

**Opportunity, Power & Language:
Monolingualism & K-12 Compulsory Education in the United States**

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Introduction

The majority (80%) of people in the United States speak only English at home. Out of the remaining twenty (20) percent who speak another language, only half speak the second language proficiently¹ (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2016). The U.S. is facing a language crisis and must increase its speakers of foreign languages, particularly those that are designated as “critical” for national engagement in the global economy (Edwards, 2004; Stein-Smith, 2023; Department of State, n.d.). This paper seeks to investigate why so many Americans remain monolingual despite an acknowledgement of the language crisis and a national educational commitment to promoting “student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

The history and current state of foreign language education² in the U.S. demonstrates that foreign language education (FLE) is not a part of the national identity of compulsory education standards. States are responsible for governing their own education systems under the 10th Amendment (Department of Education, 2021). However, the U.S. government upholds states to federal standards in math, science, and English. The Department of Education administers and publishes the annual National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is the “largest nationally representative continuing assessment” of American student knowledge and capability across 10 subjects (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). The NAEP does not include any measure of non-native English language proficiency. There is not a tangible investment in or clear incentive for FLE, particularly at the state level. This paper will argue that

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I define the term proficiency as the ability to utilize a non-native language with real-world application.

² I define foreign language education as the process towards proficiency in a non-native or non-heritage language.

in order to remedy the current foreign language crisis and uphold the Department of Education's mission, foreign language education must become a U.S. cultural standard.

I first provide a genealogical overview where I lay the evidential groundwork for demonstrating the reactive efforts for FLE. Next, I will discuss the current state of foreign language education where I describe the ongoing cycle of stagnancy and the lack of collaboration between across national, state, and local levels. Finally, I will provide recommendations and limitations for improving the current state of FLE where I call for mutual understanding amongst all levels of government in order to achieve the shared aim of increased foreign language proficiency.

Genealogical Overview of United States Foreign Language Education

The U.S. government has expressed the importance of education for the purpose of national defense and global competitiveness (National Research Council, 2007). However, their efforts demonstrate a state of reactivity and a lack of sustainable commitment and investment in standardizing foreign language education. Debates surrounding federal power in state education matters and complacent public sentiments regarding the necessity of compulsory foreign language education further complicate FLE efforts.

Compulsory Education & Federal Role in Education (1918)

Compulsory education in the U.S. began in 1852 with Horace Mann's Common School in the state of Massachusetts. By 1918, all 48 states passed compulsory school attendance legislation (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). These laws intended to reduce crime, encourage cultural assimilation, and produce "productive American citizens" (Katz, 1976; Urban & Wagoner, 2009). Compulsory schooling demonstrates a fundamental United States' cultural belief that

developing competency in academic subjects necessary to fully participate in American society and the duties of citizenship, must not just be publicly accessible but mandated by law.

World War I & Foreign Language Education Prohibition Laws (1914-1918)

The first major legislative efforts in U.S. foreign language education prohibited the use of non-English languages in school. During and following World War I (WWI), 34 states passed laws prohibiting FLE (Hartmaier, 2021). Legislators enforced a narrative of English language superiority and promoted the threat and fear of the unknown that could arise from speaking another language. These laws particularly targeted the German language as a reactionary defense mechanism because it “was the language of the enemy” (Baron, 2018).

Under the Babel Proclamation, the state of Iowa prohibited any foreign language teaching or public use (Baron, 2018; State Historical Society of Iowa, n.d). While language prohibition laws were eventually declared unconstitutional, isolationist policies negatively impacted the United States’ non-English language abilities and public sentiment towards multilingualism (Kasper, 2009; Hartmaier, 2021). The resistance to other world languages during this major global conflict marked a significant moment in the legal efforts towards English-only domestic and diplomacy campaigns during this period (Baron, 2014). Legislative action against linguistic diversity encouraged the sentiment that to be American was to speak English.

World War II (1939-1945)

By the next World War, the dominance of the English language continued its rise to global leadership. The United States’ success in World War II (WWII) coupled with the rising international influence of the English language from British colonization exacerbated the U.S.

public and political sentiment towards language education. There was a decreasing necessity for foreign language proficiency because the U.S. was the world's scientific leader, and English was therefore becoming the global lingua franca. Americans began to develop the belief that since the rest of the world was speaking English, learning another language would be unnecessary (Hartmaier, 2021). The United States was growing complacent with its international identity as a leader and innovator. However, amid their success on the global stage, the U.S. failed to think proactively about equipping the relatively young nation with the tools necessary for longevity.

National Defense Education Act of 1958

The world's first successful satellite launch served as a frank wake-up call to the United States defense and education agencies. Their global leadership was in jeopardy. Following the launch of Sputnik in 1957, the U.S. government grew concerned that the Soviet Union had surpassed their scientific and technological advancements (U.S. Senate, 2023). In 1958, President Eisenhower signed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) into law to stimulate U.S. educational improvement in science, mathematics, and foreign languages with a particular focus on legitimizing federal funding for access to higher education (Urban & Wagoner, 2009; U.S. Senate, 2023). Foreign language education was deemed necessary because it was a "defense-related subject" (Urban & Wagoner, 2009).

Under the 10th amendment, states are responsible for their own educational policies and requirements. Leading up to the enactment of NDEA, there had been ongoing resistance to the concept of federal aid involvement in educational matters within the House of Representatives. Other bills aimed at federal support in educational matters had been rejected, to the detriment of poorer states. Alabama's Senator Lister Hill and Representative Carl Elliot from their respective

Education committees believed that if the House branded the education bill as a defense bill instead, then the bill would be able to pass in the House. Together, the two championed the legislative initiative (Morrow, 2021; Urban & Wagoner, 2009; U.S. Senate, 2023).

Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961

Now that NDEA had set a precedent for federal aid in U.S. educational matters, Congress designed the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961 to cultivate “mutual understanding” between people from the U.S. and people from other countries by funding and promoting opportunities for educational and cultural exchange, including foreign language development. The provisions of the act are still ongoing. The Fulbright-Hays Program funds fellowships for Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (DDRA), Group Projects Abroad (GPA) for K-12 educators and undergraduate students and faculty, and 6-week seminars for K-12 and college educational stakeholders to develop curriculum projects to implement in the classroom and local communities (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2020).

The Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961 was a step in the right direction for investing federal funds into opportunities for U.S. citizens to access culturally and linguistically enriching experiences abroad and invest their experiences back into the good of educational research and practice. The ongoing Fulbright-Hays Programs are helpful for both U.S. foreign diplomacy and domestic educational enrichment.

Evolution of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act: 1965-2015

Amongst the 1960s federal efforts for national defense and civil rights, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 sought to close the socioeconomic achievement

gap in the United States (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). ESEA allowed states to remain in charge of their own educational systems, but still seek and receive support from the federal government. This was a critical moment because it allowed poorer states to improve their education systems and level the national playing field (Pelsue, 2017).

Ruff (2019) explains that in the 1980's, governors realized the "electoral importance" of expressing the relationship between federal "investment in education and improvements in academic outcomes." Performance-based education policies developed in the 1990s and culminated in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 under President George W. Bush (Urban & Wagoner, 2009).

NCLB emphasized federal standards for science, math, and English and standardized tests as a measure of school and student achievement. Myriam Met (2001) argued that NCLB would "neither close the achievement gap nor offer students a world-class education because it ignores the importance of communication in languages other than English." In the same year, the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11 brought the importance of foreign language education to national defense back to the forefront of U.S. political conversation (Edwards, 2004; Stein-Smith, 2016).

In 2015, President Barack Obama officially amended ESEA, repealed NCLB, and signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which "extended more flexibility to States in education and laid out expectations of transparency" for educational stakeholders—specifically parents and students. ESSA requires that every state (1) measures reading, math, and science performance; (2) develops and publishes an online-accessible State Report Card; and (3) reports "per pupil expenditures." The act also allows funds to support career and technical education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

In 2023, the ongoing efforts to close the achievement gap across the United States still do not establish foreign language education as American cultural standard. Neither federal funding nor legislative action prioritize compulsory language education. Myriam Met's 2001 statement still rings true over two decades later. In the 21st century, foreign language proficiency is a necessity for global competitiveness, yet the nation's students do not have compulsory access to developing this skill.

Current State of Foreign Language Education

While the Department of Education emphasized the importance of foreign language education through the policies outlined in the previous section, the exclusion of a report or standard for FLE competencies across the country suggests a sentiment of complacency with the current state of national monolingualism.

The Department of Education's mission statement is "to promote achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access" (2021). Education continues to be primarily the legislative and financial responsibility of state and local governments. During the 2012-13 school year, \$1.15 trillion was spent on all levels of education nationwide. Ninety-two (92) percent of the funds to support K-12 education came from "non-Federal sources." The remaining eight (8) percent of funds came from several federal agencies that are not limited to the Department of Education. Supporting departments providing support to K-12 education include, for example, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Human Services (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Proficiency in a non-English language is not a cultural expectation of the United States' population. The lack of cultural expectation promotes a sentiment that non-native language proficiency is a specialized skill that one develops for post-compulsory professional enrichment.

It promotes a belief that language development is a personal investment that only a knowledgeable few can achieve. The U.S. government has established significant funding for foreign language and cultural education, but its accessibility is limited to persons engaged in higher education. Each program is funded by federal dollars; however, they are branded as prestigious educational opportunities to support national defense and global relations.

While government-funded foreign language fellowships are productive and aimed at increasing the number of U.S. citizens qualified to work in defense-related positions, they perpetuate the reactive pattern of U.S. language education efforts. By limiting the scope of persons who can access holistically enriching education, they fail to meet the provisions of the Department of Education's mission "to promote [...] preparation for global competitiveness" and provide "equal access" to all. Federal agencies have worked together and should continue to work together towards a common interdisciplinary aim. The lack of collaborative investment—monetarily, legislatively, or communicatively—to execute national goals of improving national defense, maintaining and developing global competitiveness, and providing equitable education to all fails to proactively address or remedy the national language crisis that the U.S. faces.

Ongoing federal efforts for language education in higher education, including the recently introduced Advancing International and Foreign Language Education Act (2023), fail to address the root cause of perpetual American monolingualism. The root cause appears to be the exclusion of K-12 education from federal foreign language assistance programs. K-12 learners, according to educational psychologists, are the most cognitively apt to achieve proficiency in a non-native language (Hartshorne et al, 2018). Our failure to address the root cause is a disservice to compulsory-school learners, the K-12 education system, and ultimately to the United States' goals of national defense and global competitiveness (Stein-Smith, 2023).

The specialization and monetization of language abilities as exceptional to the basic educational standards of the country perpetuates a cycle of stagnancy. The exclusion of robust and effective language programs from compulsory education threatens the United States' global competitiveness. There is an ongoing high demand for persons who are educated and proficient in the critical languages which include but are certainly not limited to: Mandarin, Russian, Turkish, Swahili, Korean, and Japanese (Department of State, n.d.). The critical shortage of persons who are proficient in the critical languages—let alone licensed to teach them—reinforces the exclusiveness of access to education for these languages. The people who do seek these programs are perhaps more likely to achieve proficiency and reap the full benefits of the government's investment because they are already seeking higher education. Furthermore, because their language skill offers greater economic and career opportunities, the higher education population is less likely to find incentive in becoming public school teachers in their language of expertise.

The cycle of stagnancy begs the question of whether language education should be a holistic goal for compulsory education. Are Americans satisfied with living in a reactive cycle of stagnancy? Are we satisfied with continuously waiting for the “most qualified” students to seek out and apply for language advancement opportunities? What could be the advantage of incorporating language learning as a standard to American education? The opportunities and their limits will be addressed in the following section.

Education researchers and organizations identify several challenges to providing sustainable and accessible foreign language education to K-12 students in the United States. The primary challenges include limited contact hours with students, difficulty with proficiency measurement, a shortage of teachers knowledgeable and/or certified to teach foreign languages

(especially less-commonly taught (LCT) languages), and the age at which students can begin studying a foreign language (Met & Brandt, 2017; National Research Council, 2007; Stein-Smith, 2023).

These challenges seem to persist due to a lack of an American cultural commitment to foreign language education. While there have been substantial movements for K-12 nutrition and STEM education, there has not been a committed effort for foreign language education despite its designation as a necessity in the modern national and global context.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 and the STEM Education Act of 2015 demonstrate that while each state has the right to responsibility and autonomy over its own educational standards, the federal government can incentivize effective development through collaboration between its independent federal agencies, private organizations, and the state governments themselves (Chandler, 2020; Office of the Federal Register, 2010; Office of the Federal Register, 2015). Healthier meals and STEM education were explicit national priorities, which encouraged national departments—namely the Departments of Agriculture, Education, and Human Services, and the National Science Foundation—to collectively take action for their constituents (Office of the Federal Register, 2010).

Challenges to and Recommendations for Improvement

A committed effort to remedying the national language crisis requires that educational stakeholders across federal, state, and local jurisdictions seek to cultivate a mutual understanding amongst their goals. Currently, a disconnect exists between each jurisdiction's objectives towards the common aim of improved American foreign language proficiency. This disconnection between each group's objectives hinders the mutual aim from becoming an

attainable goal. A significant complicating factor of the disconnect is the lack of incentives and resources for individual states to prioritize foreign language education.

National defense and global competitiveness are the federal government's primary aims in promoting foreign language education opportunities. To achieve these goals, the Department of State and the Department of Education target the higher education population and incentivize their language study and cultural exchange programs as a launching pad for careers in foreign service or diplomacy-related fields. However, in 2016 nearly a quarter (23%) of language-designated positions were filled by officers who did not meet the proficiency requirement for the position (Government Accountability Office, 2017). The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2017) explains that the "language proficiency gaps, in some cases, have affected State's ability to properly adjudicate visa applications; effectively communicate with foreign audiences, address security concerns, and perform other critical diplomatic duties."

There are clear benefits for the nation and the student, but the benefits of foreign language education remain unclear at the state level of education. Each individual state is primarily responsible for their educational system, so they face the pressure to support their local jurisdictions while still performing to the national standards and supervision, as outlined under ESSA. Furthermore, due to the misaligned objectives and efforts of the local and federal governments, state-level educational jurisdictions do not receive an incentive to prioritize foreign language education.

The local educational agencies and their constituents value foreign language education because it is beneficial to student cognitive and social development. Researchers and educators emphasize the importance of language education at the elementary level because it improves student problem solving, attentional control, and English literacy abilities. Earlier exposure to a

non-native language increases students' ability to develop native-like proficiency (Canto, 2019). However, most students in the U.S. do not have the opportunity to begin learning a language until high school. When foreign language education is offered at the elementary or middle school level, the classroom contact time lasts about 60 minutes per week or less and is primarily focused on "language and culture exposure and appreciation" (Met & Brandt, 2017).

General education subjects (math, science, and English) face very similar systemic challenges to providing foreign language education such as teacher shortages and insufficient contact hours and curriculum (Colorado Department of Education, 2023). The widespread shortage crises across academic subjects strain the individual states' bandwidth to be able to invest and commit to prioritizing language education. Recruiting and preparing pre-service educators to teach English, math and science will likely take precedence over preparing an educator to teach a critical and LCT language such as Russian or Mandarin. In the everyday life of the American student, math, science, and English prove more practical to overall preparedness for function in the context of 21st century U.S. life. The traditional "reading, writing, and arithmetic" standards are intended to equip students with the basic skills to engage in everyday American life. The U.S.' physical geography, global leadership, and standard English language limit the necessity for proficiency in any other language than English.

However, if the nation is truly committed to improving national defense and providing every student the opportunity to prepare for global competitiveness, then mutual understanding amongst stakeholders across domains is critical. To break the ongoing cycle of stagnancy and establish proactive American foreign language proficiency efforts, K-12 compulsory language education must be a legislative priority. Collectively understood objectives amongst language

education stakeholders may catalyze collaborative initiatives and solutions to the collective aim of improved American foreign language proficiency.

As the federal, state, and local educational stakeholders strive for mutual understanding of one another's goals for improving the foreign language proficiencies of their constituents, they should consider the following recommendations:

1. Designate foreign language education as a standard subject on the Nation's Report Card.

Including foreign language education as a measured subject on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, otherwise known as the Nation's Report Card, may catalyze the establishment of foreign language education as a U.S. cultural standard. Even if the nation's language proficiency scores are low at first, the score will tangibly demonstrate the U.S.' margin for improvement. The measurement will provide a baseline for K-12 language proficiency across the country so that educational stakeholders may identify the insufficiencies and inhibitors to foreign language education and tailor their remedial action accordingly.

2. Establish a standard language to be the primary focus of study.

Standardizing one or a select number of languages as the primary foreign language that K-12 students are required to take and demonstrate proficiency in would maintain the integrity of state autonomy amid federal standardization. Some states or school districts may choose, for example, to require Spanish language education. Others may designate another language as the standard, depending on their individual cultural and linguistic context.

Further, local and/or state educational agencies may offer instruction for the critical languages via virtual or hybrid learning options for students who express interest in a language that is not offered at the school. The North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) is an

example of this recommendation for enhancing accessibility within the constraints of teacher shortages.

3. Redirect funds from existing federal grants for national security and domestic education.

One example of such re-direction would be to incorporate foreign language education as a Career and Technical Education (CTE) subject.

4. Invest time and monetary resources into pre- and in-service teacher preparation and development.

Teacher preparation programs, particularly at the university level, should designate a degree track or concentration in foreign language education where pre-service teachers learn the methods, theory, and praxis of teaching foreign languages at the elementary and secondary level. Federal, state, and/or local education agencies should offer grants for in-service teachers to engage in summer intensive language courses.

5. Engage students and their guardians in understanding the benefits of foreign language education.

Federal, state, and local educational domains should make the benefits of developing proficiency in a foreign language clear to students and their parents in order to cultivate mutual investment between the home and the classroom. Students and their parents should be made aware of the career, economic, and cognitive development opportunities that becoming proficient in a non-native or non-heritage language offers.

Conclusion

To live up to its compulsory educational values, the U.S. must establish foreign language education as a cultural standard and educational right. The ongoing cycle of stagnancy and the

reactive pattern of foreign language education efforts in the U.S. demonstrate that the lack of cultural commitment to foreign language education causes a state of national complacency and yields no clear intranational incentive for educational stakeholders to innovate new solutions to the challenges at hand. In the same way that not all students complete high school, some students may not take full advantage of language education opportunities. Nevertheless, every student deserves the opportunity to learn a foreign language as well as learn about and engage with its incentives in the name of “global competitiveness and equal access to all.”

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