

Two Main Trends in the Current Language Education in the United States of America

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Language education is influenced by societal, economical, political conditions, because a language is considered not only a tool of communication but also a reflection of history and culture. According to survey results and statistics, U.S. foreign language instruction is insufficient in terms of curricula, teaching materials, teacher training and enrollments. The purpose of this paper is to consider the current condition of foreign language instruction in the United States from the point of a relationship between the improvement of foreign language proficiency and that of English. The risk in American education is based on the threat that American society would be left behind other industrial nations, due to the lack of effective communication skills in foreign language.

Introduction

The U.S. government released two reports, *A Nation at Risk* and *America 2000: An Education Strategy*. The reports suggested the national education goals to regain "excellence" in education. It is certain that education has become a great concern of the people, the states, and the nation. Along with the educational reform, language education has thoroughly reflected societal needs and changes. During the wartime, a language was used as arms. A demand for communication skills in a foreign language arose in the 1970s and foreign language education came to include cross-cultural perspective. The 1979 report *Strength Through Wisdom* indicated the importance of foreign language education and international studies. Administrators and educators in the United States today focus on improving language competence as a means to survive in the international competition.

There are two trends of the current language education in the United States: a trend to improve foreign language proficiency; and one to unify American educational standards by means of English literacy. The simultaneous objectives ... a multilingual society and a unified English-

speaking society...lead to the argument on incompatible educational approaches: promotion of foreign language education and English language amendment. A large number of studies have been conducted on foreign language education as well as on English literacy issues, however, little is known about the relationship between these two courses of language education. Although they are seemingly heading for opposite goals, both of them have the same objective, i.e., upgrading American educational standards. This fact poses a question: in what way language education will work for the national prosperity. We will begin by considering the current conditions of language education in the United States.

1. A trend toward multilingual society

(1) A Language-Competent American Society

Tucker (1984:153) uses the term, a language-competent American society, to suggest that

all residents of the United States should have a realistic opportunity to develop the highest possible degree of proficiency in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing English.--- Furthermore, English-speaking individuals should have an opportunity to develop an ability to understand, speak, read, and write a second language.

In the report of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (1978), the U.S. government has been feeling a sense of crisis in a critical shortage of language-competent residents. The President's Commission revealed the serious shortage of foreign language proficiency in the United States with the illustration of several facts: only 15% high school students study a foreign language; the enrollments of a foreign language are declining; and it is estimated that there are 10,000 English-speaking Japanese business representatives in the United States, while there are fewer than 900 of American counterparts in Japan.

Moreover, the President's Commission attributes the lack of language proficiency to dangerously inadequate understanding of world affairs. It emphasizes that a use of English as a major international language cannot be considered direct communications on many occasions. The indication also means that the majority of the world's population neither understand nor speak English. The overconfidence in the utility of the English language put off enthusiastic foreign language learning in the United States. It might have obstructed valuable information or fully understanding introduced from other cultures. The report continues that foreign language competence is "a key to unlock the mysteries of other customs and cultures (1978:12)" and that it should not be viewed as an educational luxury.

In the background papers on the Presidential report, researchers observed the current situations and attitudes toward language education as for the American adults.

Kirch (1980:5) found several "myths" on foreign language learning and teaching in the United States: one is the belief that for the Americans, foreign language study is unnecessary, because of the rest of the world studying English. Secondly, the Americans might believe that foreign language competence can be obtained easily, as is seen in his remark "as easily as we stir instant coffee."

This too optimistic idea may have increased the learners who quit after a year of language study.

The third myth is the belief that the best time to start studying a foreign language is adolescence or adulthood.

Considered above all, Kirch suggested that the President's Commission must contact to state legislators who actually controlled local education. He stressed two points: to provide maximum opportunity for American citizens to study foreign language at all levels of education; and to make it understood that a foreign language is neither a frill nor a luxury.

On the contrary, the University of Michigan Research Center (Eddy, 1980) conducted research. As a result, the Americans' attitudes toward foreign language study are quite positive in general and although most Americans cannot speak any language but English, half of them wish they could. Seventy-five percent of the Americans answer that foreign languages should be taught in elementary school. The fact is, however, overall, "more than three Americans in four cannot speak, read, or write any language but English. (Eddy, 1980:58)" Only 30% of the population studied foreign languages in school and most of them began that study in junior or senior high school.

According to the survey, more than three-quarters of those who had studied a foreign language found that learning a foreign language was worthwhile. Their positive reasons were that: foreign language learning leads to better awareness and understanding of people from other nations; foreign language learning is useful for travel; and foreign language learning increases the ability to read or write English. (Eddy, 1980:59)

About a decade later, Edwards (1989), an executive director of the Joint National Commission on Languages, conducted a research and found the quite similar attitude of the American public. Eighty-six percent of them in the survey felt that it was important to study a foreign language in elementary school. Besides, he refers to a national commitment to excellence in education in the Reagan and Bush administration. He points out "the greatest support in this area in real

terms has been from the public, state leaders and Congress." Unlike the era of the National Defense Education Act, the 1980s reforms in language education emerge from the grass-roots support.

To sum up, the survey results proved that many Americans consider foreign language education necessary for their children ... the future citizens.

However, it should be noted that there are negative responses as well. A typical one is no use for it; don't need, as often heard in foreign language classrooms. (Eddy, 1980:59)

Besides, there is a social and political point of view not to support foreign language learning and teaching. There is a question revolved around the issue... whether pluralistic societies are cohesive or divisive. We cannot deny that some Americans may regard multicultural and multilingual conditions as a mark of developing countries.

According to Tucker (1984) and Hopkins (1992), in many regions of the world, acquiring a foreign language is a normal part of growing up and surviving, economically, socially, and politically. There are more bilingual individuals in the world today than the monolingual. Many students throughout the world have been educated in a second language, because the vocabulary and linguistic structure of their native languages are sometimes insufficient in which to teach and to communicate academic subjects or because they sometimes do not have a common language. Many developing countries have been obliged to make a progress in dealing with bilingual education, concerning choice of a language and language instruction.

Hopkins (1992) discussed the reason for under-achievement of American foreign language learning and teaching from a societal point of view. Like many other researchers, he attributed it to the melting pot situation in the United States. Historically the melting pot effect meant that the burden of language learning and teaching fell to the immigrants, who were expected to become Americans as quickly and thoroughly as

possible.

Judd (1984, 1987) also refuted it in his argument on teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) as a political act. To quote his phrase:

Certainly many countries that are politically unstable and economically undeveloped are also multilingual and multicultural. But there are also stable, developed countries that are also multilingual and multicultural. (Judd, 1984:268)

What he mentions here is that there seems to be no direct links between linguistic and cultural diversity and level of development. There are, as he points out, numerous other factors which enter into the determination of economic prosperity and political unity.

From these remarks, one general point becomes clear: we may say that the perception of language competence as natural and national resource seems to be widely shared in the United States. When the Americans are asked, they answer that language competence is of importance for their future society. I assume that the public has come to realize the importance of language competence, but that there is considerable doubt as their encouragement is reflected in the current language education programs.

To support my assumption, let us consider the comparison between "dreams" and "realities" in foreign language education.

(2) Foreign language education in the United States

...the current status and potential problems

As Tucker (1990:18) noted, the native English majority in the United States must improve some aspects. He listed the following points to be improved in foreign language education in the United States: (a) the lack of foreign language education programs, particularly those that are geared to produce true communicative proficiency; (b) the lack of an "articulation" of interdisciplinary collaboration in different foreign language programs; (c) the failure to fully develop teaching methods and curricula that produce

foreign language competence; (d) the confusion resulting from mistaking language as an educational end, not a means to an end; and (e) the failure to accept language minority students as role models of the target foreign language. It is generally agreed that the U.S. foreign language education lacks trained specialists, appropriate pedagogical materials, adequate assessment devices, and teaching programs... particularly for the less commonly taught languages.

Therefore it seems quite reasonable to review the present foreign language education in the United States under the following headings: ①enrollments, ②teacher training, ③funding and ④vertical/horizontal articulation.

① enrollments

Considerable statistical surveys have been conducted on the increasing and decreasing number of students who learn foreign languages.

At secondary school level, we cannot unify the current situation of foreign language learning and teaching in the whole country. Educational structures differ from state to state. We may say, in general, attempts to promote foreign language education are now at work in the United States very slowly, but continuously.

The Joint National Committee for Languages investigated the conditions of foreign language education at the state level in response to the National Education Goals. According to Draper (1991), twenty of the thirty-seven states (24 states made no response out of a total of 51 states surveyed) had more than 30% of their high school students taking a foreign language. Fourteen states have enrollments above 35%, seven have above 40%, and four have at 45% or above. There are still areas in the United States, however, where foreign language instruction is not even available at the secondary school level. Besides there are fourteen more states which had no reaction to the survey. It may be assumed that, in those states, foreign language instruction is less actively offered to the students. Consequently the reality of foreign language learning and teaching is still insufficient.

The situation below the secondary school level is much worse. There is much fewer data on the enrollment of foreign language classes at the elementary school level. The data of the enrollment show that even though schools offer foreign language courses, the enrollment is less than 5% of their children.

These results reveal the fact that the availability of language instruction is limited in school education in the United States.

At university and college level, a result of a survey was released by Modern Language Association (1991). Obtained the result that nearly 1.2 million students were enrolled in language learning courses other than English in fall, 1990. It means an increase of eighteen percent over 1986, i.e., more American college and university students are studying foreign languages. Spanish is the fastest growing foreign language between 1986 and 1990, with the increase of thirty percent, which accounts for 68% of the total growth of the enrollments. Enrollments also grew in Italian (21%), Portuguese (20%), Latin (12%) and German (10%), but declined in French, Greek and Hebrew. In addition to the increase of enrollments in the traditional West European languages, we can see growing interest in non-Western languages such as Japanese (95% of growth compared to that in 1986), Russian(31%), Chinese (15%) and Arabic (2%). Japanese rose from seventh in popularity in 1986 to fifth in 1990, and Chinese from ninth to eighth. Over 300 schools have programs in Japanese, though only a handful Japanese courses had been offered a decade before.

One of the reasons for the remarkable increase is the education reform since the 1980s. The reform policy strongly requested the reinforcement of requirements for taking a foreign language course for the college-bound students. It is proved that the enrollment grew dramatically in Spanish, which is the most familiar language in American students' life because of the great number of immigrants from Middle and South America. It is possible that the Americans

commonly believe that Spanish is learned more easily. The increase of the enrollment may be ascribed to merely fulfillment of entrance or graduation requirements.

There are of course the influence of international, social, political, and economic changes. The 1979 report of the President's Commission was an important national initiative and redefined a national role for language. There is a good example of the increase in Japanese, Chinese and Arabic courses. Those languages were rarely taught in school only a few decades ago, but today more students are taking those "trade languages." (Smolicz, 1991:36) Nowadays many states offer Japanese and Chinese courses even at elementary school level. We can see the societal demand of learning languages for the national interest.

② Teacher Training

The shortage of qualified instructors in foreign language courses is a severe problem. The key factors to improve foreign language education are pre- and in-service training and staff development.

In many states, the state department of education assists state and private teacher preparation institutes. It is required that prospective foreign language teachers must pass 24-36 semester hours in the target language, courses in child development at the appropriate age level (K-12), methods of teaching foreign language, and have a students teaching experience.

The Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR) assessed conditions of foreign language education and teachers in elementary and secondary schools in 1987 (Rodamar, 1989:14, Thompson et al., 1990:31-33). The following facts emerged from the survey: eighty-one percent of the secondary schools said all their foreign language teachers were certificated to teach at the secondary level, whereas only 26% of the elementary schools answered that all their teachers were certificated for foreign language teaching at the elementary level. Forty-four percent of the elementary schools and 63% of the secondary schools

had no foreign language teachers who were native speakers of the languages being taught. Although in-service training is important to foster and upgrade instructors' language skills, only about half of the elementary school instructors and 69% of the secondary school language instructors in schools which offer language courses had participated in staff development or in-service training during the past year. (Rodamar, 1989)

Starr (1978:12) pointed out the lack of adequate training programs and opportunities to refresh their skills. He recalled "the certain neglected sections of NDEA," as the federal offer which promoted the federal funding for the research on language education and teacher training. He also emphasized that the fund should be made available to selected universities that provide such programs on a statewide basis.

The most common problem facing foreign language learning and teaching is a shortage of funding. More than half of the responding schools answered that the financial problems should be solved as well as the additional problems... shortage of teachers, lack of high-quality materials and difficulties in articulation.

③ Funding

Funding is important to improve foreign language education in terms of developments of curricula, teacher training, equipment and scholarship. The most drastic change was brought about in the era of NDEA. The federal government funded \$8,000,000 for the following purpose: to make studies and surveys to determine the need for increased or improved instruction in modern foreign languages; to conduct research on more effective methods of teaching such languages; and to develop specialized materials for use in such training, or in training teachers. (USCA, 1974: 312)

In establishing the Presidential Commission, the complexities resulted in extending its budget from an initial \$10,000 to over \$200,000. This sum was supplemented not only by the considerable federal expense but also by the support from various other sources.

Along with the national leadership, governors in many states worked to encourage foreign language education. Indiana was, for example, interested in developing trade with Japan and in bringing Japanese companies. In 1987, the state legislature added \$260,000 for new programs to train teachers in Japanese and Chinese.

Since 1980, over 30 new federal programs have been enacted to encourage the development of foreign language competence of American society. Federal funding for foreign language learning and teaching has doubled, compared with that in 1980, although it is not still adequate. However, while Congressional support for foreign language education continues, most of the programs have received minimal amounts of funding and in some cases they have not been funded at all. (Rodamar, 1989) Rodamar attributed that to the Department of Education, which has continued to give very low priority to research on language education, despite of major initiatives to upgrade language education by local, state and federal policy makers. Funding for compensatory education, bilingual education, and magnet schools has increased more rapidly than that for foreign language education.

One can see the differences between policy makers and the Department of Education in respect of the recognition of the priority in the current educational reform. The current funding of the Department of Education is provided mainly to establish the fundamentals to learn 3R's...reading, writing, and arithmetic (math)... and to reinforce basic skills in English, rather than to develop foreign language competence.

④ Vertical/Horizontal Articulation

I will use the term "vertical" articulation to refer to a sequence from one year of a language learning to the next year, and "horizontal" articulation to relationships between a foreign language and other subjects.

There is a serious lack of vertical articulation in foreign language education in school programs. The majority of students who begin foreign language study remain only until their requirement is

completed. Most state universities and colleges require at least two years of foreign language study for entrance, and another two years of foreign language study for bachelor's degree. In non-requirement situations, it is asserted that well over 50% of those students who begin to learn a foreign language at the college level do not continue into the second year. (Benseler & Schulz, 1978)

Besides it is pointed out that existing foreign language requirements are expressed in terms of semester or academic quarter credit hours rather than in specific competencies or levels of proficiencies. (Benseler, 1980) It is assumed that requirements/credits do not always correspond to the ability to use the language.

Conant (1959) noted his recommendations regarding proper length of the foreign language sequence: four years, minimum; and from third grade through college, the most desirable. In the 1979 survey, however, only 8% of the Americans answered that they had studied a foreign language for four years or more, and majority of them had studied a foreign language for two years or less (Eddy, 1980: 59). If one takes a Japanese course in his/her freshman and sophomore year of high school, s/he can count on forgetting it by graduation. The survey results show that the vast American citizens may have virtually few knowledge of foreign languages learned in school.

There are several factors which discourage their continuation of foreign language learning in school. At high school and college level, requirement is dominant factor. At elementary and junior high school level, rigid curriculum restriction, school size and minimal class size restrictions are counted for the discontinuities (Conant, 1959). There is no doubt that one-shot effort does not meet success in foreign language learning and teaching. In addition to this, we should not overlook the fact that foreign language classes have been disadvantaged in a school curriculum. In other words, American education programs have been reluctant to spare the time for learning a foreign language, not for developing "other more

important" skills. (Conant, 1959:344)

In the survey of the Joint National Committee for Languages, elementary school children are, in many states, encouraged but not required to study a foreign language. It may be worth mentioning in passing that in Louisiana only "academically able students" in grades 4-8 are required to study a foreign language. Some of the states require two years or more of foreign language study for the high school academic honors diploma (ex. Hawaii, Indiana), despite that secondary school students are not always required foreign language study.

Language education needs to solve the confusion resulting from misunderstanding of foreign language learning as an educational end, not as a means to an educational end. In order to solve it, foreign language teachers are strongly required to have broad and international perspectives in language learning and teaching, which give students not only the communication skills but also motivation and interest in learning a foreign language and cross-cultural matters.

It should also be added that a coherent sequence and smooth transition are desirable, resulted from interdisciplinary collaboration in different levels of school.

We are now in position to say what are to be developed and improved definitely in the present foreign language education. Schools and teachers are expected to establish the following components: to clarify requirements and desirable standard for all the students; to stimulate students' interest; to develop continuative programs from elementary school to college levels. The federal government and the Department of Education need: to inform the public that foreign language learning is not a frill, but substantial benefit for the nation; to fund for developing programs and making teachers' career more attractive in terms of social status and salary.

2. Trend toward monolingual society

(1) English Language Amendment

The first proposed English Language Amendment (hereafter ELA) was introduced by Senator Hayakawa of California at the U.S. Congress in 1981. The ELA attempted to make English the official language of the United States (Marshall, 1986).

The ELA raised several arguments regarding two concepts it was based on. One is that the English language is a source of national unity in the United States and that it has always been incumbent on people immigrating to the United States. (Judd, 1987) In view of the proponents of this idea, linguistic and cultural assimilation of groups into American society was beneficial to the social, economic, and political unity of the country, and English was the language that all must adopt. They believed that the English language was the key to unify the nation and people, so that monolingual society would allow them to discuss their differences, to argue about problems, and to compromise solutions. As a result, that would lead to a stable and cohesive society.

Another aspect of the ELA was related to discrimination and segregation. It claimed that immigrants with limited English proficiency had been kept from the dominant English-speaking majority. The proponents considered, by declaring English as the official language in the United States, immigrants would be encouraged to learn English. The ELA supporters believed that making English the official language was a way of abolishing discrimination and segregation caused by language.

Judd, however, raised strong opposition to the ELA and asserted that "the ELA was a dangerous piece of legislation (1987:114)." A language is more than a communication skill. A use of a language often reflects cultural and historical background of its development. He pointed out the danger in overgeneralizing that linguistic/cultural assimilation is a force in American political

stability as follows:

The claim that the United States is now experiencing a rise in the number of non-English-Speaking immigrants ignores historical evidence, as does the claim that previous groups of immigrants abandoned their native languages and adopted the English language and American culture.

He mentioned that the United States has always been a multilingual country and that there has never been any social and political disunity arising out of language in itself. It is more reasonable to consider that what the Americans need is "workable solutions to problems of illiteracy, poverty, and dissatisfaction in the United States." (Judd, 1987:130)

This will lead us further arguments of English literacy and background knowledge.

(2) Cultural Literacy

The word "literacy" means not only the ability to read and write a language, but also the ability to calculate. 3R's are recognized as the basic skills which students have to acquire in elementary and secondary school. It is said the desirable standard of literacy depends on the development of the nation or society.

A Nation at Risk (1983:8-9) indicates the severe illiteracy rate in the United States that:

- Some 23 million American adults are considered functionally illiterate by the simple test of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.
- About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functionally illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent.

In addition to those above, the report indicates the shortage of basic language skills among the native English-speaking students:

- (On SAT) Average verbal scores fell over 50 points from 1963 to 1980.
- Nearly 40 percent (of 17-years-olds) cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay.
- Business and military leaders complain that they are

required to spent millions of dollars an costly remedial education and training programs in such basic skills as reading, writing, spelling, and computation.

Illiteracy is no longer a problem of the minorities or immigrants, let alone of multilingual or multicultural society. What we need to consider is that the American standard of the ability to use a language has been falling.

During the 1980s, however, the meaning of literacy was more widely expanded. It came to include common sense, values, and wisdom, as well as 3R's.

We can cite two articles which ideas provoked educational reform from viewpoint of cultural literacy. One is Cultural Literacy (Hirsch, 1987), the other is *The Closing of the American Mind* (Bloom, 1992). They have a difference that Hirsch argued elementary and secondary school education, but Bloom dealt with higher education. In spite of that, they both paid great attention to establish the national identity by means of proper language education, based on the national sense of culture and values.

Hirsch illustrated that some cultural literacy could make communication easier. He uses the term "cultural literacy" as common background knowledge, which is more than 3R's or common sense but less than technical knowledge. He pointed out that the background knowledge, which commonly American citizens should have, has been declining. Reading and writing ability is more than ordinary skills for communication, but it requires a common foundation of background knowledge and information shared in the present American society. It is obvious that a lack of the ability to communicate with a language may waste vast amount of time, energy, and expense. If, for example, our company have some knowledge of Shakspear's dramas, we only have to quote a few phrase to imply several meanings. That kind of communication might not work smoothly in the present American society.

It is widely accepted that schools should have the responsibility in teaching the national culture to students. Hirsch calls it "acculturation."

Some researchers support the assumption that the reinforcement of the humanities is also vital in order to regain economic initiatives of the United States, even though the nation focuses on mainly math and science education. (Boyer 1983, Hirsch 1987, Bloom 1992, Imamura 1990)

The drastic reform in college liberal arts education programs has been proceeding. (Sugiura et al., 1993) Its focus is to get students to have the broad knowledge on history, culture, and science, and to have the ability to think critically and logically, and to communicate effectively. As long as college and universities require those ability for the students, the movement would soon influence secondary education programs.

As we have observed above, the federal policy in language education have two objectives: foreign language proficiency and English communication skills. There is no doubt that American citizens are aware of the importance of foreign language learning and teaching for the national prosperity, economically, politically, and culturally. It should also be added that the English language education is believed to develop the national unity. The multicultural and multilingual condition in the United States brought about both needs. As Lambert and Tucker suggested, Americans basically need to develop genuine competency in English and at least one other language. Lambert and Tucker pointed out the benefits resulting from foreign language and English education.

1) Bilingualism has important positive cognitive benefits for individuals in terms of creativity, cognitive flexibility, and social tolerance; and it serves to expand occupational options.

2) The changing democracy of the American school system suggests a need to teach English more effectively to non-English-speaking immigrants and to refugees who are arriving in increasingly large numbers.

3) As our nation becomes increasingly dependent upon foreign trade, and as international and political events exert more influence upon us, a largely monolingual population will be a greater and greater handicap to our national growth and

development.

We can recognize that foreign language education and English education is not incompatible in a sense that they are an attempt to prevent disadvantages caused by language competence. What is important is that language education for American residents should be offered depending on an individual's goal.

Conclusion

From these remarks described in this chapter, one general point becomes clear: it is not far from the truth to say that American education has not overcome the general recognition of foreign language education as a luxury.

Conant (1957) recommended that foreign language education be closed to all but the top fifteen percent of the student populace, as determined by scholastic aptitude testing and grade records. His words was produced in the 1950s, but can we refute that the condition of foreign language education has been completely changed to be opened to all the students? It is no exaggeration to say that for American students, foreign language learning exists beyond the appropriate communication skills in the English language still now. Foreign language education seems to be put out of their curricula, in spite of the facts whether students wish to learn foreign languages or not. If it has some validity, we can say a language-competent society is far away from the present education system in American society.

Curricular reform of college level education has been taking place in the United States recently. Many colleges and universities have introduced global studies in their curriculum. That seems to reflect their reconsideration of the necessary of international cooperation. Language skills would be one of the essential knowledge of those international studies. In my short study, only a bare general sketch can be given of the condition of language education in the United States. The question which we must consider next is the link between two trends of language education

connected with educational policy to improve chaotic American society.

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