

**STATEMENT**

*CROSS-SECTOR AND INTERAGENCY COLLABORATIVE MODELS FOR  
BUILDING U.S. CAPACITY IN WORLD LANGUAGES*

by

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to the

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce,  
and the District of Columbia

on

*“A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Improving the  
Federal Government”*

Thursday, May 21, 2012  
2:30pm  
342 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC

Senator Akaka, Members of the Subcommittee: I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today to present my views, experiences, and research results on the current state of foreign language learning in the U.S., directly connected with improving the Federal Government's Foreign Language Capabilities in the year 2012.

For the past 32 years, I have worked extensively in research, training, and assessment of the foreign language skills of Americans at key junctures in our educational system, including the evaluation of K-12 programs, college entrance testing, and the assessment of language gains connected with overseas immersion learning of a large number of school and university-level students preparing to enter careers in government, business or academic fields. Most of my work has focused on the study and teaching of Russian, but over the past decade, I have worked extensively with colleagues in Arabic, African, Chinese, Persian, and Turkic languages with similar interests and responsibilities.

Currently, I also serve as elected president of the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL), an umbrella organization composed of 75 different national, regional, and state-level professional associations with combined memberships of more than a quarter of a million professionals at all levels of the educational system. I am a member of the K-16 Foreign Language Standards Collaborative, the World Languages Committee of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), the College Board Academic Advisory Committee for World Languages, and as immediate past chair of the Council of Language Flagship Directors.

As President of American Councils, I oversee programs focused on advanced and professional-level language acquisition at overseas universities and immersion centers funded by the U. S. Department of State and the National Security Education Program of Department of Defense, which contribute to the preparation of more than 1,500 Americans annually including the nationally competitive State Department NSLI-Y program for high school students and the undergraduate overseas Critical Language Scholarships overseas summer institutes, the Department of State's Title VIII training program, USED Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad, the Defense Language and National Security Education Office's (DLNSEO) innovative "Flagship" Overseas Programs in Arabic, Chinese, Turkic, Persian, Russian, and Swahili, as well as the African Language Initiative (AFLI). We also administer several smaller but critical federal teacher training programs in these languages, including overseas immersion training which is made possible by federal support through the State Department's ISLI and TCLP programs and the USED's Fulbright-Hays (GPA).

Many of the participants in the above programs, probably more than half, select study in these demanding training programs because they expect to enter into government service upon completion of their studies. Because students combine their professional level language and cultural proficiency with concurrent study in other majors (international relations, government, business, security studies, engineering, or economics), they are well positioned to go on to a broad range of positions in government, including DHS, DOD, ODNI, State, Commerce, Justice, Energy, EPA, branches of the military, and the National Language Service Corps.

And that brings me to the first observation I would like to share with you today: to the extent that Americans undertake the study of the major world languages in extended course and program sequences that provide adequate opportunities for overseas immersion study (preferably at younger ages, as well as in the university), **our citizens may now expect to attain professional level linguistic and cultural proficiency in those languages and be well prepared for careers in government or in the private sector as strong contributing members of a globalized U.S. workforce.**

The major shift in preparing U.S. citizens in world languages has begun only recently, but its effects are clear and measurable – and cannot be overstated. My longitudinal studies, appearing in the referred journals *Foreign Language Annals* (Davidson, 2010)<sup>1</sup> and *Russian Language Journal* (Davidson, Lekic M., 2011)<sup>2</sup> address the issue of the foreign language learning career of American learners of Russian, taking into account the relative contribution of K-12 study, summer, semester, and year-long immersion programming, as well as a range of individual learner variables. The subjects for the study include (for the first time) participants in the NSEP Language Flagships, as well as at-large students supported at the Flagship level by the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Department of Education’s Fulbright-Hays programs.

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1 Davidson, Dan E. “Study Abroad: When, How Long, and with What Results? New Data from the Russian Front,” *Foreign Language Annals*, Spring (2010), 3-27.

2 Davidson, Dan E. and Lekic, Maria D. “The Overseas Immersion Setting as Contextual Variable in Adult SLA: Learner Behaviors Associated with Language Gain to Level-3 Proficiency in Russian,” *Russian Language Journal*, Vol. 60, 2010, 55-78.

Policy decisions taken by the U.S. government in 2005 officially raised the bar for federal employees in language-designated positions to ILR Level 3, or ACTFL “Superior” level or higher. DOS has also called for training beyond level 3 for critical diplomatic postings. Similar high expectations of language and cultural competency are increasingly present today in both the academic and business worlds, as well. DOD’s landmark “Roadmap Initiative” became the model for the most important cross-agency language training effort since NDEA – the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), launched formally by the White House in January of 2006.

A key component of NSLI is the STARTALK program, funded by ODNI, which last year offered 150 high-quality summer programs for teachers and students of the critical languages in 48 states and the District of Columbia. STARTALK’S goal is to provide innovative language instruction for students, facilitate stateside curriculum development, and provide much-needed faculty development for US teachers of the critical languages at the K-12 level.

Success in acquiring and maintaining proficiency in a foreign language is closely associated with substantial periods of immersion in the target language and culture, yet access to appropriate high-quality overseas immersion training has been unavailable or beyond the reach of most American students and teachers, particularly those in the critical languages, until recently. Over the past five years, the notable cross-agency collaboration represented by the “NSLI-generated” programs have increased or in many cases generated entirely new overseas

immersion opportunities for American learners of the critical languages through the State Department's NSLI-Youth for secondary school students and Critical Language Scholarships overseas summer institutes (CLS) for university students, and the DOD's Language Flagship Program, with its year-long overseas capstone program designed to bring students from ILR Level 2 (advanced) to Level 3 (professional/superior) or higher. The Flagship programs have successfully built on the achievements of long-standing federal investments in advanced language and area studies research and training through Title VI, Fulbright/Hays, and FLAP, programs which in the past two years have experienced substantial cuts at the U. S. Department of Education.

#### **MEASURED OUTCOMES FROM OVERSEAS IMMERSION**

It is relevant for policymakers and educators alike to be familiar with the growing body of empirical research on the impact on language gain of different durations and levels of overseas immersion training. The relative contribution of overseas immersion at different points along the language learning career to language proficiency development for Americans is the subject of the 2010 FLA study, noted above. The RLJ (2010) study looks more closely at the relationships between time-on-task and types of activities to ultimate outcomes in the overseas immersion environment at different levels of instruction.

In producing these studies, American Councils has maintained records over the past 25 years pertaining to the general academic and in-country language performance of many thousands of American high school, undergraduate, and graduate students who have undertaken

summer, semester, or academic year language training programs under its auspices in countries around the world. The population is significant for today's discussions because it represents the leading edge of American college graduates who go on to enter government service.

## **I. PREDICTORS OF GAIN IN SEMESTER AND ACADEMIC YEAR PROGRAMS: RESULTS**

Of particular note in the analysis are the clear relationships between second language gains and other variables such as program duration, initial level of proficiency, listening comprehension, previous immersion, early learning, and control of language structure. Listening proficiency emerges as a critical predictor variable for speaking gain at the Advanced and Superior levels, the academic year and Flagship programs. It stands to reason that students at these levels must be able to comprehend clearly and monitor effectively the feedback they receive from native speakers in the form of re-castings and informal corrections in daily discourse, if they are to raise their oral proficiency to the next level. Unfortunately, the research also indicates that listening comprehension is the least developed linguistic skill of those who begin their study of languages at the college level. For those who start at the K-12 level, listening comprehension, by contrast, is likely to be more highly developed.

Learner control and awareness of language structure prior to study abroad is correlated positively with second language gain in all modalities during study abroad. Moreover, language structure re-emerges at the Advanced and Superior levels as salient for effective communication and appropriate levels of rapport-building with native speakers at those levels.

AC students regularly report surprise at being held to a higher standard of language production and performance as they approach the Advanced/High and Superior levels, even by their long-time contacts and professional associates overseas. Improper word choices or inappropriate collocations, which would not have attracted notice at the 1+ or 2- level, become salient for native speakers at higher levels (Fedchak, 2007)<sup>3</sup>. Structural errors can undercut confidence and undermine trust among native speakers for the non-native speaker operating at or near the professional level.

Effective study-abroad programs make use of both linguistically supported and unsheltered activities in tandem with improved metacognitive learner and teacher preparation in self-managed learning, learning strategies, and “identity competence” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 150)<sup>4</sup>.

High school instruction, it should be noted, in light of the fact that 27.8 percent of the informants had studied Russian in high school emerges as significant statistically as a predictor of reading and listening gain, and approaches significance as a predictor of speaking gain for the academic year and Flagship models. As noted above, listening competence, in turn, is critical for the development of professional-level speaking proficiency.

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3 Fedchak, K. (2007). “An Empirical Investigation of Russian Interlanguage at the superior level and the perspective of the educated native speaker.” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania.

4 Pellegrino, V.A. (2005). *Constructing the self in the study abroad context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Initial level of proficiency also has an impact on gain within the study-abroad environment (see Brecht & Robinson, 1995)<sup>5</sup>. For example, of those participants entering the academic year program with 2-level reading skills, 81 percent crossed the threshold to 3-level proficiency in reading, as compared to 44 percent of those in the semester program, and 39 percent of those in the summer program.

The development of speaking proficiency is most often cited by study-abroad students as their primary motivation for studying language overseas. Students with an initial oral proficiency of 2 (Advanced) have about an equal chance of remaining at the 2 level after one year of study, of advancing to the 2+ level, or of attaining the 3 (Superior) level of proficiency. Chances of attaining level 3+ in the course of a single semester, by comparison, are approximately seven percent. What is also clear is that students aspiring to attain the highest levels of oral proficiency should take advantage of every opportunity, stateside and overseas, to develop proficiency in the language prior to the critical long term of study-abroad instruction.

An exception to this pattern is represented by the Overseas Language Flagship program in Russian at St. Petersburg University, which accepts students on a selective basis for a highly intensive program of immersion study focused on the full development of professional language skills. With weekly contact hours and direct language utilization measured at 65-70 hours per week (and higher), the nine-month Flagship program has produced six graduating classes of U.S. students with post-program proficiencies at 3, 3+, and 4 (in both the ILR and

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<sup>5</sup> Brecht, R. & Robinson, J. (1995). On the value of formal instruction in Study abroad: Student reactions in context. In B.F. Freed (Ed.), *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context* (pp. 317-334). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

European Union [CEF] frameworks) in three skills, which are increasingly the expected outcomes for Flagship participants.

Comparable outcomes have been measured using multiple systems of language assessment by the Arabic Overseas Flagship Programs in Alexandria (Egypt) and Damascus (Syria), the Chinese Flagship in Nanjing, and the Persian Program in Dushanbe (Tajikistan).

Obviously, existing language skill measures should not be seen as exhaustive statements of cross-cultural competence, but they represent nonetheless a good level of consensus across government and academia regarding constructs viewed as important for operating effectively in a professional environment in a second language and culture. Multiple studies of the long-term impact on personal lives and professional careers of overseas immersion learning of critical languages provide considerably further validation of study-abroad learning (Davidson & Lehmann, 2005)<sup>6</sup>.

Research has shown that language learning in the overseas immersion environment holds enormous potential for meeting the linguistic and cultural training needs for the government work force in the 21st century. But to function effectively, it must be properly integrated into K-12 and undergraduate curricula and adequately supported by faculties, administrators, policymakers, and funders. In short, a sustained effort across government and the academy in support of world languages and cultures will necessitate a concomitant approach to overseas language immersion study, as well. The above data make it clear that such

a concerted effort is possible and can succeed, but the commitment required of students, universities, and society at large is great. I would like to present some key elements of the highly successful Flagship programs:

- Articulated school-to-college proficiency-based programs and curricular sequencing e.g., the K-16 outcomes-based standards for foreign languages in the U.S.;<sup>7</sup>
- Intensive summer immersion institutes (stateside) for non-beginning students engaged in developing language skills beyond 0+, 1, and 1+ levels;
- Effectively supported study abroad immersion language programs for non-beginning students engaged in developing language skills beyond 1, 1+, 2, and 2+ levels; and
- Stateside university-based advanced level and content-based courses, taught in the target language, to support language maintenance and language development at or near the 3 level for learners returning from substantial study abroad programs and/or previously trained heritage speakers.

State Department (NSLI-Y and CLS) and DOD Flagship programs exist today for many of the critical modern languages. Flagship domestic programs are housed within major research universities (Arizona State, Hawaii, Maryland, Michigan, Michigan State, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas, UCLA and Wisconsin); others within smaller institutions that have made particular commitments of resources and faculties over time to advanced language study, such

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6 Davidson, Dan E. and Lehmann, Susan G. "An Overview of Language Learning Careers of 520 ACTR Alumni of the Study Abroad Programs in Russia," preliminary report on version posted at <http://www.actr.org>.

7 *Language-Specific Standards for the Modern Foreign Languages: K-16*. Foreign Language Standards Collaborative, Allen Press, Lawrence, KS, 2006.

as Bryn Mawr College (Pennsylvania), Hunter College (New York), Portland State University (Oregon), and Rhode Island.

## **II. CENSUS OF LESS COMMONLY TAUGHT LANGUAGES IN U.S. SCHOOLS**

Critical to this discussion of U.S. national capacity in the critical languages is a discussion of the state of language instruction in American schools. American Councils has conducted a nationwide survey of less commonly taught language instruction in U.S. high schools to identify those schools, and to collect basic data on instruction in order to support ongoing efforts to strengthen critical foreign language education.

As of May 2009, there were 3,500 high schools in the U.S. offering instruction in the less commonly taught languages. I cannot emphasize enough the critical importance of developing a pipeline of young students who begin foreign language instruction at an early age.

It is important that the funding that is invested in language programs, such as the Language Flagship, is invested early – from the stateside STARTALK and USED/ FLAP and overseas NSLI-Y programs to the Language Flagship – so that we have an established system in place that produces foreign language speakers at the highest levels of achievement, at levels 3, 3+, and 4. As a result of these programs, we are indeed producing speakers that do achieve at these high professional levels.

### **III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The latest research on critical language acquisition provides support for several basic assumptions underlying the formation of policy regarding the present “language gap” in the federal government’s foreign language capabilities:

A. Americans are now achieving professional-level proficiency (ILR-3 or higher in multiple skills) in these languages thanks to the NSEP Flagship Program and its many feeders.

B. Americans are interested, as never before, in learning the critical languages, as is evidenced by the notable growth of K-12 programs in Chinese, Arabic, Japanese and Russian across the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

C. Americans who begin the study of a foreign language and continue with that study over an extended number of years are well positioned to reach high-levels of functional proficiency in a second language, while gaining a range of cultural and cognitive advantages for functioning as citizens and effective members of the work force of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What is needed, then, is a mechanism for drawing greater public attention to the successes and proof of concept for US success in this area that now exists, so that more students in institutions of all kinds can pursue long-term study of world languages, just as their counterparts in other parts of the world are doing in unprecedented numbers. That mechanism, both informational and financial, would address:

- 1) The general lack of knowledge, particularly at state and local levels, of how to plan and implement language training careers from early childhood through tertiary levels of the educational system that will bring larger numbers of our citizens to the 3-level, and also enable them to maintain that language through their professional lives; the Flagship K-12 experimental models in several American school districts should be emulated by other districts and states.
- 2) The need for increased federal support of proven models of long-term language proficiency development on the level of ESEA, as well as through specific programs activities with proven track records, such as FLAP, the “NSLI” complex of programs inaugurated during the past decade; the support of high quality pre- and in-service teacher professional development for those with responsibility for world languages at all levels; and the availability of standards-based assessments at grades 4, 8, 12 (such as AP) and 16 to permit learners and their teachers to demonstrate measureable progress in world language study.
- 3) Continued support of essential overseas immersion programs for students and teachers at the high school, undergraduate, and Flagship levels of training on site in the target country and culture where the language is native. Federal support for overseas study is critical, as such training and related travel is difficult for students and teachers, especially K-12 teachers and their districts, to afford on their own.
- 4) The support of continued research in the field of world languages and language acquisition, particularly the need for greater understanding of the processes of adult second language acquisition and the assessment of language competencies at the advanced- and superior levels of proficiency.

Currently, students who participate in the Flagship Programs, whether or not they have had the opportunity to study the language in school, have the real possibility of attaining 3-level proficiency by the time they are ready to enter the workforce upon graduation. Those that have started language study earlier in their schooling, reach professional levels of fluency at an earlier stage in their education and are better positioned to take advantage of international study and overseas internships at the undergraduate levels.

Flagship is clearly a model that should be disseminated generally, for it guarantees a capacity and an on-going source of well-educated US speakers of all the major critical languages, even while the larger educational system is adjusting to meet the new demands for high-level linguistic competence in virtually all government agencies and professional fields.

Unfortunately, Flagship programs are available only on 22 American campuses at the present time, usually in no more than one or two languages per campus. The Flagship model, which serves government language capacity directly, should now be expanded, at least to the size of Title VI, which has provided the building blocks of language and area expertise at our major research universities, which has made the Flagship programs of recent years possible.

This concludes my prepared statement. I will be happy to answer any questions