

The Modern Language Association (MLA)

Saturday, December 29, 2007: 8:30 – 9:45 a.m.
Erie Room, Sheraton Chicago

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

Heidi Byrnes, Georgetown University, Introductory comments

This is the second of a series of four moderated panel discussions at major conferences (ACTFL, MLA, Northeast Conference and AAAL) that have been organized to provide the foundation for an extended *Perspectives* column in *The Modern Language Journal* which will explore sources of knowledge among experts representing various constituencies and educational policy experiences and interests. It is hoped that the profession will benefit from the procedure and will become more aware about these issues. The discussions and the resulting document might well influence future government deliberations and actions.

The reason for this choice of topic was presented. Language abilities have created considerable interest recently on the part of the public, an interest documented by the increased foreign language enrollments in the 2007 MLA survey. However, the larger foreign language educational policy context behind these developments has not recognized the consequences for the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the United States. In addition, the absence of the language field in high-level decision making has negative consequences for addressing the ultimate goal of teaching languages: the creation of a citizenry competent in at least one language beyond their native tongue.

Next, issues that need to be addressed in order to establish effective institutionalization were presented. Institutionalization needs 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 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;
- open and publicly accountable in the usual ways in which government accountability is established and practiced.

The above characteristics are not controversial, but they are challenging to the profession.

Because the series of panels is planned as a threaded discussion and previous deliberations considered in each new panel, a summary of the main points made at the ACTFL panel in November was presented.

1. Questioning of the assumption that a federal role was either desirable or possible (Argument: top-down vs. bottom-up approach)
 - Advantages/disadvantages of a federal/central vs. a federalist/states and local communities-oriented approach.
 - Possibility of “meeting in the middle” between centralist and federalist approaches.
2. Need to relate forms of representation to the kinds of goals being pursued
3. Concern about the nature and location for such representation
 - compromised proposal of a “language czar” position
 - politicized environment of the Department of Education
 - need for long-term commitments that are difficult to obtain with political appointees, as contrasted with career appointees
 - need for buy-in from diverse constituencies, starting with the major language-related organizations
 - need for processes that can respond to changing circumstances
4. Call for multiple representations that create “checks-and-balances” or that can maximize the potential and expertise of different entities. Crucial role of coordination, collaboration, communication.
5. Department of Education with something like a World Languages Coordinator, National Academies, a national foreign language educational council as possible locations/entities
6. Need to see any new positions and processes that advocate and push a foreign language education agenda in the larger context of education policy in the US, most particularly the No Child Left Behind legislation and the larger context of educational goals, where the concept of **literacy** seems particularly

promising inasmuch as it links FL with native language education and also with other discipline-based forms of literacy.

7. Need for the profession to address accountability regarding learning outcomes.

❖ **Katherine Arens**, University of Texas, Austin

Stated need for a counter proposal or a way of rethinking the norms, in order to:

- contextualize FL education within education, not as a mandate in itself
- capitalize on extant structures and infrastructures
- accommodate stakeholders, not theories, and long-term strategic resources development in many areas

Proposed what might be educational mandates and policy directions

- Federal versus centralist is the wrong heuristic. The "National Language Policy Summit" (2005) identified stakeholders: business, government, and academe
 - Lobbying and future assessment; policy; and expertise and best practices models
 - Local lobbies that can attract earmarks
- Suggested alternative: parallel to "national science advisor" in executive branch, the Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, charged with administering resources, consciousness-raising, models, and funding

An immodest proposal: Language Study Considered as Education

- Proposition: Create a Strategic Education Resources Administrator
- Location: Not in ED or executive branch, but perhaps in oversight entity like the Government Accountability Office
- Function:
 - Represent/adjudicate *all* aspects of education, not just languages; supplement to language expert within the Department of Education
 - Address language study as part of a more general area, *the arts and humanities* together, cultural literacy, balanced off the sciences and social sciences
- Mission:
 - Coordinate stakeholders (business, academe, government, and local entities) and adjudicate accountability
 - Administer language and other expertises as "strategic reserves" or "strategic resources" fostered by education, not only for security purposes or current market issues, but also as long-term assets to be maintained at readiness, even if not immediately required
 - Foster, like FDIC, "effective management of strategic resources" including human capital, financial and infrastructure resources, information technology, risk management
 - Adjudicate policy and resources tradeoffs originating from any of its significant stakeholders as an interlocked set of demands on

establishment and maintenance of strategic education resources.

- Goal: Transparency and accountability by:
 - Tying federal funding and policy accountability into local funding and stakeholder accountability under comprehensive "best practices" models
 - Bringing locally established standards (including criteria for performance/under-performance) into transparent national comparisons with peers, best-practice planning, financial and social planning
 - Iterating between short-term and long-term planning for fiscal accountability and response to newly emerging needs
 - Setting up transparency on education costs and benefits, including:
 - Plans with benchmark levels, appealing to precise research bases for design validation, outcomes assessment, articulation among levels, plans for human resources involved (e.g., teacher [re-]training)
 - Moving away from "core curriculum" as set-asides into a more flexible curricular framework, designed like *Standards* projects around functions (and probably treating *clusters* of subjects as alternative and tradeoffs)
 - Clearing triggers for implementation of exit/transition strategies, sunset reviews, retraining, revision, [voluntary/involuntary] opt-out from federal scrutiny and federal funding.

Suggested functions of the administrator: accountability, adjudication, suasion/advocacy

- Routine auditing and reporting on outcomes for *public scrutiny* as ground for policy and funding calls at all levels
- Adjudication of progress/lack thereof in terms of plans and benchmarks set by local entities, national best-practices norms, fiscal accountability, expert assessments for outcomes at levels, local ability to provide basic services
- Critical exercise of central, long-term strategic planning, to sustain resources in face of "immediate needs" (asserted by government [e.g., DoD], individuals [e.g. culture-lobby, business-lobby], or academe [earmarks for "academic freedom" or "pure research" without outcomes accountability])
- Tying post-secondary education, scholarship, and research into public space as generating models for future best-practices, outcome assessments, definitions of and stewardship of strategic resources
- Comprehensive review of funding for expert scholarship, research, archival stewardship, media accessibility and post-secondary education (including NEA, NEH grants, Fulbright, etc.), including
 - Justification of research in terms of long-or short-term stewardship of public interests, not just within its own disciplines
 - Local and national accountability for iterating K-12 with post-secondary education, development, and a strategic reserve of innovation
- Public advocacy for sharing, imposition of public peer pressure, relating *rights* and *accountability*.

Offered further points of adjudication:

- account for disparities between best practices in teaching and research on learning
- acknowledge need for non-traditional curricular materials rather than "standard" textbooks
- use a combination of existing testing measures
- research, identify, and emulate best practice models
- accept input from long-term *national* strategic resource planning
- consider local (and sometimes regional and national) fiscal and demographic factors
- advocate for government and business planning to help academe maintain and archive specific resources
- accommodate and educate local stakeholders

❖ **Dennis Looney**, University of Pittsburgh

Began by presenting the challenges for the field:

- Promoting FL study K-16 by federal decree
- Those caused specifically by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation with its checkered record thus far; an adjudicator may be a solution here.

Offered three models of federalism:

- 'layer cake' with its clear delineation of bureaucratic layers
- 'marble cake' with a pragmatic mixing of authorities and programs and levels
- 'Christmas cookie' federalism, a plurality of models on the local level, bottom-up paradigms

Supported centralization at the local level: the third model of federalism at work

- Successful models of federalism adapted to the local level
 - How school-based perspectives can shape foreign language education policy (research by Donato and Tucker); creates a new experience for new students of FL
- Building support among parents and taxpayers rather than creating resistance; effective marketing to enhance status of FL study and all FLs; combating the exclusion of FL because of requirements of the NCLB
- Being aware of tokenism and marginalized inclusion
 - Perils of marginalization in the 'inclusive syllabus' for the college bound elite student (Ditmar)

Considered the European Union and its supranational redefinition of federalism as a possible fourth model of federalism

- Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) created by the Council of Europe and adopted by all of its member states

❖ **Catherine Porter, SUNY College at Cortland**

Began by establishing that our challenge is identifying an interlocutor to represent FL professional concerns to federal agencies

Among the obstacle are the numbers and diversity of concerns within the profession: how can we speak in a single voice?

One approach would be to identify a common goal and develop a structure and a strategy for working toward that goal: introduce FL education into K-12 core curriculum throughout US.

Advantages of this approach are that it:

- (1) Would solve or alleviate most problems currently facing post-secondary FL educators
 - a) Shift in focus from lower- to upper-level work
 - b) Experienced FL learners = more capable learners
 - c) Advanced proficiency levels within reach
 - d) Increased numbers for study abroad
 - e) Broader upper-level curricular choices

- (2) Would address many aspects of current “language deficit” at the national level
 - a) Larger pool of people with FL proficiency to meet crises
 - b) Larger pool of people with FL proficiency available to teach
 - c) Larger pool of people with FL proficiency to meet the everyday needs of government and business
 - d) Citizenry experienced in seeing the world through the lens of at least one language and culture other than English

Obstacles to this approach are the:

- (1) Need to build a consensus and change the culture
- (2) Need to resolve practical issues at local level
 - (a) starting age/grade level
 - (b) choice of language
 - (c) choice of methodology/materials
 - (d) recruitment of teachers
 - (e) adaptation to diverse student bodies
 - (f) assessment of outcomes
 - (g) financing

Proposed strategy to accomplish this:

- (1) Establish working group/task force through JNCL-NCLIS

- (a) prepare position statement summarizing the arguments in favor of incorporating foreign language education into the K-12 core curriculum in the United States (Resources: ERIC, NFLC, other)
- (b) develop strategies for mobilizing our memberships to undertake advocacy efforts aimed at influencing federal, state, and local policies and practices at the K-12 level. Examples:
 - (i) study and publicize approaches used in other nations
 - (ii) publicize and encourage replication of existing programs
 - (iii) introduce and publicize new model programs
 - (iv) seek out and reward FL competence in schools and in the workplace
 - (v) orchestrate support at the local, state, and federal levels for measures that would further our goal (e.g., legislation such as H.R. 2111, the “Foreign Language Partnership Program”)

An agreement on a common goal and multi-level plan of action to pursue it will give the profession a way to represent some of its concerns effectively at the federal level.

Moderated discussion from panel

The moderator began the discussion by asking why it hasn’t been possible to maintain what we have in exemplary programs and substantial enrollments and what we have to do to increase awareness and support at all levels. Some excellent local examples are being marginalized by the intrusion of the No Child Left Behind law. Although this federal legislation was not funded, its impact has been and continues to be enormous.

One answer is that we must set criteria for good programs and adjudicate them to gain credibility. K-12 programs are driven by college admissions, hence the two year/semester syndrome and the opting out by many students once they have met these minimum standards. It would be a huge step for the present college culture to mobilize the necessary activism to fulfill the actions listed by the panelists. Thus far, the MLA has not followed up on the recommendations in the report of its Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages other than publishing the report “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World”. Many of these recommendations, if enacted, would begin to address the concerns and obstacles mentioned by the panelists.

Another solution might be the institution of a Foreign Language Council, which would serve as a program accreditation group.

Comments from the floor

Government programs, such as *Startalk*, which supports Chinese and Arabic study at this time, are federally funded. What are reasonable objectives for these programs? We need to have the learners reach proficiencies for professional use, but often they are retaught the same materials as they “advance” in their study of a language.

There is, perhaps, a myth about learning outcomes that would magically be gained simply by introducing language study at the K-6 level (see studies by Snow and Burstall). However, the desired learning outcomes are possible only if language studies continue in articulated curricula throughout K-12; often that is not the case. Instead, we achieve only mixed results, due to widely differing lengths of study, interruptions in study, and widely differing quality of instruction. Rather than pushing for elementary foreign language programs regardless of whether they will be continued, perhaps we should focus on educational policies that would guarantee four years of good instruction at the secondary level, in a well-constructed sequence of pedagogy, curriculum, and instruction that would simultaneously teach language and content. Also mentioned was the continuation of language study at community colleges, or beginning study of another language at community colleges that would articulate into programs at the college/university level. Needed is the careful articulation from Advanced Placement courses to college level courses so that students attain higher levels of ability.

There is a need to include high level thinking skills into all language courses, no matter what the level, since we often claim that as a major reason for language study. We could then be an important part of the general cognitive and affective development of students. In order to gain good will toward foreign languages, we have to be ready and able to respond to the variety of needs from the public, taxpayer, government, and business.

Linking content and language acquisition, along with assessing outcomes, is necessary for establishing accountability in the field and transparency to the public. The lack of emphasis on the teaching of literature, although there is an MLA division of that name, is also a concern.

The reward structure for those in academe does not include forms of service to the profession, such as would be required to realize many of the goals outlined during the panel, so many academics spend their time with only research and teaching.

It was agreed that we have to begin by maintaining what we have while working with other partners and other major stakeholders, such as the business community and the security sector. It was suggested that we consider acting on some of the recommendations in the report from the Committee for Economic Development "Education for Global Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security" published in 2006. Despite the positive reaction to this report from most quarters, we have not yet delivered.