

Critically Speaking

U.S. college students demonstrate a growing interest in studying “critical” foreign languages

BY KAREN DOSS BOWMAN

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HILE WESTERN EUROPEAN LANGUAGES have dominated higher education’s foreign language programs for decades, U.S. college students in recent years have increasingly gravitated toward languages that are less commonly taught, such as Chinese, Arabic, Hindi, Japanese, and Russian. These are just a handful in a group of languages the U.S. government has deemed “critical” because of their importance to national security, commerce, and improved international relations.

Though David Kiel excelled in German language studies during high school, he realized the language wasn’t in high demand in the job market. Inspired by his readings of Russian literature classics, Kiel decided to study the Eastern European language when he enrolled at Kent State University in 2006. His program of study included a year in the university’s long-standing exchange program with Volgograd State University in Volgograd, Russia.

David Kiel, a student at Kent State University studied Russian for a year at Volgograd State University in Volgograd, Russia.

As he prepares for his spring 2010 graduation, Kiel is confident that his proficiency in the Russian language places within reach his career aspirations of becoming a diplomat for the U.S. Department of State or a professor of East European politics.

“Russian is such a useful and in-demand language throughout the world, specifically in fields such as diplomacy, science, and medicine, that I feel I have a solid foundation for either career,” says Kiel, who will earn a BS in Russian translation and a BA in German. “I think the proficiency which I’ve gained has helped to instill a sense of confidence in my future and attainability of a career, no matter what I decide to do.”

What Makes a Language Critical?

Though the federal government’s list of critical foreign languages is updated periodically, an August 2008 report from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Postsecondary Education, titled, *Enhancing Foreign*



Language Proficiency in the United States: Preliminary Results of the National Security Language Initiative, lists the targeted languages as “Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Russian languages, as well as the Indic, Persian, and Turkish language families.” According to VistaWide.com, Chinese is the most widely spoken language in the world, followed by Hindi and Spanish. English ranks fourth on the list, followed by Arabic.

“Our world has changed so much fundamentally—it’s a global society,” says Marty Abbott, director of education at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). “It doesn’t really matter what career you’re preparing for, the knowledge of other languages is going to be critically important.”

While much interest in critical foreign languages among college students came after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, the first federal efforts to promote study of these languages actually began in the late 1950s, shortly after Russia launched Sputnik, the first Earth-orbiting satellite, explains Michael Nugent, deputy director of the National Security Education Program (NSEP) and director of The Language Flagship. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was passed to improve education in math and science, as well as foreign language instruction.

Lessons learned from the Gulf War in 1991 prompted a renewed push for educating Americans in languages critical to national security. This led to the creation of NSEP which, since its inception, has provided support for overseas study for more than 4,000 U.S. students through the Boren Awards for International Study, Nugent says. In 2000 the NSEP created a pilot National Language Flagship Initiative to support advanced language instruction for postbaccalaureate students. In 2006, NSEP expanded this effort to focus on undergraduate students off all majors. Currently, there are approximately 1,000 students enrolled in Flagship programs nationwide.

“There is widespread recognition in many branches of the federal government that the United States cannot engage effectively in a globalized world without having U.S. government officials at all levels who understand the languages and cultures of the regions in which they work,” Nugent says. “Whether engaging in military operations, trade negotiations, natural disaster relief, dealing with pandemic outbreaks and humanitarian missions, communicating effectively matters.... In the end, the United States develops better trust and longer lasting relationships when its representatives understand the languages and cultures in which they work.”

While promoting critical foreign languages may serve the U.S. government’s interests, Allison Busch, assistant professor of Hindi at Columbia University, believes another important reason to promote this group of languages is to foster knowledge and understanding among U.S. citizens about the non-Western world. Learning to speak at least one language other than one’s native tongue enhances creative and critical thinking skills, she says.

“Language is a window into culture,” Busch says. “We don’t just teach grammar and verb tenses. Language encodes

whole belief systems. And when we understand other people’s belief systems, we become capable of seeing beyond American ways of doing things and realizing other people have different, and valid, ways of doing things.... Critical language programs open up the world to American students.”

A Priority for U.S. Government

Like the Boren Scholarships, a number of federal initiatives are providing funds for U.S. students to study critical languages in the countries where they are spoken. The State Department’s Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) Program, for example, offers financial assistance for U.S. undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students to participate in intensive summer language institutes overseas in 13 critical foreign languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Persian, Bangla/Bengali, and Turkish. A similar program administered by the American Councils, The National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y), offers merit-based scholarships to U.S. high school and “gap-year” students to study critical foreign languages in summer, semester, or year-long programs in overseas immersion programs.

“The decision by our government to support the study of critical languages across the U.S. educational system means you have several agencies—not just the U.S. Department of Education—working together to create opportunities both for students in the K–12 system and for those who teach them, to upgrade their knowledge of the languages, to get them overseas, and trying to get them started early,” says Dan Davidson, president of the American Councils for International Education, which administers the programs.

STARTALK, a highly acclaimed program launched in 2007 by NSLI, funds summer courses in critical languages for students ranging from kindergarten through college. These programs, which typically are offered on university campuses, also provide training and certification for teachers of these languages. Many are offered for free and grant college credit.

Kent State University, collaborating with Cleveland State University, Oberlin College, and the University of Akron, received a STARTALK grant to support the Ohio Board of Regents Foreign Language Academy. The four-week, summer residential immersion experience in Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, or Russian is offered to rising juniors and seniors, who may receive four semester hours of college credit. Students also may earn additional college credits throughout the following academic year by participating in several “mini-immersion” Saturday sessions.

Brian Baer, associate professor of Russian at Kent State and director of the



academy, says that the program has been extremely popular and competitive. Last year, nearly 400 high school students applied for the 50 available slots. That has allowed the academy to be very selective, and some of those students have gone on to Kent State, which recently began offering minors in Japanese, Arabic, and Chinese.

The Language Flagship, administered by the NSEP, is an innovative partnership between government, education, and business to offer advanced instruction in critical languages. The Flagship community currently includes 23 Flagship centers at colleges and universities throughout the United States, three K–12 programs and 11 overseas centers and programs. Oftentimes, advanced language instruction classes are filled with students who are majoring in the language, Davidson says. But the Flagship programs are designed to offer the highest level of training to students from all disciplines, preparing them for international careers in a variety of fields.

“A big piece of Flagship is to make language study available to people who may not be majoring in a language—people who are engineers, musicians, business leaders, social scientists—it doesn’t matter,” Davidson says. “We want people from all disciplines who also happen to know these critical languages. That’s how the national competence is going to change. If we only train linguistic specialists, then all you’ll have are linguists, but the economy needs people all across the board who can do this.”

The Chinese Flagship Program at Brigham Young University is one of the original programs of the initiative, integrated into one of the nation’s oldest undergraduate Chinese academic departments. It’s also one of the largest, with enrollment typically surpassing 600 each semester.

One of the BYU Flagship program’s greatest strengths, says program director Dana Bourgerie, an associate professor of Chinese, is its individualized nature that tailors language instruction to meet each student’s personal and professional goals. Students are paired with native-speaking tutors who help students learn the specialized language and culture of their chosen career field. Along with spending a semester abroad at Nanjing University, students also are required to complete a four-month internship with a Chinese organization. [All Flagship programs require an internship and enrollment in your subject area at an institution abroad.]

“Historically the U.S. sends a lot of students abroad, but rarely do we find Westerners who are fully functional professionals in countries like China,” Bourgerie says. “Our mission is to help students become global professionals in whatever field they’re interested in.”

Boston University, which offers language instruction in 23 languages, received a grant from the U.S. Department of Defense for Project GO (which stands for “Global Officer”), says William Waters, chair of BU’s Department of Modern Languages and Comparative Literature. The two-year, renewable \$500,000 grant allows the university to plan initiatives designed to encourage ROTC students in all four armed services to pursue the study of strategic languages—particularly Arabic, Chinese, Hausa, Turkish, and Wolof. During the fall semester, the university offered “Globally Speaking,” a program that allowed students, faculty, and staff to take non-credit language “pre-courses” at no cost. Waters says 160 students participated in the courses, which were offered in the evenings.

“The idea is to give students a teaser,” Waters says. “The high-energy, enjoyable format helps them lose their apprehension about

studying a strange or supposedly difficult language ... Of course, our hope is that some of these students will now go on and register for the normal credit-bearing courses in these languages.”

Entrepreneurs also are finding a marketplace in language instruction. The free online language learning and social networking Web site, Hello-Hello (www.hello-hello.com) was developed in collaboration with the ACTFL. The site allows users to complete language lessons in English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish online, anytime, anywhere. Users also may enjoy social networking opportunities to link up with people from all over the world, giving them the opportunity to practice their language skills with native speakers, or help other members learn their native language. The site has plans to soon add German, Mandarin Chinese, and Italian.

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Challenges to Teaching Critical Languages

One of the reasons languages like Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi are so infrequently taught at colleges and universities is simply that qualified teachers aren't widely available, Waters explains. Boston University's STAR-TALK grant helped in the development of a Summer Arabic Academy for Teachers.

"Arabic teachers are in extremely short supply nationally, and those who are hired to teach the languages are now very often native speakers who have little or no training in current language pedagogy," Waters says. "But you really can't teach your native language well without serious training—having teeth doesn't make you a dentist."

The increasing demand for critical language instruction means that colleges and universities are adding education abroad opportunities to their academic programming. During the spring 2009 semester, Boston University senior Anna Graves enrolled in BU's then-new Arabic program in Rabat,

Morocco. Growing up in Singapore, Graves considers herself conversational in Mandarin and Cantonese, but she developed an interest in studying Arabic at a young age.

Though she studied Arabic for two semesters prior to enrolling in the program, living in a country where most citizens do not speak Fus'ha (modern, standard Arabic), which she studied in class, was a challenge. While many Moroccans may understand Fus'ha, most—including her host family—speak Darija—Moroccan Arabic.

An epidemiology major with aspirations of becoming a medical researcher, Graves was able to complete a research project on pregnancy cravings among Arab women. The project required her to conduct interviews in Arabic (mostly Darija) with pregnant women and new mothers at local hospitals.

"I got to visit several clinics and hospitals, so that gives me a perspective so I can think about working in international health research," says Graves, who is interested in the social and cultural

Boston University student Anna Graves studied Arabic in Rabat, Morocco. Here, Anna (on the left, wearing black) with another course participant, is pictured with newfound friends outside of Kasbah Amzrou, Amzrou, Morocco.

The Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) is the only federally funded program that exclusively targets foreign language instruction in elementary, middle, and high schools.

factors that prevent women in the Middle East from getting adequate health care. “Now, when I sit in class and am listening on how to conduct surveys or how to create a measurement instrument, I can think back to my experience in Morocco. It’s an experience through which I can think about the reality of doing my research.”

While enrolling in an education abroad experience is often the best way for students to gain proficiency in a foreign languages, countries where some of the critical languages are spoken have been sites of political or social unrest in recent years. Boston University, which offers instruction in Hausa, recently had to suspend its long-standing education abroad program in Niger, Africa, when the U.S. State Department issued travel warnings for the region.

Not Just Critical Languages

Supporting all foreign languages is important—not just current critical languages.

“The current emphasis for the less commonly taught critical languages such as Arabic or Chinese is not by any means meant to be done at the cost of other language learning,” says Nugent. “However, the federal government can only do so much to support language learning. The states and local school districts play a major role in supporting language learning and this investment remains mostly in the area of Western European languages.”

Brian Baer recognizes that, “Yes, the list of critical, critical-need, or priority languages can and does change somewhat as our national security interests change.” He further explains the perspective of many involved in teaching foreign languages. “In language-teaching circles, these [critical] languages are referred to lesser-taught languages. There is a real fear that the introduction of more priority languages will squeeze out the more traditionally taught languages, such as Spanish, French, and German. In the foreign language academy that I run, we try to downplay any competition between traditionally taught languages and priority languages by using a candidate’s success and persistence in the study of a foreign language (typically, a traditionally-taught language) as an indicator of success in the academy. Because traditionally-taught languages are more closely related to English than are the priority language, with a greater number of shared roots, similar syntax and, of course, a common alphabet, they are good languages for American students to begin with. Those who are successful with those languages are prime candidates to study priority languages. Moreover, American students have more opportunities to speak, for example, Spanish (Mexico) and French

(Quebec) than they do most of the priority languages. I wouldn’t want to see the traditionally taught Western European languages disappear. Rather, they should serve as an introduction to foreign language study; they can only help students who then wish to explore a priority language, which take far more contact hours to master.”

Starting With the Young

The U.S. government has recognized that children who start learning a second language at a young age are most likely to be successful in developing proficiency. The younger the student, the greater their capacity will be for learning a second language, according to Yu-Lan Lin, world languages program director for Boston Public Schools, a district that offers instruction in 10 languages. Children learn language more naturally than adults, she says, because they absorb the new sounds quickly and repeat them without inhibition.

The Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) is the only federally funded program that exclusively targets foreign language instruction in elementary, middle, and high schools. Established in 1988 by the Foreign Language Assistance Act and funded through No Child Left Behind, FLAP provides three-year grants to states and local school districts “to establish, improve, or expand innovative” language programs for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade.

“If we want to build capacity for the nation for our students to become functional, twenty-first century citizens, we need to help them from a very young age to learn languages,” Lin says. “It’s like math: You teach math in kindergarten—you don’t wait until ninth grade to teach math. Language is the same, and language really helps students cognitively, thinking creatively and critically.”

Davidson points out that adolescents and teenagers already are demonstrating an openness to other cultures through their connections on Internet sites such as Facebook and YouTube. It’s the institutions that need to be globalized. The federal government’s initiatives are a step in the right direction, he says, but so much more needs to be done to promote language instruction from the earliest levels.

“We need to recognize that language, like science and math, is core and it’s critical,” Davidson says. “It’s part of the core curriculum.”

KAREN DOSS BOWMAN is a freelance writer in Bridgewater, Virginia. Her article, “The Rise of Intensive Foreign Language Programs Abroad,” appeared in *International Educator’s* 2009 intensive languages supplement (March/April).