

Beyond Foreign Languages

Foreign Language as a Global Competency in International Education

Students from around the world—some with limited English proficiency—come to our campuses, and U.S. students—in increasing numbers and generally speaking only English—prepare for study abroad.

In a globalized world, with only approximately 10 percent of U.S. undergraduate students studying abroad, it is imperative to expand international education both in terms of more flexible study abroad options so that more students will have the opportunity to study abroad and more importantly, in terms of international education on our campuses through internationalization of the curriculum, which would include courses with an international focus as well as an increased presence of foreign languages.

In *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of International Education*, international education has been defined as “the study of all aspects of society in other countries.”

According to the late former president of Fairleigh Dickinson University J. Michael Adams and his coauthor Angelo Carfagna in *Coming of Age in a Globalized World: The Next Generation*, “language is a critical instrument that shapes one’s view of the world. Understanding the meaning of the words other people use yields perhaps the most insight into cultural differences.”¹

International education, therefore, includes the study of other languages, and the lack of knowledge of other languages and about other cultures is a challenge to U.S. students planning to study abroad and to U.S. campuses welcoming international students about whose language and culture the students, and even faculty and staff, may know little.

In broader terms, the relative lack of foreign language skills among Americans negatively impacts our economic and national security, career opportunities for monolingual Americans in a globalized workplace, and the ability of Americans to effectively navigate our own multicultural and multilingual communities.

The Impact of the U.S. Foreign Language Deficit on Study Abroad

U.S. students—in increasing numbers and generally speaking only English—prepare for study abroad.

According to *Open Doors*, a report published annually by the Institute of International Education supported by a grant from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, 289,408 U.S. students studied abroad in 2012–13, up from 283,332 in 2011–2012. Worldwide, a total of 886,052 students studied abroad in 2013–2014, up from a total of 819,644 in 2012–2013.²

Although the United States is a nation of immigrants, the majority of Americans do not speak another language, and this lack of foreign language skill negatively impacts our economic and national security, our careers, and our ability to be effective global citizens.

The lack of foreign language skills among Americans not only limits the potential study abroad destinations that many U.S. students are willing to consider, but even the degree to which those who are willing to venture beyond their linguistic comfort zone may be able to maximize their educational and cultural experience because of their lack of linguistic knowledge.

The United Kingdom is the leading study abroad destination for U.S. students, and even those Americans who choose to study abroad in a country where English is not the official language may have little or no knowledge of the local language and be limited to courses taught in English and intended for U.S. and other international students. In addition, their opportunities for local cultural experiences, social encounters, and casual conversation are limited for those who do not possess proficiency in the local language.

However, for U.S. students, although in 2012–2013, 14.3 percent of bachelor’s students studied abroad, that number falls to only 1.5 percent of the total U.S. higher ed-



ucation enrollment. While the study abroad participation has climbed in recent decades, the relatively low percentage of U.S. students who choose to study abroad may reflect lack of interest, lack of preparation and skills, or both. Compared to the United States, where virtually all students study foreign languages, 10 percent of all EU students study abroad, many through the Erasmus program, and the percentage of globally mobile students from Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa is 7.5 percent and 3.5 percent respectively.

The challenge is to create a campus environment that prepares and enables U.S. students who are planning, or even considering, study abroad to maximize their international experience.

In addition, as only 10 percent of U.S. students currently study abroad, it is essential that our campuses provide an environment that will offer those local students who do not study abroad an opportunity to develop the awareness, mindset, and skills essential for a global citizen and for success in the globalized workplace.

The Impact of the U.S. Foreign Language Deficit on International Students in the United States

Students from around the world—some with limited English proficiency—come to our campuses.

According to *Open Doors*, China, India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia are the leading countries of origin for international students in the United States. According to the *English First English Proficiency Index*, China ranks “low proficiency,” number 37 out of 63 countries. South Korea and India rank “moderate proficiency,” number 24 and number 25, respectively, out of 63 countries, and Saudi Arabia ranks “very low proficiency,” number 59 out of 63 countries.³

The implications for U.S. campuses welcoming these students are significant—as students from three of the leading countries of origin for international students in the United States may have low levels of

English language proficiency. Courses specifically designed to empower these newly arrived students to achieve academic success and to effectively navigate the campus and local environment are needed, as are staff to facilitate the linguistic, as well as the academic and cultural, transition.

It is essential to note that the lack of foreign language skills among U.S. students and of English-language skills among international students on U.S. campuses does not foster cross-cultural learning and relationships.

The challenge is to create a campus environment that welcomes international students and empowers them to make the most of their study abroad experience in the United States.

Foreign Language Skills as a Global Competency in International Education

The Extent of the U.S. Foreign Language Deficit: Although it is easy to think of English as the global lingua franca, it is necessary to remember that 75 percent of the world's population does not speak English.

In the United States, a Gallup Poll found that 25 percent of Americans reported being able to hold a conversation in a language other than English. However, when recent immigrants and other heritage language speakers are deducted, the number of Americans able to converse in a second language is approximately 10 percent.⁴

When compared with Europe, where 56 percent of adults report that they are able to hold a conversation in a second language, 28 percent report that they are able to converse in additional languages, and 11 percent report the ability to converse in two additional languages, Americans are clearly at a disadvantage in the globalized world and the global marketplace.⁵

Furthermore, when virtually all students in the European Union (EU) and in many other areas of the world study additional languages, according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), only 18.5 percent of U.S.

K–12 students study a foreign language,⁶ and according to the Modern Language Association (MLA), only 8.1 percent of college and university students are enrolled in a course in a language other than English.⁷

Even as globalization has increased, the percentage of U.S. college and university students studying foreign languages on U.S. campuses has decreased from 16 percent in 1960 to 8.1 percent today.⁸

Foreign Language Skills as a Global Competency

The call for increased attention to the development of foreign language skills as a global competency is not limited to foreign language educators, with concerns voiced by a wide range of international education stakeholders.

According to the ACTFL *Global Competence Position Statement*, “the ability to communicate with respect and cultural understanding in more than one language is an essential element of global competence.”⁹

The Many Languages One World (MLOW) Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum, sponsored by the United Nations Academic Impact and ELS Educational Services, was launched in 2013, with events held in 2014 and 2015, for the purpose of promoting “multilingualism and the continued study of the six official languages of the United Nations: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish.”¹⁰ The MLOW Global Youth Forum culminates with an opportunity for students to present in their second, target language on a UN-related theme at the UN General Assembly. In terms of the lack of foreign language skills among U.S. students, it is noteworthy that among the 70 MLOW 2015 winners, only five were from the United States.

In *World Languages are Global Competencies*, the Asia Society describes the need to transcend local and practical needs and to envision foreign language learning as a global competency.¹¹

In *National Education Association Global Competence is a 21st Century Imperative*, “proficiency in foreign languages” is one of

four elements in the definition of global competence.¹²

Nonetheless, although U.S. students planning to study abroad are routinely advised to begin preparation well in advance, with paperwork and even travel and cultural issues routinely addressed, language skills are generally not included.

Traditionally, U.S. students studied abroad largely to perfect foreign language skills. However, this is no longer the case, as students from across the disciplines routinely study abroad. As study abroad destinations beyond Europe become more popular among U.S. students, the language barrier and the lack of cultural knowledge will tend to increase in severity.

Knowledge of the target language and culture needs to be explicitly included in preparation for study abroad, through for-

credit, perhaps short-term classes, and other assessment-friendly learning experiences so that they may maximize their study abroad experience.

Knowledge of a foreign language is an unparalleled window on another culture. While it is easy to imagine the advantages of foreign language knowledge for a traveler abroad, for an expat during an overseas assignment, or for a diplomat at the United Nations, it is also essential to keep in mind the importance of foreign language skills for international students, for U.S. students planning study abroad, and for all of us in our globalized world and in our multicultural communities.

Not only is knowledge of one or more foreign languages a window on other cultures, but foreign language skills are essential in the global workplace.

According to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, “employment of interpreters and translators is projected to grow 46 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Employment growth reflects increasing globalization and a more diverse U.S. population, which is expected to require more interpreters and translators.”¹³

Current Trends and Future Directions

Collaborative partnerships are essential in effecting the needed paradigm shift in attitude toward and achievement in foreign languages in the United States, and these include interdisciplinary partnerships among foreign language and international educators and campus partnerships among faculty and staff who work with U.S. study abroad students and international students on our campuses. The “language enterprise” partnership should be expanded to include international educators and the private sector and government stakeholders whose support is essential to international education. In addition, collaborative partnerships in developing and supporting high-profile international programs and events highlighting the importance of multilingualism, as well as local programs, including immersion programs, to expand language skills among students at all levels, are essential.

The issue facing foreign language educators, international educators, and university administrators is multifaceted, but the most important element is how best to collaborate to realize the synergistic effect of empowering both U.S. students abroad and international students in the United States to maximize their study abroad experience, and to develop a campus curriculum and environment that will provide the opportunity for local students who do not study abroad to develop the necessary intercultural skills.

This is an opportunity for foreign language and international educators to work together to effect positive change. It is essential that study abroad, international enrollment, and international student services professionals, as well as key staff on campus, who welcome and provide needed

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services to international students, be aware of the importance of language and cultural intelligence (CQ) skills. Faculty and staff who encourage and prepare U.S. students to study abroad can develop curriculum and cocurricular activities to foster the development of language skills and cultural knowledge among all our students.

Immersion programs and high-profile events highlighting the importance of multilingualism as a global competency are two effective responses to the challenge of the U.S. foreign language deficit. At the university level, the Many Languages One World Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum is a wonderful example of the collaborative “language enterprise” international education partnership, recognizing and rewarding foreign language skills within the context of the pre-eminent international organization, the United Nations.

Among immersion programs, the “révolution bilingue” in New York City and the French language immersion programs in New Orleans and Louisiana are noteworthy for their success in developing strong partnerships among government, educators, and parents. Among higher education institutions, Middlebury College, known for the “Language Pledge” and whose language schools celebrated their centennial just last year (in 2015), and Concordia’s Language Villages are examples of successful immersion programs.

Conclusion

The foreign language teacher has always implicitly been an intercultural competence teacher. Highlighting this aspect of foreign language education and forging partnerships between international educators, foreign language educators, and relevant stakeholders will benefit all our students—those who study abroad, those who stay on campus, and our international students.

The language-international education partnership would support the expansion of opportunity for study abroad and international education to include a larger number of students.

Many of the principles articulated in the 2013 *Languages for All?* report are applicable to international education.¹⁴ By working

together, we could be a stronger voice for foreign language and international education for all our students. **IE**

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ENDNOTES

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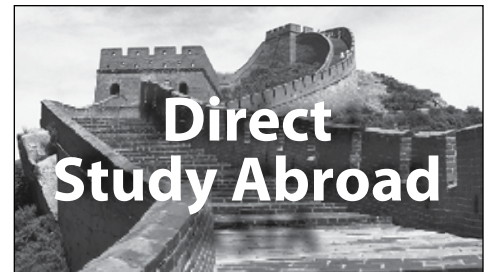
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