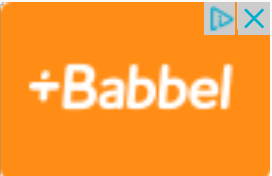




Industry News

Practice French	Practice German	Practice Italian	Practice Spanish	
-----------------	-----------------	------------------	------------------	---

Why foreign-language skills matter for the next-generation workforce

Kanoe Namahoe · January 14, 2021

- [Education](#)
- [Educational Leadership](#)



Unsplash

Demand is growing for multilingual work talent.

Want more stories like this?

[GET NEWSLETTERS](#)

Practice French	 Practice German
Practice Italian	Practice Spanish
Practice Portuguese	



Organizations are increasingly seeking employees who can speak more than one language, according to a [2017 report from New American Economy](#). This is particularly true for companies and industries that provide services requiring high levels of human interaction, such as finance and health care.

And yet, foreign-language instruction does not appear to be a top priority in K-12 schools in America.

A [Pew Research report](#) shows that 91% of students in European schools are learning English, while just 14% of US students are learning Spanish, 2% are learning French and 1% is learning German. What's the reason for this variance?

We discussed this issue and the urgency of foreign-language



Educational Leadership
Taking a pause



Educational Leadership
In the "hot seat": Sharing, learning in a leadership cohort



Educational Leadership
Hidden benefits higher education gained from the pandemic

instruction for the next-generation workforce with Howie Berman, executive director of the [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages](#). The following conversation has been edited for brevity and format.

The data from the Pew report shows a staggering disparity in foreign-language learning among students in the United States and in Europe. What do you think is the reason -- or reasons -- for this disparity?

It is true that for many years here in the US, language learning has not been a priority. That thinking is part of a larger mindset about what language learning looks like in the 21st century, our

place in the world and the
myriad of benefits
language learning affords.

There is certainly a
traditional view of
language learning among
a large swath of the
public. Many adults today
look back at their
experience learning
French or Spanish in high
school, for example, and
will attest to the fact that
they barely speak a word
in the target language
today. But language
learning in the 21st
century has evolved -- it
places greater emphasis
on authentic, learner-
focused, culturally-
relevant activities.

Educators can harness
technology to use as a
complementary tool,
gamifying learning and
assessing student
progress.

We hear constantly in this
country that “everyone

around the globe speaks English, so what's the point of learning another language?" To be blunt, it just isn't the case. Most estimates point to between 1.5 and 2 billion people speaking English (about 20-25%) worldwide, but only a fraction are native speakers -- the rest have relatively low levels of proficiency. While English is spoken in more than 100 countries, languages like Arabic, French, Chinese, Spanish, German, and Persian are also widely spoken throughout the globe. Bengali, spoken by more than 265M people primarily in Bangladesh and India, has more speakers than German (132M) and Japanese (126M) combined. And according to the US Census Bureau, it is estimated that about 65 million people speak a

language other than English at home. Language diversity is widespread, and it is here to stay.

With this English-only worldview comes a related view that language learning can't help you get a job. Again, this idea is patently false. In a [recent study](#) conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs for ACTFL, nine out of 10 US-based employers report a reliance on language skills other than English among their employee base. Nearly one-third report a high dependency. And while STEM subjects are still the most popular among US K-12 curricula, language should be recognized as interdependent and critical to producing a globally competent workforce.

If this trend continues, what

**impact could it have
on the next-
generation
workforce? Is foreign
language an
important work skill?**

If the trend continues, it will have devastating effects on our workforce for generations. The demand for language skills is greater than it's ever been before -- and it is only getting bigger. We see increasing demand for multiple languages across sectors regardless of size of the business. What might be most surprising is the fact that, referring back to that same 2019 ACTFL study, US employers are almost twice as likely to deploy their language capacity domestically than internationally, [with 97% using these skills to some extent domestically and](#)

only 54% overseas.

In other words, it's a myth that you only need to learn a language if you're planning to work abroad; language skills are needed to boost our workforce here at home.

Secretary of State

Mike Pompeo

recently penned an

[op-ed for Newsweek](#)

in which he talks

about the

importance of

foreign-language

proficiency. In it he

says that Congress

should pass

legislation that would

create college-tuition

vouchers for

language study. What

do you think of this

idea and what other

ways can we make

language study more

accessible?

I'm pleased to see the secretary of state expressing his support for language proficiency and study. While details of a college tuition voucher-like system for language study are murky (would they divert funds intended for public use?), I think it's wonderful that the State Department has created a website to bring together information on the language programs it offers, like the [Critical Languages Scholarship](#), the [National Security Language Initiative for Youth](#) and [Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistants](#).

I do think, however, there are many other ways to make language study more accessible. To start, we need more language teachers across the US -- recent data points to a

teacher deficit in 44 states and the District of Columbia. Having less qualified teachers available allows schools and districts to cut programs, resulting in less access for students. We know that most teachers leave in the first two years of their first teaching job, so ensuring new teachers have access to mentoring, professional development and professional learning communities is critical.

So, if we have more teachers, we solve the problem? Not entirely. This is also an issue of equity and access. While the effectiveness of language teaching and learning has reached levels not seen before, enrollments in the US are uneven, especially for BIPOC, heritage, English-language learners, and students in inner cities and rural communities.

This means investing in things like technology (devices and internet) and professionally translated materials for families whose first language isn't English, for example. In the COVID-19 era, this is even more critical and should be addressed in Congressional stimulus.

Foreign language instruction does not usually begin in school until high school. Should we start earlier?

Absolutely. Research shows that language learning at an early age leads to increased cognition, improved academic performance, high self-esteem, empathy, and a whole host of other benefits. And while it's never too late to learn a language, we give students a better chance

at reaching higher levels of language proficiency if they begin learning EARLY. Higher levels of proficiency in middle and high school will hopefully translate to more language programs offered in colleges and universities. More proficiency-based language courses and interdisciplinary programs offered at the college and university level translate to better prepared global citizens and employees in the 21st century.

How do we change the mindset that foreign language is a “nice to have” as opposed to a “must-have”? How do we create more urgency for it?

As a country with the richness of language

diversity as the US has (more than 300 languages in addition to English spoken), we have taken this asset for granted for far too long. Languages connect us to each other. They help us understand other cultures and other people. In the case of national security and defense, they help keep us safe. Economically, the demand for language skills will only increase as we become more diverse linguistically at home and the international economy becomes further globalized. Again, referring to the 2019 ACTFL study on language skills in the US workforce, [one in three language-dependent employers reported a language skills gap and an astounding one in four either lost business or were unable to go after business due to a lack of language skills among](#)

their employees. Think about that. A lack of language skills is costing US businesses real dollars. And it only gets more dire if we don't take serious action to invest in language education, educators, and learners.

What does this look like? We start by advocating for funding of early language programs through high school and beyond. We focus on equity, advocating for programs that bridge the language access gap and ensure ALL students can learn another language, not just the privileged. We invest in a pipeline of well-prepared, diverse educators so that our learners have access to high-quality teaching, focusing on college affordability, debt forgiveness and teacher preparation. And we make sure high-quality

professional development is widely available to teachers, regardless of where or who they teach.

On top of the existing challenges we normally face, COVID-19 has dramatically raised the stakes when it comes to ensuring that every student in the US can learn a second (or third) language. There is no doubt that if we fail to act as a country, we will miss a great opportunity. Now is the time to act.

Kanoe Namahoe is the director of content for SmartBrief Education and Business Services. Email her at kanoe.namahoe@futurenet.com

Like this article? [Sign up for ACTFL SmartBrief](#) to get news like this in your inbox, or [check out all of SmartBrief's education](#)

*newsletters, covering
educational leadership,
English-language arts,
special education, math
instruction and more.*

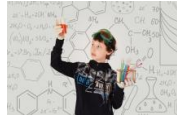
Want more stories like this?

SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTERS

More Originals from Our Editors



Finance
 Q&A:
 Broadridge's
 Kevin
 Moran on
 the role of
 digital labor
 in financial
 services



**Connected
 Teaching and
 Learning**
 5 tips for
 creating a
 future-
 ready
 science lab



Communication
 What's next
 when your
 apology is
 not
 accepted



Strategy
 What
 qualities lead
 to
 organizational
 resiliency?




**Leadership
 and
 Management**
 Stop trying
 to
 transform
 your
 culture.
 Renovate it,
 instead

SMARTBRIEF [Our Company](#) [Contact](#) [Careers](#) [Write for Us](#)

NEWSLETTERS [Manage Subscriptions](#) [Manage Ad Preferences](#)

LEARN MORE [Publishing Partnerships](#) [Advertising](#) [SmartStudi](#)



© 2021 SmartBrief All rights reserved. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [CCPA "Do Not Sell My Personal Information"](#)