer any questions.

CITATIONS

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