

In Defense of the "Impractical": Why Language Study is More than Just Studying Languages

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Earlier this year the American Academy of Arts and Sciences published *America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century*. The report was written in response to a bipartisan congressional request for an analysis of foreign language education in the United States. The report is available for free download or print copies by order at amacad.org and provides some helpful insights for anyone interested in knowing more about the pressing need to improve and expand the teaching of foreign languages in the United States.

Among its findings, the report gives various practical reasons for the study of foreign languages. Far fewer people in the United States can speak and read a foreign language for functional use in comparison to the populations of China and the European nations. There is a severe shortage of trained language instructors in this country, and the majority of states have indicated they are unable to find qualified teachers for the courses they need to teach. These shortcomings serve as an indictment of the current educational structure and signal a growing national security issue. United States citizens are becoming increasingly isolated linguistically. And while English is spoken widely around the world, failure to learn another language prevents U.S. English speakers from moving beyond the more superficial aspects of other cultures.

The findings of the report provide strong arguments that proponents of foreign language education might use to advocate for the profession with school administrators and politicians. But language instructors should use caution when seeking to justify language study based solely upon what many would call the "practical" benefits. The corporatization of education in the United States has many students and parents questioning educational benefits in terms of the economic return on investment. While language educators can easily articulate the financial reasons for acquiring basic competence in Spanish or Portuguese, can they use the same arguments to justify a close reading of Machado de Assis or an advanced study of the historical change in Spanish vowel structures?

Advocating for foreign language study as nothing more than an avenue for gaining a potential advantage in the workforce unnaturally divorces the study of language from a deeper understanding of culture and higher-

level linguistics. Unfortunately, many foreign language departments have segregated the teaching of advanced courses in literature, culture, and linguistics from the basic levels of instruction. Basic language courses at larger universities are routinely staffed exclusively by graduate students, adjunct professors, and/or lecturers, while tenure-stream faculty teach the more advanced courses. But the issue here goes beyond this division of labor. Even in smaller departments where professors teach all language levels (as is almost always the case for the overburdened Portuguese professor), there might still persist a more philosophical divide between upper and lower division language study. And while language educators may be cognizant of the connection, it may not be as apparent to people outside of the profession.

Language instruction in the United States will improve when students, teachers, professors, and administrators begin to understand that there is a unifying link in the type of knowledge gained on the first day of the first semester of Spanish 101 and the last word typed in a thesis on *Don Quixote*. A student who learns to say, “Eu me chamo...” is taking the first steps to increasing her understanding of communicating in a foreign language that is, while more basic, intimately connected to the knowledge she will gain should she eventually study the sociolinguistics of Brazil. I can think of no other field that believes there is a pedagogical divide between basic and advanced instruction. While students may not engage in overly complex material in their first semester history, economics, or computer science courses, they begin to lay the foundation of knowledge they will need for a deeper study later. To be sure, there are some differences in teaching methodologies for teaching basic language and for more advanced courses. Nevertheless, the ultimate objective (that students gain a greater understanding of the world by interacting with a foreign language) remains consistent among all courses. The connections should be clearly understood among member of the language faculty and consistently articulated to those outside the departments.

A critical link between upper and lower division coursework is the role of graduate teaching fellows. Graduate students routinely take on a dual role as both educators and pupils. They simultaneously witness the importance of advanced research and study in foreign languages while often engaging directly in the teaching of beginning and intermediate languages. Graduate instructors are at once members of the faculty and of the student bodies of their campuses. But occupying this liminal space may leave them vulnerable to policies that would marginalize their role. It is in our best national interest to recognize graduate students as scholars making significant contributions to collective knowledge and trained educators providing language instruction that is vital to our societal wellbeing. These young academics should be protected against administrative

and governmental policies that would overburden and tax them. Much more than passive receptors of knowledge, graduate students in the foreign languages are uniquely poised to emphasize the relationship between elementary language study and more advanced research.

As language educators more intentionally signal that the study of language, literature, and culture are intimately connected, they can begin to affect the culture surrounding language study in the United States. This country's lack of robust foreign language education poses a national security threat, not because students have failed to memorize enough verb charts or vocabulary sheets. The danger lies in a spreading lack of ability to engage in intercultural communication. While extremists in the U.S. may want to build walls and close borders, technology and increased travel is connecting the world at an unprecedented rate. If students fail to engage with other cultures, they will be left behind as their peers around the world forge ahead. The solution to this problem is increased emphasis on quality instruction in foreign languages and literature at all levels of education. Investment of social and economic capital into the study of foreign languages will prove more value for the long-term wellbeing of this country than any other change in policy.

Works Cited

Commission on Language Learning. *America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century*. Cambridge: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017. Print.

