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Is fluency the goal of language learning?

By Gretchen Busl

“What good is a foreign language?” is a question many college administrators are asking these days.

The **Modern Languages Association** reported recently that foreign languages enrollments have decreased by 6.9 percent since 2009.

Language departments are often the first cut in a budget crisis, and many universities have lowered or even eliminated foreign language requirements.

Nonetheless, some states are working to encourage students to learn languages at the high school level. Indiana is the most recent state to consider a bill that would allow students to earn a “biliteracy” designation on their diploma.

Indiana **Senate Bill 267** was passed by that Senate recently, and has been approved by the House Committee on Education. This law would make Indiana the ninth state to implement a “**seal of biliteracy**,” earned by taking foreign language courses (or English as a second language) and passing a proficiency exam.

These lawmakers seem to recognize that learning languages should be an integral part of public education. And why shouldn't they?

The **American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)** has collected a list of studies that suggest bilingualism promotes higher test scores, better memory skills, and increased reading skills, among many other benefits.

Bilingualism is the ability to speak two languages conversantly.

The seal of biliteracy promises more: biliterate students can also read and write proficiently in two languages.

Yet the reality is that most American students will never be fluent enough even to be considered bilingual, let alone biliterate.

Without more upper level coursework – for which State Bill 267 does not provide any additional funds – students with exposure to another language at home are the most likely to earn the biliteracy seal.

Implementing this seal may certainly have positive effects: it recognizes the value of language diversity, and the promise of providing certification to colleges and employers should encourage more students to take language courses.

But in college, most students will never take more than the required one to two semesters of language, making those who haven't done it yet unlikely to achieve proficiency. And even those who graduate with a language degree still might not be able to hold a conversation with a native speaker.

If few students ever attain, let alone maintain, fluency, should we really keep requiring languages at the college level?

The answer is *yes*, because continued use is not necessarily the goal of undergraduate language study. For a few students, a foreign language will become an integral part of their lives.

For the others, though, language study can be not only a gateway into a richer experience of life, but a platform for developing the soft skills many employers are seeking. Even limited exposure to new languages in structured coursework promotes desirable attributes like creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving.

Studying a language may not open doors to jobs abroad, but the skills learned along the way are certainly desirable to U.S. employers. According to a **recent by the National Association of Colleges and Employers**, the two most valuable skills for new hires are critical thinking/problem solving and teamwork.

When students are exposed to a new language, they understand there is more than one way to see the world - and therefore more than one way to solve a problem. Language study also encourages students to navigate cultural differences, respect unfamiliar viewpoints, and value participation in communities.

In my experience as a language teacher, students with the aptitude – and more importantly, the *drive* – to excel at language learning are rare.

But again and again, I have seen students opening their hearts to a new culture, and learning to work in more creative, spontaneous, and surprising ways. From day one in my classes we speak only in Italian. To compensate for a limited vocabulary, students must develop their ability to read context clues, to improvise, and to rely on visual communication– vital skills, no matter the language.

So let's be honest with college students about the goal of foreign language requirements.

The most important takeaway for a student in a beginning language course is not the ability to ask “¿Dónde está el baño?” or to

talk about last summer's vacation. The most important lesson is actually the ability to see that *the world is so much bigger than you*.

The capacity to speak another language fluently may not necessarily be a requirement for global citizenship - but the ability to see beyond yourself certainly is.

If the goal of a 21st century education is to prepare learners to work and live in a global economy, then foreign language study should be required for every student.

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