

A Plea for a Planetary Perspective:

Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, or Russian *

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In choosing languages to teach and to study there are always utilitarian arguments and arguments stemming from the values of the best possible liberal education. Language teachers and scholars are familiar with the age-old reasons for learning languages: One cannot know one's own until one knows another (Goethe); the well-educated person is by definition multilingual (Wilder Penfield); the best way to "get under the skin" of another culture is to learn its language (Edwin Reischauer). They also know the arguments about an early start: "the younger the better;" that native- or near-native-speaking teachers are vital; that when one starts early enough, no language is difficult (at least to speak); and that a child who learns another language before puberty can more easily learn still others after puberty. And many educators believe that knowing from infancy that a chair is also a *chaise* and a *Stuhl* enhances abstract thinking.

But the majority of North American teachers and scholars have worked entirely in the Western tradition-in French, Spanish, German, and/or Italian – not in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, or Russian. And despite the noble efforts of the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL), most instruction still takes place at the secondary or college level. It is wrenching, to put it mildly, to contemplate retooling, and for the effortless early start it is much too late. Besides, school structures and traditions militate against doing anything radically different; they are notoriously conservative. As the late Harlan Hanson, long-time Director of Advanced Placement, pointed out, the

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College Board examined in the early 1900s Latin, Greek, French, and German. Almost the only change in nearly a century was that they dropped Greek and added Spanish. (This must look odd he wryly remarked at a meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in the mid-1980s, to the people of the Pacific Rim.) To put it bluntly, people would have to change career – and might not even get gold watches – if suddenly early starts for American children in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, or Russian were the order of the day.

However, let us ponder the interests of the current five- to seventeen-year-olds and their futures in the twenty-first century, when we are all long under the ground. Are their futures likely to be in Europe? Surely, they may be anywhere in the whole world. Young college graduates, may for instance want to work in Tokyo or Beijing. If they had learned one of the “hard” languages as a child, it would be easier as a young adult to learn one of the others or, of course a European language. (The latter would be helped by the study of Latin as a classical language in middle school.) Since babyhood, they have been watching satellite pictures from all over the world, and from space. Why limit a young person’s choices in any way?

The Rationale

We are all leading global lives, so which are the most important languages for us to teach English-speaking children? I would argue on historical, geographical, cultural, and economic grounds: *Chinese*, for its civilization is the most ancient of all – justification enough. *Japanese*, because of the enormous economic, and therefore political, power of Japan for the foreseeable future. Russian because it covers a vast continent of huge resources and a rich literary heritage with both Asian and European roots. *Arabic*, because of Islam, which spans the world and is socially, culturally, and politically important to us all.

Any one of the four would give a child a planetary perspective so that he or she would not be “half-educated.” in Norman Cousins’ phrase, as most of us are today. The content of our schooling has stemmed from one small inland sea, the Mediterranean.

A new factor has entered lives of American children in the twentieth century. It is what Senator William Fulbright called “the arrogance of power.” Until World War I, the U.S. hardly figured on the world stage. After 1918, we were a great power – one among several. After World War II, we became one

of two. With the collapse) of the Berlin Wall (1989) and Yeltsin up on that tank (1991), we became the one and only great power, and so we will remain until, if and when, another nation, such as China, takes the forefront. It is now hard for any young American, in whatever circumstances, to believe that anyone else really matters. We are top dog. So getting, through language, “under the skin” of the Arabs, Chinese, Japanese, or Russians is a good lesson in humility, itself central to a liberal education,

This is not a new idea; one could even call it “old hat.” As early as 1985 a position paper of the Council of Chief State School Officers called for all young Americans to have the opportunity to learn a language other than English: “The opportunity should include study in languages other than ‘Western’ languages, and should begin in the earliest years of elementary school with continuation through the post-secondary level” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1985, p.3).

Implementing the Plan

So how do we do it? This cannot be mandated from the federal or state level. But any nongovernmental school, and any public school that can achieve a political consensus of its school board, superintendent, principal, and parent-teacher association could begin. With charter schools, this becomes possible in ways undreamed of when everything had to go through the narrow bottleneck of a school system.

Pedagogically, my own preference is for the old-fashioned bilingual immersion pattern (prevalent in Latin America, the Cameroons, etc.), where all subjects are taught through both English and another language. One language can be used mornings, the other, afternoons. Or they can be used every other day. What matters is the half and half schedule. But there is no right or wrong way to do this. See, for instance, Campbell’s discussion of two-way bilingual immersion above.

There are currently a small number of immersion programs (both “regular,” with only English speakers, and two-way, with both native English speakers and native speakers of the second language) in U.S. schools in each of the four languages. There are two Arabic immersion programs, including one that is two-way; two Mandarin Chinese immersion programs (and three two-way Cantonese programs); twenty Japanese immersion programs, including two that are two-way; and three Russian immersion programs, including

one that is two-way. (Montone & Christian, 1997; Center for Applied Linguistics, 1995).

Suppose we encourage parents of today's kindergartners to put them into schools where, from the beginning, their children could study their subjects in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, or Russian. It is desirable to find in the community just as many non-native-speaking children as possible, for the more of the "other" language the English speaker hears from a peer the better, though in most communities, it will be difficult to make it fifty-fifty. With regard to finding qualified teachers, we could let native speakers of these four languages, who are experienced kindergarten teachers, come to the U.S. Then give these schools, imaginative leadership from the nongovernmental and international school worlds, all without regard to U.S. teacher certification.

If there were free and open a parental choice among all schools – yes, vouchers – we might be able to begin with one third or even one half of the kindergartners. It has been the experience of the Washington International School over more than 25 years, and of the United Nations International School (New York) over fifty, that American minority families yearn for serious instruction through a language other than English in order to give their children a head start. Moreover, when many of these English-speaking children in urban centers do not speak standard English, the indirect approach is usually the best. From the experience of those of us who have established and led two-way bilingual immersion programs, it is more effective to teach standard English to nonstandard speakers by first stressing speaking, reading, and writing in a totally different language from which there is no environmental interference. Then later, more emphasis can be placed on the child's English. From the school's standpoint, all one has to do to accomplish this is to order textbooks from the relevant countries – and let the teachers loose.

This is the ideal, the early beginning and the use of one of the four languages, in addition to English, as a "vehicular" language. But if we are to get the four languages going right away, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, we must make plans to start at many levels all at once, and to find and/or develop materials for language-as-a-subject in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian.

Challenges

What challenges do schools face in establishing such programs? The main challenges include: (1) obtaining texts and teaching materials, (2) finding qualified teachers-, and (3) dealing with legal and administrative constraints.

Texts and Teaching Materials

Circumstances differ from language to language. In North America, Russian is the best established of the four, Arabic the least, with Chinese and Japanese somewhere in between.

Russian Finding reliable sources of a variety of materials is the chief problem. Numerous Russian texts and teaching materials at the college and high-school levels have been produced in the West since World War II. The main difficulty for the school wanting to launch Russian at the upper levels is, or has been, the lack of bibliographies and the fact that titles tend to go out of print. Much has been published in the USSR and Russia for foreigners, even at the younger levels, mostly, we are told, with English-speaking Africa in mind.

There is another potential source in Russia itself. The Soviets often tried to encourage their minority populations to teach their children reading and writing in their own native language and then teach Russian later as the first “foreign” language. Therefore there are published materials for these minority children that help in teaching Russian to English speakers and others whose base is a European language. Some fine teacher-made Russian materials for younger children are available from Friends of International Education’s collection (see Resources) and they have contact with expatriate schools in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Chinese (Mandarin) (Here the challenge lies first in whether to teach traditional characters (Hong Kong and Taiwan) or simplified (Beijing and Singapore). An Australian scholar once told us that opposing views on this question held up serious teaching of Chinese in Australia for a decade. Another question is transliteration. Should one use Pinyin (Beijing), Bopomofo (Taiwan’s phonetic system), Wade-Giles (used historically by the Library of Congress), or Gwoyeu Romatzyh? These questions await resolution. Chinese grammar is not difficult – it’s almost nonexistent – but tones can be hard to learn. Thus it is particularly desirable to start Chinese before puberty.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington can provide samples of textbooks for

nonnatives (some published for overseas Chinese) and some children's books. There is a critical shortage of books within China. If a school is planning to teach Chinese, at any level, it should consult with the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, which has been developing Chinese programs in both public and private sectors (see Resources).

Japanese Programs have been springing up everywhere, at both secondary and elementary levels. There are hundreds in the U.S. and Canada for English speakers and quite a number in Europe, as well as in international schools, mostly English-medium, scattered around the globe. Currently in the U.S., Japanese is the fastest growing crucial language in the public schools.

Lively discussion continues among teachers and scholars about whether to start with *romaji* (Latin letters) or directly with *hiragana* and *katagana*. Seminars in this topic have been held at Georgetown University's Annual Roundtable in Languages and linguistics with university scholars, students, and Japanese teachers. In the end, people have had to agree to disagree. Educators also disagree about the form of address to use with children.

Arabic Here there is a dialect problem. There is no question about the written language, "modern standard Arabic," but scholars and teachers differ about whether or not a standard oral language can be taught. The nay-sayers believe it is better that a native Tunisian use his or her dialect with the five year-olds because it would be artificial to speak modern standard. Arabic teaching in this country is in its infancy except at the university level.

Searching for resources In summary, searching the world for native materials is both fascinating and frustrating as well as being absolutely essential. Procurement presents challenges, some of them unforeseen. Both Arabic and Russian materials at the younger levels seem to be "fugitive" – published once in small quantities, and then not reissued, or if, as in the case of Russian materials, new editions do appear, they are in a different format and not recognizable, without detailed scrutiny, as being the same as the old. Japanese sources are the most stable, but little is available for foreigners above the nursery and kindergarten level, where native and non-native materials need not be differentiated. The Internet will change in kind, not just in degree, the rich resources available to teachers of Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian.

Teachers

Native-speaking, experienced (at the relevant level) teachers are available in most urban centers of North America and Europe, and where necessary, they can be brought from abroad on a teacher-exchange-program or even on quasi-permanent visas. At the upper levels, teachers can often be found in colleges and universities. In Washington, D.C., we have college professors in all four languages who are eager to help in the schools. And salaries are often better in the schools than in the universities.

From puberty onward – and assuming the children have not been in the program since kindergarten – the ideal is a team, as Eleanor Jorden (1987) has described in detail for Japanese: one English or base-language teacher who knows the target language well, and one native teacher as a model. This will have to wait until measurable numbers of Westerners have learned Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, or Russian. In the meantime, let us build on those kindergartners!

Legal and Administrative Constraints

State certification requirements often make it difficult to hire crucial language teachers. But most education authorities have means of issuing waivers. Sometimes a letter from the teacher's consulate, stating that the teacher is qualified to teach in the home country, will suffice. Many charter laws exempt schools from certification, and private schools do not require it. However, immigration regulations do not make it easy to bring teachers into the U.S. This is something on which we must all work.

Another roadblock is the conservatism, indeed the fear, of teachers of European languages, those first cousins to English: French, Spanish, German, and Italian. They are afraid for their jobs. They have been on the defensive for several decades and they see an adult public that is increasingly illiterate linguistically. People now in their sixties and seventies are, in general, the last to have had serious language instruction in school. Language teachers have been the Cinderellas of school faculties. Other serious academic subjects have been required, but in North America the majority of schools and school districts have no foreign language requirement at all, let alone one in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, or Russian.

Concluding Remarks

There is mounting anecdotal evidence that once a youngster has begun seriously to study Chinese or Russian, he or she will then add French or Spanish as an additional subject. The question they ask themselves is: Why not begin a second foreign language? It is not an either/or situation; it is both – a “crucial” language and a “common” one.

Too long we have been crippling the next generation by confining the content of their schooling to the Western tradition. Once you have the will, you will certainly find the way.

Resources for Schools

General

Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), 1118 22nd Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037. Contacts: Dora Johnson, Nancy Rhodes. CAL can help you search ERIC for crucial language teaching materials and can provide a list of U.S. immersion programs.

Friends of International Education (FIE), P.O. Box 4800, Washington, DC 20008. Contact: Dorothy B. Goodman. FIE and its affiliate, the Institute for Crucial Languages (ICL), have a collection of Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian teaching materials for children ages three to eighteen and extensive supplementary bibliographies. See also FIE/ICLs “Directory of Elementary and Secondary Schools Teaching Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian” (Washington, DC, 1991). Although now a little dated, it is still valuable for finding teachers and programs in your vicinity.

Arabic

American Association of Teachers of Arabic, 280 HRCB, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602. Contact: Kirk Belnap, Executive Director.

Chinese

Chinese Language Teachers Association, c/o Kalamazoo College, 1200 Academy Street , Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI 49006-3295. Contact: Professor Madeline Chu, Executive Director.

Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Inc., 163 Madison Avenue, P. O. Box 1239R, Morristown, NJ 07960. Contact: Scott McVay, Executive Director,

Japanese

Association of Teachers of Japanese, Department of EALL, CB279, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80301. Contact: Laurel Rasplica Rodd, President

The Japan Foundation and Language Center in Los Angeles 2425 Olympic Boulevard, Suite 650E. Santa Monica, CA 90404. Contact: Isao Tsujimoto, Director

Russian

American Council of Teachers of Russian, 1776 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036. Contact: Dan E. Davidson, Executive Director.

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Biographical Information

Dorothy Goodman (Ph.D. University of London) is the founder and former Director of the Washington International School and a founder of the International Baccalaureate: North America. She is currently Chairman of Friends of International Education (FIE), a nonprofit organization that helps schools with the scholarly content and sequence of their curricula and with the challenges of governance. FIE also nurtures, through their affiliate the Committee for Public Autonomous Schools (COMPASS), the founding of public charter schools.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE
WASHINGTON

My own life has convinced me of the value of language study. My father was a Czech diplomat, and by the time my family came to the United States, I had lived in five countries and knew four languages.

Today that experience is less and less unusual. The global economy moves people as well as products all over the world. Students, travelers and immigrants come to our doors from every corner of the planet. And advances in communications technology mean that at the movies, on television, or over the Internet we have unprecedented possibilities to experience other cultures,

Language learning pays off in a variety of ways. I have often explained that I learned My French in a Swiss boarding school where, if you couldn't speak properly, you wouldn't eat. Most people's motivations are not that urgent, of course. But beyond opening doors to friendship and cultural exchange, language skills today make possible new employment opportunities, bold enterprises in business, improved cooperation in humanitarian endeavors, and better understanding on crucial security and political issues.

Now that I am Secretary of State, I see more than ever how useful it would be to speak another language or two. And I am hopeful, because in today's world it is never too early to begin learning another language – and never too late. So I offer my thanks and gratitude to all of NNELL's members, who are working to extend to more Americans an opportunity that has been so important to me – and that holds so much in store for them.

Sincerely,

Madeleine K. Albright