

A Role for World Languages in Improving Maine's Economic Climate

by Jane Smith

INTRODUCTION

Language is intrinsic to being human. It is a means of communication, a medium for self-expression and transmission of culture, and important in creating identity. It is through language that we create and build relationships, share ideas, tell stories, write literature, conduct commerce, and make and record history. Languages must be a fundamental component in educating Mainers for the global society of the twenty-first century. The following discussion provides a brief overview of the state of world language education in Maine and offers suggestions for steps we can take to increase the number of proficient speakers of other languages.

WORLD LANGUAGES IN K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Maine Learning Results “identify the knowledge and skills essential to prepare Maine students for work, for higher education, for citizenship, and for personal fulfillment.”¹ Originally formulated in 1997 and revised in 2006 to better align with the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages’ (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines and the National Standards, the Learning Results for World Languages outline standards and performance indicators for K-12 classes. With world language education beginning in kindergarten, the goal is to have all Maine students achieve at a minimum intermediate proficiency in at least one language in addition to English by graduation.² In passing the Act to Prepare Maine People for the Future Economy (LD 1422) in May 2012, the Maine Legislature enacted a law calling for proficiency-based education; beginning with the class that graduates in 2018, students graduating from public high schools in Maine must demonstrate proficiency in several content areas including world languages.” Through a formal extension process, a school may be allowed additional time to prepare for implementation, with some schools planning to meet the proficiency requirement by 2020.

Most language programs in Maine's elementary and secondary schools include Spanish and/or French, with some schools offering classes in Chinese, German, Ancient Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Japanese, Passamaquoddy, and American Sign Language. In fall 2013, Deering High School in Portland became the first public school in the state to offer classes in Arabic, with a view to preparing students for today's global world and eventually starting an international studies program.

WORLD LANGUAGES AT MAINE'S POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Among the campuses of the University of Maine System, the University of Maine (UM) and the University of Maine at Fort Kent (UMFK) offer a B.A. in French. In addition to French, UM offers a B.A. in Spanish, as well as an M.A. and M.A.T. in French and an M.A.T. in Spanish. Other specializations that include language study, such as global studies or international affairs with an emphasis on language or area studies, are available in B.A. programs at UM and the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF). The University of Maine at Presque (UMPI) and UMFK offer French for education. Several campuses offer a smattering of courses, most of which are at the elementary level, in one or more of the following languages: Arabic (UM), Chinese (UM, UMF, UMPI), German (UM, USM), Irish Gaelic (UM), Italian (UM, USM), Japanese (UM, UMF), Latin (UM, USM), Brazilian Portuguese (UM), Russian (UM), Spanish (UMPI), and Wabanaki (UM). American Sign Language is offered at UM and USM.

In recent years, the state's public universities have seen a number of language programs cut. In fall 2014, the B.A. in French at the University of Southern Maine (USM) was eliminated, as were the self-designed majors in French studies, Spanish studies, and the B.A. in classics, leaving that university without any degree programs in world languages. Over the last decade and a half, B.A. programs in Latin and Russian have been eliminated from UM, and the B.A. program in German remains

suspended, with elimination likely. At USM, bachelor's degrees in German studies and Russian studies were eliminated two or three years ago. Courses in German once offered at UMF and UMPI disappeared several years ago, as did courses in Russian at UMPI.

Within the Maine Community College System, Central Maine Community College (CMCC), Kennebec Valley Community College (KVCC), and Southern Maine Community College (SMCC) offer beginning courses in French and Spanish. SMCC also offers beginning German, and CMCC and Washington County Community College (WCCC) offer courses in American Sign Language (ASL). WCCC offers Spanish in addition to ASL. Eastern Maine Community College does not offer classes in world languages.

Among Maine's private institutions, Bates, Bowdoin, and Colby Colleges each have majors in French, German, Russian, and Spanish. Minors in Arabic, Chinese, Italian, and Japanese are also available. Of course, majors in classical studies, including Latin and Ancient Greek languages and literatures, are also available. Husson University is in the early stages of language program development, offering beginning courses in French, Spanish, and Chinese.

To be sure, specializations in French and Spanish are indeed wise choices, especially if combined with a second major in business, education, nursing, social work, or engineering, to list just a few disciplines that lend themselves well to a double major with language. In light of Maine's strong historical and cultural connections with French-speaking Quebec and New Brunswick, not to mention current economic ties in trade and tourism with those Canadian provinces, French is a useful language to know. Given recent immigration trends from Central and South America, Spanish is becoming more important even in Maine. On a global scale, Spanish is the second most widely spoken language in the world (44 countries, with approximately 421,500,000 native and second language speakers) after English. French comes in at number 11, (54 countries, with approximately 212,000,000 speakers who use French every day).³

That being said, with bachelor's degree programs at Maine's public universities limited to only French and Spanish, language programs at Maine's post-secondary institutions are inadequate. High school graduates who wish to specialize in any other language (and who are unable to afford one of the three private liberal arts institutions) must go out of state to do so. Moreover, the

lack of majors and minors in other languages makes UMS campuses less attractive to students from out of state, an important population it seeks to attract. In today's global society and in a state seeking to educate its citizens for the future economy, the current state of affairs is untenable.

THE BENEFITS OF KNOWING A SECOND LANGUAGE

Like most Americans (68 percent according to the 2008 Global Social Survey [Brecht et al. 2013]), Mainers recognize the benefits of learning another language and consider the ability to speak more than one language a lifelong benefit. Through its linguistic structure, another language provides access to another way of organizing reality and opens the door to a better understanding of the ideas, perspectives, and practices that can only be fully understood within the context of that language. By learning another language, the individual is able to contextualize and understand better the products of another culture, from the artistic and folkloric to the mundane. Another language gives us different perspectives on familiar topics such as current

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events, history, and literature, and allows us to interpret them with greater insight. Equally important, knowledge of another language and culture gives us a different perspective of our own language and culture, sometimes challenging us to change the way we view the world.

In addition to these social and intellectual benefits, a number of researchers have found cognitive benefits resulting from bilingualism, particularly for older adults and especially with respect to delaying the onset of dementia (Bialystok, Craik, and Luk 2012). Cognitive benefits have also been found in early second language learners in immersion programs (Nicolay and Poncelet 2011). Language learning helps to develop the ability to interact with others and sharpens critical thinking skills (Sanders 2007).

Yet, since the 1960s, the overall percentage of students studying world languages has been on the decline in higher education (Sanders 2007), and the number of programs in elementary schools has also diminished (Pufahl and Rhodes 2007): Americans seem to shy away from learning another language in spite of the obvious benefits it would afford them. One can only speculate as to why this is so. Clearly, the fact that English has spread around the globe as a lingua franca accounts for some of the continuing monolingualism: many Americans assume that because speakers of other languages are learning English, there is no need for them to learn other languages. This perspective is naïve and short sighted.

Many Americans seem to place little importance on the fact that speakers of other languages who also speak English have a clear advantage in the global marketplace, for they are able to conduct business in two or more languages and have access to a whole host of knowledge (literature, research, ideas, concepts) that is available only to the speakers of the languages that created them (Harper 2011). Moreover, as Lindenfeld and Hoecherl-Alden (2008) rightly point out, monolingual Americans in the global marketplace are dependent upon the good will of those who can speak English and are potentially vulnerable. Unlike their bilingual and multilingual counterparts from other countries, they are unaware of what is being discussed around them and are ill prepared to meet prospective business partners half way. They are less able to interact in a culturally appropriate manner with business partners. After the deal is sealed, they are unable to strengthen the business relationship through the camaraderie that grows out of shared cultural experiences. Furthermore, as more speakers of other languages learn English and become increasingly influential in the global economy, English itself becomes a global language. Speakers of English in countries where it has long been spoken can no longer hold a claim of ownership as the language evolves to reflect the cultures of all who now use it.

One also can reasonably argue that the covert language policy within the United States, whereby immigrants must assimilate by learning English and adopting American ways combined with the vast distance between borders, has made it easy for Americans to remain linguistically isolated, at least in how they think about language. Consequently, some Americans view non-English-speaking immigrants as un-American, a threat to their values and way of life. Anti-intellectualism

no doubt plays a role, as well, in down playing the value of learning other languages and studying their literature, culture, history, and ideas.

The net result is that American culture, broadly speaking, does not value the knowledge of languages other than English. For all the enrichment knowing another language can bring, it does not seem to sway many English-speaking Americans away from monolingualism. The following section approaches language from a different direction, one that may help shift the downward trend in language learning upward.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AS A DESIRABLE WORKFORCE SKILL

Shortly after his election as governor of Maine in 2010, Paul LePage declared Maine “Open for Business.” Despite efforts to improve the business climate, Maine is still ranked at the bottom among U.S. states, coming in at 49 in the *Forbes* 2014 annual ranking of best states for business (*Portland Press Herald*, November 12, 2014). This is in sharp contrast to Utah, which has topped the *Forbes* list in four out of the last five years (*Forbes*, November 12, 2014).

One of the factors behind Utah's favorable business climate is its workforce, 33% of which is able to speak a second language according to the Economic Development Corporation of Utah (EDCUtah) language information sheet (2014). This figure ranks 8 percent above the national figure of 25 percent of Americans who can speak a second language according to a Gallup Poll taken in 2001 (EDCUtah 2014). EDCUtah states that 77 percent of Brigham Young University's 33,000 students speak a second language and the university is home to business language courses in nine different languages according to (2014). EDCUtah further indicates that the University of Utah offers courses or programs in 17 different world languages. Clearly, Utah's universities are educating a linguistically prepared and culturally sensitive workforce. As further testimonial to the value of a workforce proficient in other languages, the *Forbes* article goes on to cite E-Bay Vice-President for Global Customer Experience Scott Murray, who praised Utah's workforce for the availability of returning Mormon missionaries who speak other languages.

Maine's public universities' offerings in world languages are meager by comparison. And although “foreign language competency is much more than a liberal

arts talent; it is a highly desirable workforce skill” (Ward 2010: 14), the Comprehensive Evaluation of Maine’s Economic Development Incentive Programs (ICA 2014) makes no mention of world languages, second language proficiency, or cross-cultural preparedness of Maine workers. One of few references to workforce readiness includes the following suggestion gleaned from interviews with the public sector: “Develop workforce skills and provide better transferrable skills” (ICA 2014: 9).

Based on the example of Utah, the development of a workforce conversant in other languages would go far toward improving Maine’s prospects in attracting new businesses and strengthening the competitiveness of existing businesses. Mainers are a practical people, proud of their independence and self-sufficiency, who seek the practical application of skills and knowledge. An appeal to their practical nature may prove helpful in the effort to prepare Maine people for the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To see an increase in the study of world languages and the number of Mainers proficient in other languages, knowledge of languages other than English must be valued within society. The best way to demonstrate their value is to promote and invest in them in a manner comparable to the investment in time, money, and policy that has gone into increasing the competence, read competitiveness, of Maine’s workforce in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).

Americans would place higher value on knowledge of another language if they truly understood to what extent language is tied to identity. While monolingual speakers of English no doubt understand the connection, they may not fully comprehend its importance. By being part of the majority language group in the United States, until recently their identity as speakers of English has gone largely unchallenged and unthreatened. Despite English-only movements (and legislation) in a number of states, the marketplace has long forced immigrants to the United States to lose their first language by the third generation. In many countries, however, populations are often bilingual or even multilingual. Such multilingual situations often work quite well, such as in Switzerland, where there are four official languages. In other cases, speakers of minority languages feel their identity threatened by the majority language.

In India, for example, where Hindi and English are official languages, another 22 state or scheduled

languages are also recognized by the Indian constitution. To illustrate the depth of the connection between language and identity, in South India, where Hindi is not widely spoken and state languages prevail, a few individuals have died as a result of self-immolation for linguistic rights (Mitchell 2009). Because of this binding force between language and identity, Maine’s heritage speakers of French, Somali, Spanish, Khmer, Arabic, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac, to name several of the more than 60 languages spoken in Maine, should be encouraged to maintain their home language.

The different French-speaking communities of Maine kept their language alive for several generations, particularly through the 1960s and 1970s. Some continue to do so, though the infrastructure that was once in place and helped maintain their language—bilingual parochial schools, French-speaking parishes, and neighborhoods populated by communities of

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French speakers known as P’tits Canadas—has all but disappeared. More recently, several communities in the St. John Valley have been able to extend the vitality of French thanks to the proximity of French-speaking New Brunswick and the federally funded bilingual program *L’Acadien du Haut Saint-Jean*. Immersion programs should be encouraged and, whenever possible, supported within heritage language communities, whether through weekend, after-school, or other linguistic and cultural programs. Speakers of heritage languages are a natural asset for business, social services, education, and cultural tourism, not to mention national security.

Maine’s institutions of higher education should require one or two years of high school language study as an admissions requirement. A language requirement for admission to a community college or university would underscore the importance of proficiency in a language other than English that is part of the Learning Results. Moreover, if colleges and universities require particular fields of study, that tends to assure their delivery in the preK–12 system.

This raises the question of the dearth of qualified language teachers. Some districts are unable to find teachers certified to teach a world language and have resorted to drafting teachers certified in other disciplines to obtain an endorsement in French or Spanish. The problem here is that oftentimes these individuals do not have the proficiency level necessary to teach language courses. In some cases, schools have had to resort to the use of commercially available language learning programs. While it is possible to learn something of a language from this type of program, they are no substitute for live interaction with a teacher, other students, and members of the target language community.

One possible solution to the language teacher shortage is to offer incentives to Maine's graduates if they become language teachers. The incentive might be a partial tuition waiver in exchange for four years' service as a language teacher in Maine. Alternatively, private funding for language education scholarships could be found to attract students straight out of high school to the profession.

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A different type of challenge arises in some schools, particularly in rural districts: low student motivation with respect to learning languages. In homogenous communities, families have few opportunities to interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and the likelihood of travel or study abroad may be remote. As a result, some students may have little external motivation for learning another language. In this case, cross-disciplinary programs similar to Cultures and Languages across the Curriculum, which take language and culture outside the language classroom, would help language learners to see connections between the language they are learning and other disciplines from a different cultural perspective. For example, students of French could, with the help of their French teacher, read about the history of Maine from French or French-Canadian sources, thereby gaining insight into their own history from the perspective of another culture. Students

preparing to enter the world of business might work with Junior Achievement Worldwide, comparing JA projects elsewhere with JA projects here in Maine and working together to understand projects, business culture practices, and approaches to problem solving different from their own. Even when taught in English, this type of program offers new perspectives by taking the learner outside of their American frame of reference.

The University of Maine System should make expanding language study a priority and develop more language programs. In the twenty-first century, delivery of bachelor's degrees in only two (commonly taught) European languages does not go far enough toward meeting the needs of a state looking to increase economic development and educate its citizens in language proficiency. While many students will likely continue to study French and Spanish, courses that satisfy the 24-credit-hour minimum for a state endorsement to teach should be available in Arabic, Chinese, German, Japanese, Brazilian Portuguese, and Hindi/Urdu or Telugu in Maine's public universities. Several of these languages will also help prepare Maine people for work in the area of renewable energy and sustainability, fields in which China and Germany, for example, currently play a leading role. With Maine's desire to attract high-tech companies, it also makes sense to have a workforce that can speak at least one of the languages of India.

At the state level, policymakers should consider establishing a magnet school for languages and cultures similar to the Maine School for Science and Mathematics in Limestone. It could be located in southern Maine, where the densest, most ethnically diverse population lives and could serve as a resource for planning and programming within the school and where students could engage in service learning within the community. Wherever there is a community of speakers of another language, community members should be invited to be a part of school and after-school programming, even exploratory language classes offered for credit. After all, it takes only one positive cross-cultural experience to inspire a lifelong language learner.

Some of the recommendations outlined above are no doubt already happening in some schools. Others represent significant change from current practices: tuition incentives for future language teachers, the expansion of language programs within the University of Maine System, and the establishment of a magnet school for world languages. If implemented, they will

no doubt yield an increased number of proficient speakers of other languages. To assure greater success, however, we propose the establishment of a world languages task force for the state of Maine.

ESTABLISHING A WORLD LANGUAGES TASK FORCE

The University of Maryland's Center for Advanced Study of Languages and other collaborators led a year-long study of what it would take to fully support language education and increase the number of speakers of other languages across the nation (Abbott et al. 2014; Brecht et al. 2014). Their proposed five-year-long project will eventually be expanded to include 20 states. A similar group (language educators, community members, policymakers, and business people) dedicated to the educational well-being of Mainers and the state's economic development could be effective here in Maine.

The task force could plot out a course of action that will truly help us to prepare Maine's workforce for today's global society and the future economy. As an advocate for languages in all arenas, it could act as a coordinating body in recommending best practices and providing guidance in their implementation. Developing workplace language education programs (perhaps as internships for college majors) and organizing ongoing professional development for language educators could also be a part of its mission. In addition, it could seek out private and government funding to support different language- and culture-related initiatives. Such a task force would need to include representatives from the Maine Department of Education, preK–12 schools, universities and community colleges, and the Foreign Language Association of Maine. It could act as a liaison between educational institutions, policymakers, translators and interpreters, business owners, and Maine's various linguistic communities. A coalition of language stakeholders could provide the necessary strength in numbers that will make efforts on behalf of language learning a priority and more effective than they currently are.

CONCLUSION

The decline in language study in Maine, particularly at the post-secondary level, is representative of a nationwide trend. While the state legislature has passed forward-looking legislation in the proficiency requirement for world languages, the primary challenges to its

implementation are longstanding: insufficient school budgets and a lack of qualified language teachers. Extensions and exemptions to implementation of the Learning Results for World Languages must, therefore, be provided for school districts without the means to implement them. What is unusual, however, is the low number of languages, only two, in which one can obtain a bachelor's degree at a public university.

The preceding discussion offers several suggestions for the promotion of world languages both in the community and in education. By suggesting an emphasis on the economic benefits of a linguistically prepared and culturally sensitive workforce, our goal is to encourage policymakers and state government officials to consider language education from a different perspective and to view it as an asset, as well as an enrichment. The ideal outcomes from our recommendations would entail a long-term, concerted effort on the part of numerous stakeholders in world languages to promote language learning, educate new teachers, support the maintenance of heritage languages among immigrant and indigenous communities, and provide opportunities for in-depth study of more world languages at Maine's public institutions. 

ENDNOTES

1. More about the Maine Learning Results is available on the Maine Department of Education's website: <http://www.maine.gov/education/lres/>
2. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are based on the U.S. government's Interagency Language Roundtable Skill Level Descriptions. The scale includes five levels: novice, intermediate, advanced, superior, distinguished. The National Standards for Language Learning for Language Learning were revised in 2011 to include Common Core State Standards, College and Career Readiness and 21st Century Skills. More about the world language proficiency standard for Maine students is available at this website: <http://www.maine.gov/doe/worldlanguages/diploma.html>
3. Figures are from Ethnologue.com, Nationsonline.com, and Francophonie.org.

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Maine has been home to speakers of many different languages for quite some time. According to the Portland Schools Annual Report, by 1924 the Junior Americanization class at the Woolson School in Portland included 35 students of 11 different nationalities: Armenian, Canadian, Chinese, Danish, Greek, Italian, Jewish, Lithuanian, Norwegian, and Russian. This photograph was published in the Portland Sunday Telegram on February 26, 1924. (Collections of Maine Historical Society/MaineToday Media, Maine Memory Network Item 48821)