

THE FUTURE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE U.S.

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(Speech given at the August 1981 FLEAT Conference in Tokyo, Japan)

I am very pleased to be here today sharing the platform with my distinguished colleagues, Norman Davies, Masaya Kaneda and Morio Kohno. I am particularly pleased to be asked to give my thoughts on The Future of Foreign Language Teaching in the United States. To begin, I would say that I am very grateful that this conference was called in 1981 and not four years ago, because at that time foreign language teaching in the United States was beginning to look like an "endangered species." However, since that time, many events have taken place which, as you will see, lead me to be very optimistic about the future of the foreign language profession.

I would like first to discuss some of these events in order to give a wider view of foreign language teaching. Then, keeping closer to the general theme of this conference, I would like to discuss the possible impact of these events on the development of educational technology.

1968 - YEAR OF UPHEAVAL

As I was saying, if this conference had been called a few years ago, I would have been at a loss for words. Let me go back a little to explain why. You may remember that 1968 was a year of particular upheaval. This upheaval was concentrated in great measure around the university and college campuses in the U.S. One of the products of the ferment of those times was a rethinking and reshaping of the college curriculum, with the result that many institutions--in the interest of 'liberalizing' the curriculum--and in response to students' cries for 'relevance'--dropped the foreign language requirement. Naturally, if you drop the foreign language requirement at the college level, the impetus or pressure for high school and elementary school students to learn foreign languages is considerably lessened. Therefore, we soon witnessed a large-scale decrease in foreign language enrollments at all levels and throughout the country. Before too many years had passed, many of us, particularly those of us in the foreign language profession, realized that we had an alarming trend on our hands. It was alarming not just because our livelihoods were at stake, but also because a fundamental harm had been inflicted upon the educational corpus. The irony, the paradox of the situation, as Yale President Bartlett Giamatti pointed out in 1978, was that "at many colleges and universities, it was the humanists themselves who"--as he put it--"led the charge away from order, that is, who wrote the guidelines that eloquently undermined the foreign language requirements."

And it is true that we were often silent witnesses to the elimination of foreign language requirements, either for admission to or graduating from higher education programs. In effect, we the humanists denied the humanist tenet that language is central to human experience.

A 10 YEAR HIATUS

On the pragmatic side, the upshot of 10 years without foreign language requirements was a serious shortage of language professionals with the productive skills required in, for example, jobs in the international arena. (Incidentally, this marriage of foreign language and international studies has continued to be a union of great strength and mutual benefit.) In short order, many of us in both foreign language and international studies became quite concerned at what we could see was a problem which could only become more serious. However, unfortunately, our were just so many voices crying in the desert, until a funny thing happened to a congressman on the way to dinner at President Sadat's. Congressman Paul Simon was in Cairo...neither he nor anyone in his party knew enough Arabic to tell the taxi driver where they wanted to go, and they almost didn't make it.

This episode and many others like it convinced Congressman Simon, Congressman Leon Panetta, and a few others that the situation had reached critical proportions and it was time to address the issue in order to propose some solutions. So they convinced then President Carter to form a Commission. This Commission devoted an entire year to an intensive evaluation of the state of foreign languages and international studies in order to formulate a report to the President. There were hearings throughout the country and consultants' reports and interim reports.

"A SERIOUS DETERIORATION IN...LANGUAGE CAPACITY"

At the end of it all, in 1979, the Commission submitted its final report entitled, "Strength Through Wisdom: A critique of U.S. Capability." The report began by saying, and I quote: "We are profoundly alarmed by what we have found: a serious deterioration in this country's language and research capacity...Americans' incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous... While the use of English as a major international language of business, diplomacy, and science should be welcomed as a tool for understanding across national boundaries, this cannot be safely considered a substitute for direct communications in the many areas and on innumerable occasions when knowledge of English cannot be expected. The fact remains that the overwhelming majority of the world's population neither understands nor speaks English..." The report goes on to specify in detail what's wrong and to recommend a variety of remedial courses of action. Inter alia, it cites inadequate supplies of effective written and audio-visual materials. I won't go into great detail on the Commission's recommendations--that information is available to any who read the report, but I would like to point out a few significant features of this event.

To begin with, you will notice that the causes for concern over the lack of foreign language education are concentrated primarily around the questions of, shall we say, political and economic expediency rather than, as I referred to earlier, humanistic educational tenets. This is characteristic of government-supported language study in the U.S. It is lamentable that cries for foreign language study are couched exclusively in such pragmatic terms; however, this is another argument. After such a long silence, most of us were relieved to hear anything at all.

This brings me to a second point: although foreign language professionals had great hopes for this Commission, many felt that the Report itself said not enough about language study *per se*. Nonetheless, the Commission did have one very positive effect, and I think a crucial one for the future of foreign language teaching in the U.S., and that is this. It brought together members of the many American professional foreign language organizations and forced them to realize the necessity of working **together**.

A NEW COOPERATIVE SPIRIT

One instance of this cooperative spirit was a conference sponsored jointly by Georgetown University and the Modern Language Association. The conference was entitled "Language in American Life." At the time the conference was planned, we knew that a Presidential Commission was to be appointed. Sensing the arrival of a critical moment in the future of language education in the U.S., we set about to devise a conference which would facilitate exchanges between the scholarly community--the traditional proponents of the importance of language study including Wilga Rivers, Charles A. Ferguson and Howard B. Altman--and the groups outside academe who recognized and wished to emphasize the role of language in a world of social, political and economic interdependence--congressmen, government officials, administrators, teachers, and of course, representatives of the leading professional foreign language organizations.

This cooperative venture marked the beginning of a new alliance of interests. As I mentioned before, after the President's Commission had presented its report, many foreign language professionals felt its biggest flaw was that it didn't say **enough** about foreign languages. However, I believe that this forced members of the profession to realize that their future should no longer be entrusted in other's hands, but that foreign language professionals **themselves** had to band together and work to determine goals and objectives. It also forced recognition of the practical realities which university people in particular often avoid. The result of this introspection on a grand scale was the formation of an organization called the Joint National Committee for Languages, a coalition of existing professional organizations. The JNCL is a consortium of organizations. Its members pool their resources and experience in order to encourage public support for foreign language studies.

In order to achieve this, they have established a Washington office, home base for their lobbyist, whose chief mission is to monitor and seek support for legislative and educational policy. Also, the Council for Languages and Other International Studies (CLOIS) has been created--a subsidiary organization of JNCL--its lobbying arm, complete with registered lobbyist and completely legal under the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act.

This is a very important new aspect of foreign language organizations in the U.S. The heyday for government support of foreign language education was known as the National Defense Education Act programs, and was a magical world which existed in the 1960s, full of money and support for foreign language study. Fundamentally, it was politically motivated--questions of security and prestige, just as the President's Commission was politically motivated. Nonetheless, it can be said that the NDEA programs declined steadily in the 1970s because their proponents disdained entering the political arena to argue their effectiveness and importance.

JNCL'S WASHINGTON CONNECTION

It is in the area of information that the Washington office is most useful. It acts as an information clearinghouse--from foreign language organizations to members of Congress and to executive policy-makers. The JNCL office was mentioned as a source of information in the Congressional Record. The JNCL officer has worked with an international education study group in Congress, with the White House on Foreign Language Week, with the Department of Education on regulations for higher education assistance and bilingual education, and with the State Department, Defense Department, the National Institute of Education and the International Communications Agency on language training and exchange programs. The results were increased funding despite fiscal retrenchment. For example, final figures in the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 showed the National Endowment for the Humanities with \$113.7 million vs. the \$74 million proposal; Title I, ESEA, \$3.48 vs. \$3.3 billion; International Education, \$30.6 vs. \$15 million; Bilingual Education, \$139 vs. \$85 million with block grants; and the National Institute for Education, \$55.6 vs. \$22 million.

CONGRESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR FL STUDIES

The JNCL's efforts in the political sphere are aided considerably by some very strong supporters in Congress. I have mentioned Congressmen Paul Simon and Leon Panetta and would add the names David Obey and Henry Gonzalez. Through their activities and initiatives they have kept language issues before both the Senate and the House of Representatives. In the last session, they did it through a number of bills, perhaps the most important of which was House Concurrent Resolution 301, noting that it was the sense of Congress that foreign language study be encouraged.

In this session, Representative Simon has again introduced legislation "to further the national security of the U.S. and the nation's economy by providing grants for foreign language programs to improve foreign language study for elementary and secondary school students and to provide for per capita grants to reimburse institutions of higher learning for part of the costs of providing foreign language instruction."

Congressman Panetta has constantly been seeking ways to keep the importance of foreign language training and cultural understanding before his colleagues considering export and trade legislation. Representative Gonzalez has introduced a bill to establish a national commission for the utilization and expansion of our nation's language resources. Last spring, in the budget committee, David Obey attempted unsuccessfully to amend the budget to take \$50 million away from military bands for the use of foreign language study. Representative Simon offered an amendment to HR 3519, the Defense Dept. authorization bill, to require the Defense Secretary to report to Congress, within one year of the date of enactment, on the feasibility of requiring cadets and midshipmen at U.S. military academies to study a foreign language and of increasing existing requirements for foreign language study. Representative Simon also offered an amendment to HR 3380, the Armed Forces Pay Act, to require the Defense Secretary to pay a \$500 bonus to members of the armed forces for each language native to the country where they are stationed (other than English) in which they are proficient.

Because of a number of factors such as the activities of Simon and Panetta, the President's Commission Report, H. Con. Res. 301, and the existence of JNCL, we are beginning to attract the interest of other members of Congress and policy-makers. And this interest will grow to the extent they hear from their constituents, and from us, that it is detrimental to the political, economic, and intellectual security of our nation for our cultural ignorance and linguistic parochialism to continue. We also recognize that friendship of the sort I have described here, is a two-way street. In order to get support, encouragement and assistance from our friends in Congress, it is necessary to give in kind, and we are doing so by supporting these congressmen in their home districts.

Coalitions are an exceptionally valuable means to extend one's influence. Nationally, JNCL has been working with other national organizations such as the American Council on Education, The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, to effect education and international policy in general and to keep the language issue before these groups as part of their overall philosophies and policies. In the past, we have worked effectively with groups such as the National Association for Bilingual Education on issues of bilingual education or the Global Studies coalition concerned with international and area studies. We will continue to work with these coalitions, but, at present, we are expanding our base to work with all of the various education organizations since education as a whole is currently under fire.

At the local level, as well, we highly recommend seeking allies for our views and concerns. We advise local groups not to be hesitant to seek out some strange bedfellows--civil rights groups, labor, business, international groups like the United Nations Association, the Foreign Policy Association, the League of Women Voters, and so on. The larger our support, the louder our voice and the more likely we are to be heard.

ORGANIZING POLITICAL POWER

In the political realm, if information is influence, then organization is a form of power. Good organization not only means we can demonstrate concern and provide information in a timely fashion. It also means we can control and influence votes. Letters, telegrams and telephone calls from constituents are effective in dealing with legislators in large part because they indicate that if someone is concerned enough to act on an issue, they are also concerned enough to vote on that issue and possibly to talk their family and friends into voting the issue. As the American Medical Association or the United Mine Workers have consistently demonstrated, small numbers, well organized, acting in a timely fashion can be quite effective.

Organization is the key to making our concerns known and to convincing policy-makers that we are serious and committed. JNCL has developed for its constituent organizations workshops, procedures, models and information on how to develop effective grassroots and national networks. In fact, one of the best publications available is one prepared by the National Education Conference and distributed by one of our member organizations, ACTFL, entitled "Building Community Support for Foreign Languages." At least two of our member organizations, ACTFL and NABE, have developed successful and dynamic action networks and others, such as TESOL and AATF, are in the process of developing networks and the necessary political awareness that must accompany them.

THE PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION

Well, I think that you can gather that I now feel optimistic that foreign language education does have a future in the U.S. and a very promising one. I would like to return for a few minutes to the recommendations of the President's Commission which deal specifically with educational technology.

I did mention that the Commission, in submitting its report, stressed that the deterioration of language and research capacity was a serious and complex problem and one whose solution required a commitment not only of funds but of ideas and will. The Commission believed that a major, sustained effort is required to raise the nation's competence in foreign languages, and recommended pedagogical experimentation as one means to that objective.

It is in this field that language technology can make the greatest contribution. Generally, the Commission report suggested increased use of technology. One area of particular need is study of languages which are referred to as 'the uncommonly taught' languages. Because of a shortage of competent personnel, one solution has to be self-instructional programs. Here in particular we rely on technology--be they the original language labs or the new computer systems--to address educational needs. The Report also recommended increased use of the media--not only for programs in actual language instruction but also for programs on other peoples and cultures. In fact, the Commission Report speaks in some detail of the importance of technology, specifically the media, in developing public awareness in matters of foreign language and international education.

I will read excerpts from the Commission Report:

Current U.S. foreign policy issues need much wider public understanding if the government's positions are to receive broad public scrutiny and support. The urgency of issues confronting the United States increases the need for an educated electorate; we cannot wait for another generation to become educated about these issues. Moreover, the changes urgently needed in current educational systems and policies to strengthen foreign language and international studies--whether at local, state, or national levels--also require the understanding and support of an informed citizenry.

The media--radio and television, the daily press, and periodicals --are potentially among the most effective means of informing the public about foreign affairs.

THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THE FOLLOWING:

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should encourage public radio and television stations to devote more time to international topics, especially to cross-cultural educational programming.

The media, especially television should offer more programs on other cultures for school-age children.

Local radio and television stations should produce more programs with international content, drawing upon college and university resources to portray more fully and accurately the nature and problems of an interdependent world.

As rapidly advancing technology for home delivery and information services becomes widespread, information systems designers and suppliers should be encouraged to develop services through which interested citizens can receive up-to-date print and audiovisual materials on foreign language and international topics, as well as reference materials. Foundations and corporations should support the international programming of local public broadcasting stations.

THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

USICA should facilitate the flow of foreign-produced information and materials (especially audiovisual) to the United States. It should do this by directing its overseas personnel to identify materials that, if disseminated in the U.S., would enhance public exposure to different national and cultural perspectives. Such an effort by USICA could be part of a larger effort to reverse the dominant one-way flow of information and materials abroad and remedy the essentially monocultural view of the world resulting from present emphases in TV and radio programming in this country.

Pedagogical experimentation:

Experimentation in instructional strategies (is recommended), including increased use of technology and self-instruction.

There are other reasons for optimism:

1. Rose Hayden at the National Council on Foreign Languages and International Studies in New York complements our work at JNCL.
2. The Teacher of the Year award went to a foreign language teacher, Jay Sommer of New York.
3. The Secretary of Education, Terence Bell, spoke at the National Teacher of the Year ceremonies. His speech is a very strong commitment to the importance of foreign language education.

He began with the following story:

"Wellington Koo was in the United States to represent China at the Washington Conference in 1921. In those pre-United Nations days, even urbane Washingtonians were not used to foreigners on their soil, and Koo found that people did not know quite how to approach him.

One socialite he sat next to at a dinner party turned to him after sometime and brightly asked, "Likee soupee?"

Koo was tired of explanations and apologies, so he just smiled and nodded and continued with his dinner. When the meal ended, Koo was invited to say a few words to the guests. He agreed and spoke for 20 minutes--in flawless English.

In his seat again, he noticed his condescending neighbor had blushed a deep red and was now silent. With equanimity, Koo turned to her and asked, 'Likee speechee?' Secretary Bell continues:

"This story, although humorous, represents what I believe is a serious concern for the American people--our lack of fluency in foreign languages, our widespread ignorance of other cultures, our limited understanding of other nations and their national policies--these symptoms are indicative of the ethnocentric disease that has plagued this nation far too long.

INTERDEPENDENCE-ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, & ENVIRONMENTAL

The time is past due for us to understand that the nations and peoples of this world have become more and more interdependent--economically, politically, and environmentally. We are closely linked in many ways--through trade and business, communication systems, transportation systems, transportation, international organizations, monetary systems, and the technology that is greatly accelerating the emergence of a world society.

The reality of this interdependence on our ethnically and culturally diverse planet has brought us a challenge that will, to a large extent, effect the destiny of our country and of the world. The challenge I speak of includes teaching foreign languages, and the understanding of other nations and their cultures. In its most inclusive terminology, I am speaking of 'Global Education.' " Secretary Bell concludes:

"More widespread, advanced language training and international studies are badly needed in this country to provide a resource bank of individuals better prepared for the specialized roles required by business and government."

I began my remarks by referring to the humanistic basis of language study. Like many others, I have come to think of technology as the antithesis of humanism, but here's a chance for technology to redeem itself, by directing its works toward the service of foreign language study in the U.S.

Congressman Paul Simon also wrote a book entitled *The Tongue-tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis*. He takes many of his examples from the success of Japan in foreign languages. Thus, Japan can very well be viewed as having made a great contribution to Congressman Simon's thinking, his book and the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. The United States has been a sleeping giant regarding foreign languages, but that giant has awakened. The foreign language profession in the U.S. intends to see that it never falls asleep again. These recent events will have a great impact on the teaching of foreign languages in the U.S., and therefore all over the world, including on that most widely taught of all foreign languages: English as a Foreign Language.

FL STUDY-A BRIGHT FUTURE

The future of foreign language teaching in the United States and therefore throughout the world, and the use of technology in that teaching, is very bright indeed, and we hope that you, in Japan, will continue to exert the leadership you have shown, as we move together toward the realization of our common purpose: international understanding through cross-cultural communication leading to world peace.

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