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HOW AMERICANS LEARN FOREIGN LANGUAGES: FROM KINDERGARTEN TO COLLEGE

This paper focuses on the way languages other than English are taught in the United States. It briefly examines the history of foreign languages in the U.S., and examines recent enrollment figures in language courses. Despite the common misconception, the United States does not have an official or national language. This fact underscores the significance of multilingualism in U.S. history, while also alluding to the continued importance of foreign languages today. However, while

the U.S. is demographically as diverse as ever before, second language education is in a slow decline across the country. Spanish, French, and German continue to dominate in language education at all levels, while training in strategically important languages such as Chinese, Arabic, and Russian is severely underdeveloped at all levels. The second half of the paper describes the author's personal experience learning languages in the United States, opining that the problem is not in the quality of language education, but in its accessibility.

Key words: foreign languages, language courses, personal experience, United States, language education.

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Introduction

Recently at an academic conference, I asked the audience (consisting mainly of young Russian university students) to raise their hand if they did *not* think that the U.S. has an official national language. Nobody raised their hand, presumably because everyone present assumed that the official language of the United States is English. After all, what country does not have an official language? In reality, the United States truly has no official language at the federal level. One reason for this may be that while the overwhelming majority of settlers of the U.S. were native English speakers, there were sizable communities whose native language was not English, but Dutch and German dialects, as well as French and Spanish. In fact, the 8th president of the United States, Martin Van Buren, spoke Dutch as his first language; despite being born in the United States. Establishing a national language may have risked alienating these communities and contradicting the nation's democratic ideals.

This paper will look to explore the study of languages other than English in the United States. The first part will examine the history, popularity, and structure of foreign language learning in the U.S. The second part will be my personal story of the study of foreign languages in the U.S.

1. History and Structure of Foreign Language Education in the U.S.

The three most commonly taught foreign languages in U.S. public schools are Spanish, French, and German, in that order. There are several clear reasons for the popularity of the Spanish language as the most popular second language. Spanish has almost 40 million speakers in the United States, making it the second most common native language in the country. Spanish has also long been the most important language for U.S. foreign policy, given that it is the native language in most of the U.S.'s neighbors in Latin America. The Monroe Doctrine has long established that the U.S. should work closely with these countries. French was the most popular second language during the period of the nation's founding, as France was the U.S.'s first ally. German was historically the most widespread native language in the country other than English, which is why it was also the most common foreign language in the early 20th century, before it fell out of favour due to the rise of Nazism. The fourth most popular language, Latin, is taught as a key piece of classical education. It is also believed to help expand and fortify students' grasp of English vocabulary. Latin not only helps with English, but also serves as a base from which one can more quickly master any of the Romance languages later on. Rounding out the top ten second languages are Japanese, Italian, Chinese, American Sign Language, Russian and Korean, in that order. But the gap between the top three languages and the others is enormous, at both the school level and the college level. Spanish, French and German make up 90% of enrollments in school and 69% of college language enrollments [1]. Russian, by comparison, makes up only 0,14% of school enrollments and 1,4% of university enrollments [2].

In general, foreign language study in the U.S. is in a slow but gradual decline. In all, 18% of adult Americans report speaking a language other than English, while in Europe 53% of people speak a second language [3]. Foreign language courses are not a requirement in American schools, and only about 20% of American schoolchildren take foreign-language classes. The percentage of public and private elementary schools offering foreign language instruction decreased from 31 to 25% from 1997 to 2008 [4]. The percentage of all middle schools offering foreign language

instruction decreased from 75 to 58% [5]. The percentage of high schools offering foreign language courses remained about the same, at 91% [6]. In college the numbers are even lower. While all major colleges offer foreign languages, only 7% of American college students are enrolled in a language course [7]. The overwhelming majority of Americans only receive the opportunity to study strategic languages like Chinese, Arabic, and Russian in college, but these language only make up 6,4% of university language enrollments [8].

2. My Personal Experience with Learning Foreign Languages

I attended a secular private school called the Kinkaid School from pre-kindergarten all the way through 12th grade. We were fortunate to be exposed to foreign languages early on, as Spanish was required for all students starting in 1st grade. In 6th grade students were required to take both Spanish and French, and those who liked French better could switch starting in 7th grade. In 8th grade we were required to take Latin for one year in addition to Spanish or French. In 9th grade Chinese became available, and I seized this opportunity, deciding to take both Chinese and Spanish. I was one of only a handful of students who decided to take more than one language.

Chinese proved to be a wake-up call for me. Our teacher was an energetic older woman from Taiwan, who we affectionately called “Lao-shu” (teacher). It was my first exposure with intense complexity in language, as Spanish had come fairly easily to me. Chinese took much more effort, repetition, and hard work than I could have imagined. Classwork involved mainly listening to the teacher as she explained concepts with presentations, but we also did skits and other activities. Homework was the most brutal part. We would have to write characters over and over – maybe forty times – in a special workbook each night, in order to remember them. I was lucky enough to participate in my school’s two-month China trip that year, which was one of the most eye-opening experiences of my youth. Though I very much enjoyed the trip personally, I became disenchanted with my abilities to learn the language, and eventually quit taking Chinese at the end of that year.

I continued taking Spanish for the rest of high school. My Spanish teacher was a passionate young woman from Mexico, who was genuinely excited for every class. We would read from the textbook and she would explain grammatical concepts to us. At the end of every class she would pass out the lyrics to a Spanish-language song, with some of the words missing. We would then listen to the song and sing along, while trying to fill in the missing words. On Fridays we would watch movies or soap operas and do assignments related to them.

Once I chose which university I was going to, I knew that I wanted to try another language in college. My parents had encouraged me to take Arabic, because of the language’s critical status in the U.S. and its importance in the oil business. I decided to try Russian instead, because of my interest in Russian literature and Soviet history. At the time I did not imagine that I would eventually major in it, as my preliminary declared major was philosophy.

The head of the entire department of Romance, Slavic, and Germanic Languages and Literatures ended up being my first-year Russian professor. His name is Richard Robin, and as I later found out, he is actually the co-author of the most widely used Russian textbooks in all of the United States! His textbook is called “Голоса”. Professor Robin had a very unique teaching style to say the least, with a few elements of Russian and Soviet pedagogy. He immediately tried to intimidate us and weed out those with low motivation. The class began with sixteen students, but after three weeks the number had dropped to ten. I remember one time when I forgot the word for “brown” (коричневый), and Professor Robin proceeded to yell at me and embarrass me for several minutes in front of the whole class. We would also suddenly decline new words on the fly, as a sort of test. If we read a new word or phrase, for example “ржавый ключ”, he would just suddenly ask “чего?” and point randomly to one of us, and they would say “ржавого ключа”; then he would point to someone else and ask “чему?”, and they would answer “ржавому ключу”, and so on. We would decline the word in every case, singular and plural, but if one of us messed up, then we would have to start the whole declension over again. This made us put pressure on each other not to mess up. His course was difficult and required a lot of individual work outside the classroom. We strictly followed the textbook he had written, but by the end of the year I grew to immensely respect his peculiar and strict teaching methods. His strictness made me take learning more seriously, and I am thankful to him for that.

Our second-year Russian teacher was Ludmila Alexandrovna Michael, who received a degree in teaching Russian as a foreign language from Leningrad State University in 1990, and immigrated to the U.S. shortly after. She was a fantastic teacher who made all her own materials. Her teaching methods were much more traditional when compared to Professor Robin's, and her style actually reminded me of my experience in high school Spanish. We read texts, watched and discussed movies, and performed skits. We also would have bi-weekly one-on-one conversations with her in her office, so that she could examine and evaluate our progress. At the end of every semester we would have OPIs (oral proficiency interviews) with a random professor, who would rate our speaking level.

I spent my third year studying abroad in St. Petersburg, Russia, on the program recommended to me by Professor Robin, CIEE at St. Petersburg State University. He stressed to me that conversational practice (i.e. conversing with friends) was most important in reaching the advanced level, and confessed that it was ok to skip class as long as I was conversing in Russian with someone instead!

As a senior (fourth-year student) I no longer had Russian language class, as I had already achieved the speaking level needed for my degree (advanced low). Instead, I took a Russian literature course in Russian. We read 20th century Russian literature including Bulgakov, Bunin, and Nabokov. Our teacher was Elena Borisovna Ovtcharenko, a brilliant woman who worked both at our university as a Russian literature teacher and at the International Monetary Fund as an economist. Reading literature with her guidance greatly helped me increase the complexity and eloquence of my speech.

Conclusion

My experience with foreign language education is very much an outlier. I was very fortunate to have all of my language teachers (except for the renowned prof. Robin) be native speakers of the languages they were teaching. This is a luxury of learning languages in the U.S., where there are substantial numbers of native speakers of most languages from around the world. It is also important to note that in America, literary and language training is mixed together, meaning that students take separate language, literature, and linguistics courses. However, there is usually not special training in translation in undergraduate programs. Professional translators usually undergo special training at private professional schools, or at certain Master's programs. In all, I am extremely satisfied with the quality and structure of the language training I received in the U.S. The challenge facing the United States is making language training more accessible, and demonstrating the relevance of multilingualism to the resolution to global problems.

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КАК АМЕРИКАНЦЫ ИЗУЧАЮТ ИНОСТРАННЫЕ ЯЗЫКИ: ОТ ДЕТСКОГО САДА ДО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА

Статья представляет собой обзор проблемы изучения иностранных языков в Соединенных Штатах Америки. Автор дает краткое описание истории изучения языков (за исключением английского) в США, приводя последние данные о зачислении на языковые курсы в школах и университетах страны. То, что в США есть официальный государственный язык, является довольно распространенным заблуждением, на самом деле его нет. Этот факт подчеркивает историческую значимость многоязычия в истории страны, вместе с тем предполагая особую важность иностранных языков в настоящее время. Однако, несмотря на то, что США, как и прежде, продолжают быть многонациональной страной, спрос на изучение второго языка постепенно падает. Испанский, французский и немецкий языки занимают доминирующие позиции на всех уровнях образовательной системы, в то время как изучение таких стратегически важных языков как китайский, арабский и русский еще крайне ограничено. Вторая часть статьи посвящена личному опыту автора в изучении иностранных языков, который позволил ему заключить, что проблема состоит не в качестве языкового образования в США, а в его доступности.

Ключевые слова: иностранные языки, языковые курсы, личный опыт, США, языковое образование.

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