

Summary

The Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NECTFL)

Friday, March 28, 2008: 2:00 – 4:00 p.m.
Marriott Marquis, New York City

“Representing Foreign Language Education at the National/Federal Level in the United States”

Heidi Byrnes, Georgetown University, Introductory comments

This is the third of a series of four moderated panel discussions at major conferences (ACTFL, MLA, Northeast Conference and AAAL) that have been organized to provide a foundation for an extended *Perspectives* column in *The Modern Language Journal (MLJ)*. A *Perspectives* column on this topic is particularly timely given the release of two major documents in 2007 – the report of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, and the review of Title VI and Fulbright-Hays.

One of the elements that has repeated itself in these two reports is the “absence of a presence” of the foreign language (FL) community at the decision-making level in the United States Government (USG). This may not appear to be a hot-button issue, given that the majority of education policy is established at the state and/or local, not federal, levels. On the other hand, numerous decisions are being made at the federal level – in particular No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – and these have had significant and arguably negative impact on K-12 education, including FL.

With regard to FL capacity, there is no question of how ill-prepared the United States is, and not just because of 9/11. Nor is there any question that the massive infusion of money into certain areas related to national and international security was necessary. But the question arises, who makes and is making the decisions where money goes? Because it is not possible to anticipate all future FL needs, there must be some way to bring a more broad-based and well-informed constituency to the decision-making table.

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed in order to establish effective institutionalization of language policy decisions. Forms of institutionalization need to be:

- *long term (not ad hoc);*
- *encompassing the range of language uses (not merely security-related language learning);*
- *substantively educational in terms of academic and experiential knowledge regarding the teaching and learning of languages and cultures (not quick-fix instrumental);*
- *encompassing all languages (not merely those deemed priority-languages by government policies);*
- *comprehensive (not only subsections of the issue);*
- *attentive to fostering language learning through a continuum that spans all educational levels, from elementary school to graduate education (not disjointed efforts at various points of the educational system);*
- *open and publicly validated by a variety of constituencies (beyond serving only delimited groups, such as government security and defense based constituencies);*
- *based on steady funding sources (rather than being on-again, off-again, which is particularly destructive for language learning);*
- *transparent (not relying on a stream of ad hoc rulings, programs, initiatives, legislative acts and programs that make it difficult to consider them a rational, coherent whole);*
- *able to respond to future needs by various constituencies flexibly, expertly, expeditiously, and in a publicly visible and validated way (rather than short term, narrowly interest-driven, and therefore not conducive to cooperative behaviors that harness the best of knowledge and practice);*
- *authorized to advocate for language learning and use in a range of societal contexts (not just in the way that we as language teachers advocate for ourselves)*
- *equipped with a means to validate for the “truthYness” of what is being claimed;*
- *open and publicly accountable in the usual ways in which government accountability is established and practiced.*

Previous two panel discussions have shown a number of recurring main points:

1. Asserting the central role of languages and international studies as a humanistic and educational enterprise. The goal is to move FL education into the core curriculum in K-12 – this is a core background assumption.
2. Questioning the assumption that a federal role was either desirable or possible. This has become particularly important given the introduction of a bill by Representative Rush Holt (D-NJ) to establish a federal FL oversight authority. The argument is whether the approach should be top-down or bottom-up. The decision regarding which approach to

- employ “depends” – we need to know more about how the FL community could contribute to the shaping of the role/responsibilities of such an oversight authority.
3. Recognizing that a federal role could manifest itself in various ways, and not only in the form of a “language czar,” and not only in the Department of Education – toward which the latter has been directed a fair amount of suspicion, being such a highly politicized agency. How that position would work collaboratively with interested parties with extensive broad-based experience representing the interests of the states, professional organizations, government interests, etc., would be the crucial points that would have to be worked out carefully – perhaps suggesting the need for something such as a World Languages Oversight Board.
 4. Considering an alternative approach, such a position to be more as an “oversight position” for **all** of education (and within that language education) – a Strategic Education Resources Administrator, charged with administering resources, consciousness-raising, models, balancing federal and local missions. This would place FL education within the broader context of general education

❖ **Helene Zimmer-Loew**, American Association of Teachers of German

Goal

It appears that Congressman Holt’s bill, which has a good deal of support (e.g., from the National Academies, Coalition on International Education, JNCL), has some possibility of success. It could well be a first step toward achieving the goal of coordinated federal language presence.

Achievements

From the perspective of someone who has spent 50 years in the FL field, the past 30 years have been particularly active. Most influential among the accomplishments has been the Foreign Language Standards Collaborative, if only because it got the four major FL national

member organizations (ACTFL, AATF, AATG, and AATSP) to sit down together and seriously talk about standards. But the funding from the Department of Education for the Collaborative only supported development of Standards for three languages (French, German and Spanish). The Collaborative recognized that the other languages had to be brought in, ultimately resulting in the expansion of a 95 page document to a 400 page-plus document. New languages were added and continue to be added, both modern and classical, non-European (e.g., Arabic); currently in development are South Asian and African languages. Standards are here, and here to stay, and most states have adopted the Standards in some sort of form.

The Standards have had an impact not only on language teaching but also language teacher development. With funding from the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) the Standards were incorporated as part of the process for accreditation of schools of education training FL teachers. Of 1300 schools of education in the United States, over 600 get their accreditation from NCATE. There is as well a growing acceptance of the Standards as a Collaborative (generated by sales of the Standards, which have already reached over one million dollars), the National Standards required part of the process of teacher certification in many states. Without the support of the Collaborative, none of this would have happened.

Other notable achievements in the FL field in the past three decades include:

- Creation of the Joint National Committee on Language/National Council for Languages and International Studies (JNCL/NCLIS) in 1976. Albeit not directly involved in policy development, JNCL/NCLIS has been extremely influential in the creation of FL-supporting legislation, and is an organization with great potential.
- The establishment of many strong language programs at all levels of instruction – some truly model programs.
- The growing numbers of Advanced Placement (AP) exams and students, with four languages added since 2003. The AP program has thus exhibited increased inclusiveness in its exponential growth. In addition the College Board is taking greater control over the quality of these programs, including threading the Standards through the AP course structure.
- The growth in study abroad/internship programs
- The creation of more sophisticated assessment instruments (e.g., Linguafolio)
- The recent interest in language study for a more diverse range of uses

Challenges

- The low percentage of students studying languages at all – 8%
- The even lower percentage of students continuing study to reach an advanced level of proficiency – 1.9%
- Marginalization of humanities in general and FL education in particular
- Conflicts between various special interest groups within the FL education community – e.g., theoretical versus applied linguistics
- Cost-cutting, accountability-oriented legislatures, school boards, and boards of trustees
- Generally poor economic conditions at all levels of government
- Federal government-imposed and unfunded mandates (NCLB)
- Lack of consistency of the status of language learning at state and local levels
- Lack of language coordinators at the state and local levels
- Inability of government agencies and departments to work together

Approaches to Meeting the Challenge -- recommendations

- Establishment of a policy-focused task force or advisory board from within the profession – the leaders of the field (ACTFL, MLA) must be heard by any decision-making authority at the federal level
- Strategic plan to accomplish goal
- Work on establishing incentives as well as mandates for effecting change at local and state levels
- Advocacy at all levels of instruction (e.g., Discover Language) and government, with **every** language instructor involved
- Coordination of K-12 with college/university programs
- Identification of model programs at all levels of instruction
- Research on the benefits of learning languages
- Involvement with ASCD, NASSP, NAESP, PTA, ACE, etc.
- Outreach to all decision-making constituencies (administrators, policy makers, etc.)
Whoever is ultimately placed in the proposed high-level federal position should ideally

be one of us – who better knows us than us?

❖ **Ron Woo**, Director of Teaching Fellows Program, Hunter College, New York City

There are many things in the FL field that are “riches”, but there is no place wherein a truly national perspective is housed.

What do we want students to gain from learning FLs? We do have the 5Cs, but is that sufficient in this globally shrinking world? Need for a national task force that should address some of these issues.

States manage learning, including FLs, but there is a federal role – for which some monies should be made available. At present, the federal focus is the 800 pound gorilla, NCLB. Where is

FL? It's "hidden" within the English language education piece of NCLB, NCLB talks about language arts – what about **foreign** language arts? And the reference to FL as a core curriculum is buried in OELA. How about an Office of **Language** Acquisition (to include English)?

There needs to be a centralized locus for strategic planning for the coordination of all the federal funding – not in the way they are currently dispensed. REF: the Federal Register – yesterday's announcement of FLAP "competitive grants." If we are talking about supporting FL education, it should not be competitive. It should be categorical aid, and it should be real money. For example NSLA called for \$114 million divided by 50 states – hardly a meaningful sum.

In this shrinking global world, social communication is not enough – academically rigorous language instruction is necessary for students to truly compete globally.

How many states require students study FLs to graduate from high school is hard to know, because of multiple high school degree programs in some states. However, only three and the District of Columbia consistently require FLs for graduation. For example, in New York State, two years is required (one in middle school, one in high school). New York States has its own examination (the Regents); no other state has that. But there are a very limited number of Regents exams, and the ones that exist do not adequately and comprehensively reflect our changing world

With regard to testing, we test what we value – but once upon a time, we talked about a NAEP. A NAEP would help drive that and place pressure on the states to improve. All of this will not happen unless we're all involved – and at the end of process, there needs to be some sort of meaningful enforcement.

❖ **Christine Brown**, Glastonbury (CT) Public Schools

Presentation provides the perspective of a school administrator rather than a language teacher. From the perspective of a superintendent the greatest need for improving FL education is simply money. It is not about mere millions of dollars – it is about the equivalent of entitlements (namely the various federal Titles; e.g., Title I, II, III). Further complicating the matter is that even if local

school districts receive the entitlements, they can choose not to use money from the entitlements toward FL programs.

FL programs are absolutely at the bottom of the curricular priority pile in K-12 settings if not for the presence of a strong program director, and a strong advocate in the central administration office. As administrations change, this position is very vulnerable..

The field needs to be consulted; but we need to recognize the dire straits we are in as a profession; hence the need to support the Holt bill.

In Glastonbury, as much money is budgeted for special education programs as for all education programs in the district – of which FL education is only one part. Given those realities, it will take a huge amount of money to change the state of FL education anywhere in the nation, much less nationwide.

Boards of education don't care about content – they are lay people, somewhat anti-intellectual (people that made it in spite of their education), and they are concerned about buildings and test scores (and not how you get the test scores). It's all about money, yes, but it's all about test scores, too.

With regard to NCLB, as a national policy, we only value language arts and math. Some states (e.g., Ohio) do also value science, and science is being tested in some states – which has driven history (especially U.S. history) out of the curriculum below 10th grade, and totally driven international studies out of the curriculum (there simply is no time to teach it). Without those social studies courses in the curriculum, within a decade, the impact on our students is going to be tremendous – we'll be lucky to have US history. Even worse, for example, most teachers in Connecticut have no knowledge of world history. Result: a citizenry that is ignorant of their world. And it's not just what's happening in our own FL field – it's the narrowing of education field in general. The real terror will be when they come into competition with the broader world.

There are some good signs; for example, in many districts, there is a diverse parent population interested in FLs – but in general, our national inability to speak other languages is intersecting with world events and failures of economies that are of crisis proportion for humanity.

Recommendation 1: Establish a position at the highest level of government that would oversee a new, coordinated federal campaign to improve language and international education. This could take the form of an Office of Language and International Outreach (OLIO).

Recommendation 2: All educational sectors (Elementary and Secondary, Higher Education, Defense, Intelligence, and State) would serve or be represented under the leadership of the Director of the OLIO.

Recommendation 3: The first charge of OLIO would be to create a strategic plan for revolutionizing the teaching and learning of languages and cultures in the United States.

Recommendation 4: The Director of OLIO would work with national and international experts in the field to redefine the content of language and culture education to include all aspects of international awareness and intercultural competence. All languages would be represented in this effort.

Recommendation 5: Aspects of the “Five V’s” that follow would have to become parts of the strategic plan and initiatives undertaken by the new Office of Language and International Outreach.

THE FIVE V’S:

View

- ❖ Americans have differing views about language learning that would need to be revealed and addressed.
- ❖ A view of the past times when multilingualism was valued in the United States (the first one hundred years) should be capitalized on in order to move the rhetoric beyond the English centered and sometimes xenophobic feeling about language learning today.
- ❖ The needs of the PreK-12 educational system are different from the needs of higher and adult education.

- ❖ All levels of instruction have very different contexts in which they operate and view language education.

Vision

- ❖ The spokesperson(s) at the federal level would need to be visionary.
- ❖ The vision of the life that Americans could lead if there was far greater language and culture competence from PreK-12 through adulthood would need to be crafted and marketed in the same way as has been done in other critical, federal campaigns.
- ❖ The federal leadership for language learning, cultural competence and international education would need to be supported by a “delta- force back office.”

Value

- ❖ Ongoing research into the cognitive, general linguistic, affective and other benefits of learning multiple languages would be raised to a level of national importance.
- ❖ Annual data about language programs would be collected.
- ❖ The impact of learning multiple languages on English language competence would be researched.
- ❖ An instrumental, federal role would need to provide ongoing and sustained funding for establishing, supporting, evaluating, and revising educational approaches that lead to language and culture competence.
- ❖ Multiple pathways to voters for funding language education at all levels would need to be established.

Visibility

- ❖ The federal lead for language education would elevate what are now ad hoc, profession-based advocacy campaigns to systematic and ongoing, national awareness campaigns.
- ❖ A federal initiative could showcase Americans who are already multilingual and, as a result, reap the benefits in jobs and opportunities.
- ❖ Federal initiatives would include many training opportunities for school administrators and elected officials who have no experience in language learning.
- ❖ A sustained and funded federal initiative would provide nation wide curriculum development institutes, materials development, teacher recruitment, teacher training and web based courseware.

Victory

- ❖ Americans would become proud to be multilingual.
- ❖ Americans would understand the general cognitive and affective value of knowing other languages.
- ❖ Americans would understand complex world problems from multiple perspectives and vantage points.
- ❖ There would be a system in place to ensure the opportunity for all American students to study languages in addition to English in an articulated fashion from Pre-K to old age.
- ❖ Technology would greatly enhance local language offerings.
- ❖ All American teachers and educational administrators, regardless of the discipline they teach or the level they oversee would have studied additional languages from elementary school through the college level.

It is time to bring international education, intercultural competence, and foreign languages into a common cause. We were a far better nation in our earlier multilingual past – why not a Jefferson project (cf. Europe’s Plato Project)?

Moderated discussion from the panel

If it is the case that there is a reason for this proposed federal position, and for a role in policy setting by the FL profession, is there someone within the profession that could take on such a project? For example, many groups participated in the Standards project. The current project is even more comprehensive, encompassing international education, intercultural education, and foreign language education. Unless someone takes the lead to say what should be done, would it get done?

Comments from the floor

What seems to be a major part of the problem is defining the “it.” If we can create the advisory board/council to define, then we can devise the strategic plan to solve the problem.

There are various precedents for convening such a group, one during the early 1980s, the New Visions initiative at the turn of the 21st century, and more recently the one that helped organize the 2006 and 2007 Translation Summits in Salt Lake City.

The latter group was pursuing a much more limited and less ambitious goal, but demonstrated that it could be done. While it may be good to bring together the various stakeholders with a list of their respective interests, much of the priority-setting work has already been done, for example through New Visions. Now it is a matter of procuring the money and making it happen, **and** to connect the pieces that are already out there.

One audience member cited a recent research study by a group of psychologists who found that the American subjects being analyzed were fundamentally different from the European cohort, in their inability to speculate what they would see beyond their immediate view. Need to see languages in the larger educational landscape, with emphasis on what FL educators can offer

– to enable people to see others and be somebody else. We betray ourselves when we only talk about language/ linguistic proficiency. We need to work with the anthropologists to talk about cultural proficiency. That will make us more attractive to the broader educational community, including administrators, who tend not to have had positive FL learning experiences.

One other audience member expressed concern about committees that don't have any teeth. When we constitute this committee/advisory board, we need to make sure they have some authority to speak with and really advise the office holder.

Obviously huge amounts of money are being spent in the USG in language education. It would be essential for the person in this office to oversee the spending of all that money, as much of it is being spent “enormously wrongly.” One audience member noted that, some time in the past, a person in the Office of the Secretary of Defense attempted to find out how much money was being spent in the Department of Defense on languages. He couldn't.

What separates languages from every other content area in K-12 is that if there are requirements, they are only two years – and these are layered on top of full K-12 sequences in all the other requirements. The FL field does not have the infrastructure to get people to high levels of proficiency.

Establishing a planning entity within the National Academies would presumably give it sufficient prestige and more clout.

While it is important for the language profession to put forth its ideas, it will take somebody else to take the lead and provide support. The business community still doesn't really understand what language needs are. Do we have someone with the political clout to move something like this through Congress?