

Ensuring America's Place in the Global Economy by Building Language Capacity in the Schools

Testimony of Rita Oleksak, President, American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages before the Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to appear before this subcommittee today to discuss efforts by the federal government to improve language skills throughout the nation and coordinate these initiatives among the various government agencies. Your letter inviting the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) to appear before this subcommittee clearly outlined the critical strategic, national security and economic challenges we face due to our nation's lack of language skills. We support your premise that the security and economic vitality of the United States and the basic career security of many American citizens is now tied in large part to our foreign language capability. Indeed, ACTFL believes that the United States suffers from a significant "language gap" because our country has failed to make language learning an important part of every child's education. Recent efforts to attempt to correct this problem have fallen woefully short in addressing both the short-term language skills deficit of our current government workforce and in efforts to create and coordinate long-term programs to address the language gap that exists in the American educational system.

In this age of instant global communication, worldwide economic competitiveness, and challenges to our national security, we need to rethink how we prepare students for work, how we prepare the military, and how we prepare our diplomats to interact with other nations. While other nations around the world are producing a citizenry that can communicate with others in their languages, the U.S. remains largely monolingual in its approach to education, as well as its approach to business, national security and international relations.

It is a growing reality that American students are losing a competitive edge in the business world because they lack skills in other languages and cultures. Increasingly, American business needs employees with these skills not just to conduct business overseas, but also to conduct business at home, due to the changing demographics of the U.S. population. No matter what career path our students take, knowing other languages and understanding other cultures will be of primary importance to their future success. Many students already know how important linguistic and cultural skills will be for them. In a 2005 Roper poll conducted by ACTFL, it was the 18-24 year old group that demonstrated the most support (75%) for more funding for language programs in the schools and more language education for students. Many business leaders understand the need to increase our language skills and global understanding. The Committee for Economic Development (CED) has recognized the need for expanding language education in our schools to address economic competitiveness issues. ACTFL supports the recommendations of the CED as outlined in its report "Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security."

In 2004, ACTFL and other language education organizations enthusiastically took part in the highly successful National Language Conference organized by the Department of Defense and the Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL). This conference convened representatives of academe, government, and business to launch discussions and make recommendations about formalizing a strategic national plan to build our nation's language capacity from the bottom up. Following this conference, the Department of Defense also developed its "Defense Language Transformation Roadmap" which outlines the military's need to have its personnel "language ready."

Building upon the momentum generated by this conference, ACTFL convened a National Language Policy Summit in January 2005 as part of the National Public Awareness campaign *2005: The Year of Languages*. Representatives of the three arenas – government, academe, and business – again came together to examine language policies, or the lack thereof, in the U.S. As a result of this summit, ACTFL published a "Blueprint for Action" with specific action steps that needed to be taken to make foreign language education a stronger part of our education system. The action steps presented in our "blueprint" are presented in this testimony. One of the first actions taken was the Department of Defense's funding of the first K-16 language pipeline project — an effort to provide well articulated, consistent, intense, language instruction for students from kindergarten through university. The award was granted to the University of Oregon, partnering

with the Portland Public Schools, to create a Chinese language pipeline through a coordinated program of study, leading to students graduating college with superior level language skills. Several other pipelines have now been funded in Arabic and Chinese, all made possible by the Department of Defense's National Security Education Program (NSEP).

Several months later, in January 2006, President Bush announced the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), an effort by the federal government to build our nation's language capacity with initiatives ranging from teacher recruitment and training, to student exchange and summer programs, to university scholarships and study abroad. Four agencies – Defense, State, Director of National Intelligence, and the Department of Education now share the responsibility for this initiative.

While the people at these agencies are hard-working and dedicated to seeing this initiative through to success, they lack the direction and the funding needed to achieve this goal that only legislation can provide. Too much of NSLI is reprogramming of existing resources without the specific legislative authority and directive, as well as additional funding needed to drive systemic change. Although representatives of the four agencies are communicating with each other, they lack the clear, strategic, well coordinated plan to build our nation's language capacity, both civilian and military, because there is no legislative directive to do so. As a result, there are pieces of the plan that are missing, preventing some important actions from being taken, duplication of effort in other areas, and an unequal emphasis on the importance of this initiative within the various agencies.

There has been a great deal of impetus to move NSLI forward on the part of the Department of Defense and the Department of State, but their needs and goals are different. While the Department of Education has re-directed some of its existing resources, it does not have the authorizing legislation it needs to implement all the education-based activities envisioned by NSLI. While the initiatives of Defense and State are welcomed, for the long term it does not make sense for the National Security Agency and the Director of National Intelligence to run teacher training and summer youth programs. Additionally, there seems to be a lack of coordination with stakeholders outside of government, even when these stakeholders are already working on solutions to the problems identified by the government agencies. One example of this is the fact that ACTFL has created a Language Learner Registry, containing the names of some 3,000 people nationwide with language skills who have volunteered to be available for use in testing and training, yet the government expressed no interest in availing itself of this resource.

We must coordinate these disparate efforts and consolidate them into a comprehensive national effort to build our nation's language capacity to meet the critical military, economic, and diplomatic needs of our nation. Congress should enact legislation to implement the recommendations developed as a result of the National Language Conference. Rather than repeat what the Department of Defense has recommended in the report issued after the Conference, I will simply add our support to the initiatives outlined in that report and emphasize that it would benefit language education if there were a Director of National Language Initiatives to coordinate the various activities among the agencies.

At the same time that Congress considers moving forward to coordinate the activities of the diplomatic and defense related agencies of the federal government to address the language deficiencies in our governmental workforce, legislation should also be developed to address the language gap in our educational system. While there is currently some federal legislation such as the Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) and parts of Title VI of the Higher Education Act that provide needed funds for program innovation and teacher training, the reach of FLAP is limited in the grade levels it affects and the scope of the change it can bring about.

Just as the military has its plan to become “language-ready” through its “Defense Language Transformation Roadmap,” we need a similar “roadmap” that lays out a coordinated, non-duplicative approach to expanding and strengthening foreign language education in the U.S., making it an essential part of every child’s education from kindergarten through graduate school. This is the only way we will be able to build our nation’s language capabilities and close the language gap that prevents the U.S. from full participation in global interactions and threatens our economic and national security. In fact, the long term success of the military’s roadmap to develop the language skills of the armed forces and the State Department’s quest to have language qualified personnel in U.S. embassies around the world will fail unless strong support is provided to our nation’s K-16 foreign language educational infrastructure.

This education roadmap for languages would be a national strategic plan for language education in our nation’s schools that would develop plans

for systemic change and expansion of language programs at all levels of instruction, as well as a focused approach to teacher recruitment and professional development to address the shortage of highly qualified teachers in all languages. Legislation is needed to build the school-based pipeline so that we can produce students proficient in languages. This legislation would serve as the impetus for the Department of Education to take a stronger leadership role in ensuring that language education becomes an essential part of education for all students so that we may address our long term economic and national security needs.

While the national security rationale for building our language capacity looms large in light of terrorist activities both at home and abroad, and due to well-publicized language deficiencies as pointed out in reports such as the Iraq Study Group's finding that the U.S. Embassy in Iraq had only six out of one thousand staff who were competent to communicate in Arabic, it is important to remember that economic competitiveness requirements in particular should look beyond just those languages deemed critical to national security in the first decade of the 21st Century. What is critical for our nation is not which second language students first learn, but that they begin learning any second language. Since research supports the notion that after learning a second language, the third and fourth languages come more easily, it is important to support any language that a school system deems important for its community and for which teachers are available or obtainable. There are additional practical concerns, too, in that it would be impossible to build coordinated, articulated, long sequences of language courses K-16 in all of the languages identified as critical to our national security given budget limitations and the lack of teachers in critical

languages. Incentives can be provided, however, to encourage communities to adopt additional languages of critical need, but this must not be done at the expense of current programs that are teaching languages important to us economically and diplomatically such as French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Italian or Latin. Since learning any language promotes cognitive development, success in academics, and an understanding of other cultures, we should maintain our current programs while looking to expand into other languages.

One key feature of new legislation should be to create articulated and continuous sequences of K-16 language courses and assessments, with immersion and study abroad programs as integral components of a system of language education. A fundamental challenge to building our nation's language capacity is the fact that languages are not consistently represented in the curriculum in America's schools. The result is little or no language instruction or very uneven "stop and start" language experiences which lead to wasted money and student frustration. An attempt to quantify this problem in 2005 by Murray State University in Kentucky calculated that when 75% of the 1,460 students entering the freshman class with two years of high school language had to begin their language study over again, a total of \$459,000 in tuition money went "down the drain" for parents. With this scenario playing out across the nation at all levels of instruction—elementary, middle, high school, and university – the cost in dollars, lost time and diminished capacity – is enormous.

In addition to creating programs that are well sequenced and start in the early grades, there needs to be a consistent way of measuring student

progress that translates from one level to the next: that is, a way to measure the development of students' language proficiency as they move up from level to level. This would allow for a consistent way to assess language performance with a common way of recognizing student achievement and granting credit for language learning. The government's Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) assessment scale has been adapted for use in academe through the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines which equate the ILR scale to the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and Writing Proficiency Test (WPT). These common rubrics allow students to chart their language development from their K-16 schooling and are accepted by government and business alike to determine the actual real-world language skills of individuals. In fact, ACTFL has worked very closely with the Defense Language Institute since 2003 to develop and verify the language skills of the military in more than 65 languages. Funding to assist in developing special tests for the educational system based on our experience with the military would assist greatly in closing our nation's language gap. By coordinating this effort the U.S. government could be instrumental in effecting the change that we so desperately need.

Simply starting a new language program here or there is not enough. There must be a coordinated plan to make well articulated language programs a key part of the core curriculum in our schools. While considered a core subject in federal legislation, including the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* and most recently in the *No Child Left Behind Act*, foreign languages are not included in required testing; therefore they are often not included as a core subject in the curriculum. A recent study by the Council for Basic Education highlighted the curtailment of time for subjects such as

history, civics, the arts, and languages in a report entitled “Academic Atrophy: The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America’s Public Schools.” Even more disturbing than the shortened time for language programs was the fact that this decline in instructional time was far more likely to happen in schools with high minority populations—precisely the student population that stands to make the greatest academic gains from the opportunity to learn another language.

Since research indicates that learning a foreign language promotes cognitive development in students, which leads to higher academic achievement, we must do more than preserve the meager amount of exposure to foreign languages that students now receive. It is not a matter of “making way for languages in the curriculum,” it is a matter of understanding that the content of a language class can – and does – reinforce the concepts that are taught in the general education curriculum.

Similarly, content courses at the postsecondary level taught in the foreign language have existed for some time, but need to be expanded and encouraged. These programs, such as the one at the University of Rhode Island that combines the Engineering and German programs, are geared toward continuing the students’ language development while teaching the content required for their major. Increasingly, universities are offering double majors coupling language study with another major such as engineering or physics so that students graduate competent in their content area but linguistically and culturally competent to compete in the global arena. Community colleges are in the forefront in linking language learning to economic development and student success through a number of

programs across the nation that teach languages for special purposes, such as for the health and law enforcement professions, and our system of first responders. Nowhere was the need for language training for first responders more evident than in the Hurricane Katrina disaster where people lost their lives because emergency responders did not understand the language of those being rescued. The federal government can provide the incentives to replicate these model programs across the country to meet our homeland security and economic development needs.

One challenge to expanding foreign language education offerings is the lack of teachers with the requisite language skills – not only in the less commonly taught languages critical to our national defense, but also for the more traditional widely taught languages. As our teaching force ages and retires, states are looking at alternative routes to licensure to replace them. Innovative programs such as hiring teachers from abroad and retraining military retirees can help, but these programs raise other problems.

In the case of recruiting teachers from abroad, one of the initiatives emphasized in the NSLI, there is the challenge of preparing foreign teachers to teach in the U.S. educational system – a daunting task. Foreign teachers must learn how to teach American students in U.S. schools – a much different task than teaching in their native country. Foreign language instruction in the U.S. is based on standards adopted by the profession some ten years ago and these need to be understood and incorporated, along with other best practices, into foreign teachers' approach to teaching in the U.S. Intensive professional development must be provided for these teachers or they often return to their native country within a year. Additionally, both

current U.S. policy, and quite often policies from the teachers' native countries, limit teaching assignments to no longer than three years, thus making these programs an expensive short-term fix, while perhaps short-changing the long-term solution of developing our own cadre of highly qualified teachers in various languages.

Regarding alternative certification, each state determines its own definition of what it means to be a "highly qualified" teacher and most, of course, are setting the criteria as "certified" in their respective states. States are searching for ways to determine "content knowledge" of the teachers and the ETS Praxis II content exams for teacher certification are only available in French, German, Latin, and Spanish. Many states have turned to the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and the ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test (WPT) as a means to determine the required level of proficiency to teach in the classroom. There may be additional ways that federal legislation and leadership may help create incentives to help states certify the language competency of their teachers.

In addition to pre-service teacher preparations, a comprehensive approach to professional development is also required for our language teachers already in the classroom. A new focus on assessing students' communicative proficiency will require a new way of "doing business" in the language classroom. A coordinated effort to train our current teachers to focus on standards based instruction aimed at developing students proficient in the target language needs to be put in place. Funding must be provided to develop a coordinated approach to teacher professional development at the local, state and national level focused on improving the skills of our current

teaching force. Emphasis should be placed on using new technologies to teach and increasing the proficiency of language teachers through teacher study abroad programs and summer immersion programs both in the U.S. and abroad.

K-16 instruction in our schools and universities must also build our nation's language capacity through the heritage learners who are in our schools. Instructing these students in their native language presents a challenge because of their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Methods must be developed for teaching students who range from being born in this country and speak a language other than English at home, to students who arrive from a war-torn country who have never had a formal education. Yet current educational policies and political pressures have squandered this potentially huge resource of native speakers of other languages by neglecting or even actively discouraging the use and development of their native language. Our national policies should require the learning of English while encouraging the continued learning of these students' native languages. While we have fairly solid research on the benefits of skill transfer from one language to another, we do not have solid research on the best way to instruct these students. Language teachers who have been trained to teach a second language to monolingual English speakers now find themselves teaching students to improve the skills in their native languages. We need scientifically based research to help guide us in the appropriate instruction of these students and a comprehensive way to enable these students to continue to develop their native language. We cannot let another generation of students lose their native languages while attending our schools.

A comprehensive approach to research in foreign languages is an essential ingredient in any federal legislation that Congress considers. The foreign language teaching profession needs research in a wide range of areas, including basic information such as student enrollments, the number of programs and languages offered, longitudinal studies that examine the effects of language education on the cognitive development and academic and career success of students, heritage language instruction, and best teaching practices to name just a few.

Finally, a vital area of focus in federal policies needs to be an effort by policymakers and business leaders to inform the public about the need to learn languages. While many parents understand the value of foreign language education for their children, there is varied acceptance of that proposition by some policymakers, far too many business leaders, and the general public. The general public still perceives that language learning is only for the college-bound student. This attitude **MUST** be addressed if we are to make progress in this effort to bring language learning to all students.

ACTFL has undertaken an effort to change the public perception of the value and the need for language education for all students. This effort was supported by Resolutions in both the House and Senate in 2005. The Senate Resolution initiated by ACTFL and supported by the broad language teaching community, including the Joint National Committee on Languages, was sponsored by Senators Dodd and Cochran and declared 2005 as The Year of Languages in the United States. Modeled after the highly successful European Year of Languages of 2001, this national effort highlighted the

importance of languages in the life of all Americans and the national need to formalize our policies regarding language education in America's schools and America's work places. In 2006, the effort transitioned into a long-term public awareness campaign entitled *Discover Languages...Discover the World!* Through this effort we hope to highlight the need for a wide variety of language policies in different arenas in order to promote a secure place for languages in the curriculum in America's schools and universities and in the work place.

In summary, the needs in our schools and universities are simple: we need attention, we need funding, and we need a coordinated effort to help us move forward to expand and strengthen foreign language education. We have the potential to provide the pipeline of linguists that is most desperately needed not just in government agencies but in the workforce in general. We need attention through a vigorous public relations campaign that will turn the public's attention toward the increasing need for language education for all Americans. We need funding to support much needed initiatives—the same level of funding provided for other subject areas. And we would benefit most from being part of a national strategic effort to help with these recommendations—to help all of us work smarter and accomplish more from a nationally coordinated effort to make a multilingual U.S. citizenry a reality and secure our leadership role in a global economy.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee.

