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National Language Policy: The View from Academe

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Status policy and acquisition policy. The term language policy means many things. We should begin by distinguishing between what specialists in the field call status policy and what they call acquisition policy.¹ Status policy relates to the standing of a language – for example its use in voting, or the provision of court interpretation, or, at the local level, a policy governing what languages are used for communication with parents. That is not our concern here. Acquisition policy (which is very much our concern) relates to policies, including the provision of resources, to promote (or inhibit) the acquisition of languages – through the educational system or in other ways: (1) when to start foreign language instruction, (2) whom to serve with what languages, (3) the nature and intensity of instruction, (4) with what aim in view, (5) and in what milieu.² The United States supports the acquisition of foreign languages in many ways – by funding programs in language and area studies in colleges and universities, by supporting activities designed to prepare diplomats and military personnel for the use of foreign languages in foreign settings, by funding ESL programs for immigrants, and of course by grant programs intended to promote the teaching and learning of foreign languages in schools. But in the United States most policy decisions and accompanying resource allocations result from regional and local (as opposed to national) policy-making.

Selective language-education policy and universal language-education policy. We must make a further distinction between selective language-education policy, designed to

¹ Cooper 1989 distinguishes among three types of language planning: corpus planning, status planning, and acquisition planning.

² My categories are loosely based on Lambert 2004).

produce and maintain experts in foreign languages, and universal language-education policy, intended to promote the teaching and learning of foreign language as an element in the core curriculum in elementary and secondary education.³ We often confuse the two, using capacity-building justifications (we do not have enough speakers of Pashtu; we can't translate Arabic documents fast enough) to support arguments for more French or Spanish instruction in the schools. Sometimes these arguments work, but selective policy and universal policy are two different things. Federal support for universal language-education policy is quite limited – though accompanied by plenty of encouraging rhetoric from policymakers (as we will see, foreign languages have their place in No Child Left Behind, but without funding or accompanying tests).

Selective language-education policy linked to universal language-education policy.

Of course, selective language-education policy and universal language-education policy are not wholly separate. In a talk to the Asia Society earlier this week, Joseph Esposito, deputy undersecretary at the US Department of Education, mentioned four reasons why we need to pay attention to international education and foreign languages: national security, economic competitiveness, academic improvement, and understanding and peace. A higher awareness of the importance of foreign languages in general will likely lead to a higher awareness of the importance of strategic languages, and a general capacity in foreign languages in the workforce will likely translate into a greater readiness to function effectively in an international setting, but for the most part national security and economic competitiveness will be served primarily by capacity-building activities rather than through the general education of students – though failure to build the base will make capacity-building more difficult.

Language readiness and the Department of Defense. We can note in passing that there appears to be a heightened sense of urgency about foreign languages in the Washington establishment, triggered by reports of our unreadiness in Afghanistan and Iraq. This past June, government officials, military leaders, elected officials, educators

³ The distinction was suggested to me in these terms by Kurt Müller. On selective language-education policy and its overlap with universal language-education policy, see Mueller 2002.

and language professionals came together at the University of Maryland to discuss the question of a national foreign-language policy. Recognizing the lack of language readiness among our diplomats and military personnel, the Department of Defense called the meeting to formulate an action agenda for remedying these deficiencies, but for doing so in the broader context of foreign-language learning in general.⁴ There may be the beginnings here of a renewed alliance between language teachers in general and language specialists in fields like defense, intelligence and diplomacy, perhaps under some umbrella structure focused directly on languages and roughly analogous to the structures in place on federal science policy. There are those who argue that the impact of the 9/11 disaster makes this a “Sputnik moment,” a moment when a new initiative is possible in response to an episode not only calamitous in itself but bruising to national pride, much as the launching of Sputnik in 1957 led to the National Defense Education Act, which addressed science education at all levels and expanded our capacity in area studies.

Universal language-education policy. Universal language-education policy cannot ignore issues of national readiness, nor, for political reasons, should it. But mostly it should aim at a rather different set of goals:

- to give young people an understanding of language diversity and to ready them to learn languages,
- to prepare them for civic engagement,
- to give them a better sense of the world and lower the fear factor,
- to make them aware that the sum of the world’s knowledge lies in many different languages,
- to improve students’ cognitive skills, and
- to equip them to use language in multiple contexts.

⁴ A draft “Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities” was developed on the basis of feedback from the conference, and this action paper is still undergoing refinement.

Let me say a word about each of these six goals. In my view, their achievement could be aided by government and foundation support, and they should have a place both in our arguments for such support and in our own advocacy of foreign languages.

GOAL 1. Giving young people an understanding of language diversity and readying them to learn languages fully.

This may sound like an odd goal. Is it not our purpose to bring students as rapidly as possible to a condition of fluency? In a measure, yes (and I will have more to say on this in a moment), but most students will not achieve anything approaching fluency, especially in a context in which there is relatively little reinforcement. What we can do, however, is get students over the first and biggest hurdle: discovering that language diversity is a fact of life, and that there are many different linguistic systems called languages in the world. We can help students discover how to learn foreign languages. With the assistance of colleagues in social studies (if these colleagues themselves are brought to understand it) we can give students an understanding of how language functions as a social institution – a marker of loyalty and identity, an instrument of power, a means of inclusion or exclusion, and a challenge in the creation of effective governance and democratic participation. Many students today who do study languages never grasp this aspect of language. Foreign language teachers and social studies teachers continue to fail to form the alliance that is needed in this area. Last year at this conference, an organization with which I am associated, the American Forum for Global Education, joined with ACTFL in joint sessions on this linkage between foreign languages and social studies, but more such activity is needed. I believe strongly in the benefits of an acquaintance with language and language difference, early on, as an accompaniment to the study of English and as a preliminary to the study of other languages. Such a preliminary acquaintance with other languages might stress cognate languages, or languages relatively transparent in structure, like Esperanto or Latin. The former has the added advantage of being applicable early to promote information exchanges with other countries, since the use of Esperanto on the Internet is highly developed.

Strong school programs. Of course, we are most likely to promote high levels of competence, and hence practical application of language, if we have strong school programs providing, first, continuity and articulation (long sequences, with early introduction to language study, and with anti-attrition measures designed to maintain language knowledge), second, early contact with users of the language in question (especially through the Internet and through foreign travel), and, third, integration with the rest of the curriculum. Our overall aim should be to create a citizenry open to language difference, and therefore open to the idea that other languages are useful. This might help reduce the level of (literal and metaphorical) shouting in English when dealing with the old Europe and the even older Asia.

GOAL 2. Preparing students for civic engagement.

An ability to speak and use languages opens up new ways in which our students can learn to be effective citizens. Languages can take students abroad; they can help them engage with local immigrant communities; they can assist them in triangulating their experience as Americans by viewing it through the lens of another culture. Another organization with which I am involved, the International Partnership for Service-Learning, sends students to Mexico, Ecuador and France to work and study alongside leaders of nongovernmental organizations assisting the disadvantaged and the needy. There are few settings for language-learning more compelling than the need to provide service and to learn to be citizens of the world. The service-learning movement and the civic engagement movement are both increasingly vocal and visible in education policy at the local level: we should link foreign-language education to them.

GOAL 3. Giving students a better sense of the world and lowering the fear factor.

Secretary Powell's message. In his message on the occasion of this year's International Education Week (the week that we are now in), Secretary of State Colin Powell writes:⁵ "The more we learn about and understand each other, the more effective we will be in creating a world of global citizens, and the better our chances of achieving peace in our increasingly interdependent world." He is right; these days, it is the soldiers who call for peace, and those with no experience of war who seek to wage it. Understanding, of the kind called for by Secretary Powell, requires, once again, an alliance between foreign language teachers and social studies teachers in exploring the springs of international understanding and the obstacles to its realization. In a country that increasingly sees itself at war, Secretary Powell's words are important. Our second Iraq war will go down in history as one of the most dire cultural misunderstandings of our time, in which little time was spent on "learning about and understanding each other." While the conflict has many causes, one of them is surely our lack of knowledge and appreciation of the cultural complexities of the country we contemplated invading. Because it leads to unanticipated outcomes that threaten our own convictions (neither right nor left, red nor blue, believes that things have gone right in Iraq), such ignorance breeds fear, and fear breeds further conflict. Waging war is easy; building peace requires subtler skills. Secretary Powell's likely successor is a fluent speaker of Russian. I hope she will also prove a fluent listener.

GOAL 4. Making students aware that the sum of the world's knowledge lies in many different languages.

Linguistic diversity. Linguistic diversity is not a curse, but an opportunity. In the diversity of the world's languages there is a diversity of ways of labeling and defining the world, and an accumulation of the world's wisdom. Most people in the world are to some degree bilingual: our mistake lies in assuming that we can use one language for all purposes, though even our linguistic behavior within that one language is so multifarious and diverse that it proves the opposite. We talk differently to different people; we express our group loyalties through the way in which we use even our own language. On

⁵ At <http://exchanges.state.gov/iew/statements/powell.htm>.

a global scale, the world language system offers an abundance of ways of being in the world. To experience this fact is to enrich one's own life.

GOAL 5. Improving students' cognitive skills.

Language and self-realization. We have an educational system – and a pretty good one at that – in part because you can't run an economy or a democracy without one, but also because all young people have a right to an education, a right to stretch their minds, to discover new things, and to take advantage of the opportunities that our society affords them. When all the talk of national readiness and defense education and homeland security is done, there still remains the inescapable and universal fact (a fact often lost on government officials and sometimes even educational administrators) that education is a means of self-fulfillment, of intellectual growth, to which we all have a right – as surely as we have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Everything else pales by comparison. And the key to the discovery of such self-realization is language. It is the heart and soul of what Robert Scott, of Adelphi University,, calls “liberating education.”⁶ Through language we learn and measure the world. Research tells us that early learning of a second language, or growing up bilingual, tends to enhance success in school – and success in school translates into lifelong success. But, above all, a knowledge of languages opens the world to us.

GOAL 6. Equipping students to use language in multiple contexts.

ACTFL, by developing proficiency guidelines and oral proficiency testing, has done much to break language instruction free of purely grammar-based pedagogy. These efforts have led to greater emphasis on speaking as well as writing, comprehension as well as reading, and to a reduction in purely text-based, particularly literature-based, teaching methodology. But just as mere reading ability may not be enough, too great an

⁶ See Scott 2005, a version of his remarks at the June 2004 University of Maryland conference.

emphasis on achieving fluency may lead to the ignoring of other skills. Our overall purpose should be to push students over the threshold of language usability and beyond: achieving fluency may be less important than achieving versatility.

Research. I should add that there is an urgent need for additional solid research on all aspects of language learning, on the effectiveness and outcomes of language learning in schools, and on the relationship between language study and cognitive development in general. We need also to interpret and deploy already existing research, and to examine underlying social demographics and international trends. In this connection, researchers on foreign-language teaching are often as neglectful of foreign-language sources as their monoglot colleagues in the social sciences: in a recent still unpublished study of European trends, Duncan Charters (personal communication) established that American research on language learning almost never cites research published in languages other than English.

Deficit arguments. How can we get the attention of national leaders and policy-makers? The time-honored approach, at least in the USA, is hand-wringing about the failings of government. We are a nation of fixers: our political institutions are much better at fixing what they perceive to be wrong than they are at celebrating and implementing what they know is right. There is less political mileage in doing what is right than there is in denouncing one's opponent's stupidity. So we complain a lot in our various languages and call for change before it is too late: *Après moi le déluge*. But while such deficit approaches⁷ ("we lack x," "we need y") may attract funding, arguments based on threat get attention in the short term (and they appeal to bullies and to those who believe in the American tradition that kicking ass is next to godliness), but they do not produce long-term change because they do not produce long-term commitment. This may be the biggest shortcoming of No Child Left Behind, particularly when the threats are accompanied by inadequate funding. Esposito (2004) stresses that NCLB "focuses on strengthening students' content knowledge and teacher quality, including in the fields of foreign language and the social sciences." But, while foreign language is regarded as a

⁷ The term is Timothy Reagan's (personal communication).

core discipline by the No Child Left Behind Act, it is not a tested subject. Emphasis in the schools falls inevitably on the tested subjects. In a recent article, Christine Brown stresses the need to make connections with language arts, demonstrating for example (and if such a thing is possible) how study of foreign languages tends to improve test scores (Brown, forthcoming).

Models of excellence. As educators we should favor affirmative approaches: What can we do to build on our past achievements in the promotion of foreign languages in the schools? What can we do to teach better and smarter, to foster learning more effectively, to emulate the best models? There are some remarkable examples of success in many places around the country: the Chinese American International School in San Francisco, recipient of one of this year's Goldman Sachs Prizes and a leading proponent of bilingual immersion, or the Glastonbury Schools in Connecticut and their long history of sustained and serious language education, or the National Japan Bowl Competition which brings young people together to compete on their knowledge of Japanese language and culture.⁸ Schools of international studies are springing up in numerous communities – emulating such schools as the Bodine School in Philadelphia, which has been around for over twenty-five years. And in conventional schools more and more foreign-language teachers are making the case for their subjects and attracting attention. According to Esposito (2004), high school students are taking foreign languages for longer periods (up from 2 semesters on average in 1982 to 4 semesters in 2002) and 83 percent of high school students have completed some foreign language coursework before graduating.⁹ To address the improvement in quality and the expanding range of languages offered, AP is adding tests in Italian and Russian in 2006 and Chinese and Japanese in 2007.¹⁰

International education and foreign languages. Many of the most successful foreign-language programs in the schools combine foreign language study with other aspects of

⁸ See Sachar 2004 for information on the Chinese American International School and the Glastonbury schools.

⁹ A great deal depends, of course, on what and how one counts. Several assessments, for example Müller 2002, are less optimistic.

¹⁰ Esposito 2004, and <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/>. The Russian test may be delayed. The Educational Testing Service now offers an Advanced Placement International Diploma, and the International Baccalaureate (www.ibo.org) has made great strides in US schools.

international education. Some also find ways of addressing the needs of heritage-language learners and conventional second-language learners, though bridging the gap between the two groups calls for imaginative pedagogy and curriculum design. Many make effective use of technology.

Technology. In recent years, technology has opened up enormous possibilities at every instructional level. At the college-level technology is an essential route to acquisition of languages through self-instruction, or self-instruction plus native informant. It allows for the supplementing and reinforcement of conventional language teaching. As Nina Garrett, at Yale University, points out, “It’s impossible to offer less commonly taught languages broadly – at small liberal arts colleges, at budget-strapped state institutions – unless really good materials can be created online.” At the elementary and secondary level, according to Esposito (2004), some 500 US schools collaborate with 109 countries through iEARN, the International Education and Research Network, and 2 million US students and teachers interact through e-mail with peers in 190 countries through e-PALS.

Good teaching and teachers. Successful language programs are of course distinguished by good teaching. But good teachers are in short supply. Foreign language study is a requirement in three states and in the District of Columbia, but it is hard to find the teachers to sustain these requirements. Before we insist on compulsory language learning, we had better do something about improving the quality and the quantity of the teachers we produce. In many states foreign language teaching is designated as a shortage area, and much language teaching is conducted by teachers lacking formal training in the field. Unfortunately education majors are among the least internationalized of all students – which means that the institutional climate in which foreign language teachers must operate is often less friendly and supportive than it should be. While some 12 or 13% of future professionals like lawyers, engineers and architects, study abroad during their undergraduate years, only 5% of those who become teachers do so – and if they actually major in education in college, only 3% study abroad.¹¹ We need teacher education at all

¹¹ These are Esposito’s figures (Esposito 2004), based on “unpublished special calculations” derived from the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics’ Postsecondary Transcript File.

levels that provides *all* teacher-education students with a good understanding of linguistic diversity, an understanding of the applicability of foreign-language knowledge to the various fields, and, preferably, knowledge of a foreign language.

Higher education. I have said little about higher education. Advances in foreign language enrollment at the elementary and secondary level have not translated into significant expansion at the college level:¹² foreign language enrollment as a percentage of total enrollment at the college level has changed little in 30 years – and we have seen only a modest shift to non-European languages and little or no increase in majors in fields beyond the conventional: a total of 7 BAs in Arabic in 2000-1, a total of 21 BAs in African studies in that year (Esposito 2004), and foreign-language majors for the most part linked firmly to language-and-literature studies and thereby (and I speak as a specialist in the fields of linguistics and English and comparative literature) decisively marginalized.

We need to emphasize college programs that stress language applicability and connection with the remainder of the curriculum (see, for example, Calvin and Rider 2004 on the new foreign language requirement at Indiana State University; and various initiatives in foreign-language-across-the-curriculum), but also that provide a wide range of options, and that are reinforced by self-instructional materials and programs. Colleges are not very successful in addressing the needs and capabilities of heritage students and of high-ability high school students who wish to apply their language knowledge in fields other than literature. Nor do language requirements adequately address the differences among languages and relative difficulty of acquisition for native English speakers. And there's still too much attention to seat time. Emphasis on study abroad is increasing rapidly – but we need more (and more imaginative approaches to time spent abroad).

Public programming. Finally, and addressing all levels of language learning, we need public programming designed to raise the visibility of foreign languages and stress their

¹² Again, everything depends on which figures one cites and how one cites them. Müller 2002 has a different view.

importance in (a) learning in general, (b) understanding other fields (e.g. global education, world history, US history) and (c) long-term employability and preparation for life. In this regard, I have nothing but praise for ACTFL and its ground-breaking efforts, under the leadership of Christine Brown, Thomas Keith Cothrun, Martha Abbott, and, now, Audrey Heining-Boynton, to raise the consciousness of the public at large and to raise the standards and expectations in foreign-language education. I hope that everyone will heed Secretary Powell's words, not least because so far our new millennium has been characterized by higher levels of misunderstanding, less patience with difference, and greater hostility on all sides. But *our* goal, a noble goal indeed, is more talk *and* more action in the coming Year of Languages and beyond.

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