



American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

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Once again, Jay Mathews has trained his sights on world language education. This time, his rant is aimed at high school programs and he has made the error yet again of gross generalization and ignorance of the proven benefits that foreign language learning offers to students. While we appreciate the apology posted on his blog, wherein he clarifies what he *meant* to say in his column, this kind of significant repositioning of his opinion deserves every bit as much space in the newspaper as the original misleading argument. Given that language programs across the country are being eliminated, this kind of irresponsible inaccuracy is causing many teachers misery.

Language study has changed dramatically since Mr. Mathews was in high school. It is no longer a regimen of memorization of vocabulary and verb conjugations. Today's programs focus on encouraging the student to develop foreign language skills through using it in everyday situations. Teachers use the target language for a vast majority of classroom time. Rather than being evaluated based on a schedule of tests, students demonstrate their growing skills by conversing with other students and by making presentations to their classmates. It is this real world application that makes the learning engaging and challenging rather than repetitive and boring.

Most important, this modern approach to language learning is what builds lifetime skills in the student, skills like enhanced cognitive thinking, sharper problem solving, and a better command of language structure. The accusation that our schools obscure poor performance by inflating grades may be true in some cases, but to point the finger at all teachers is unfair and destructive.

The main problem with foreign language education today is that not enough is required and students do not take it every year of their schooling. There is no question that government and businesses desperately need employees with skills in languages other than English. We cannot continue to rely on the ability to "import" the people with these skills. Rather, we need to build programs that begin in the earliest years of school and continue – each year - to build toward proficiency throughout students' academic lives. We do not expect students to learn math in one year, so why do we expect them to learn another language without it being a part of their lessons every day Kindergarten through 12th grade?

Mr. Mathews quotes one teacher claiming that 80% of high school students take foreign language courses just because they have to for college entrance. In fact, our organization has conducted research that indicates that this assumption is false. Responding to our survey with the National Center for College and University Admissions, 60% of the 150,000 high school students responding indicated that gaining fluency, broadening career choices and enhancing travel abroad were also motives for their language study. Nearly one-third wished they had started language learning in elementary school.

No doubt, many students study languages for graduation and college entry purposes. But can't the same be said of chemistry and the Calculus? It is not a valid reason for eliminating critical parts of the curricula.

Bret Lovejoy
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