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The Necessity of Second Language Learning

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The Necessity of Second Language Learning

“You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9). Although this quote from the Bible was written to the Israelites around the time of their journey out of Egyptian slavery, the meaning is still relevant today, especially being a nation founded on Judeo-Christian values with a population rooted in “sojourners.” America’s population constantly grows due to immigration, and our country celebrates its high tourism rates. This continuous exposure to different cultures and languages leaves much to be desired from our current regulations regarding foreign language instruction.

In the past half-century, Americans have had ongoing issues with foreign language instruction, which would include course offerings in any language besides English. According to *The History of Foreign Language Education in the United States Timeline*, around 1970, the number of foreign language classes began to decline, and funding slowly began to disappear. Later in that decade, America became more invested in educating its students in foreign languages. Proficiency tests and requirements were put in place, yet there were still no nationwide requirements for foreign languages being taught in public high schools. The foreign language requirements for entrance into college used to be more prevalent and followed, but studies have shown that 84% of four-year schools do not require foreign language credits (*The History of Foreign Language Education in the United States Timeline* 1). Because of this lack of

regulation and consistency, the U.S. government should change the foreign language requirements for graduation through a federally enacted legislative mandate. This mandate would effectively make Americans more hospitable, increase alignment with needs for life after high school, impact America's diverse economy, improve diplomacy and foreign relations, and strengthen the health of Americans who are bilingual.

The first reason the U.S. government should change the foreign language requirements for graduation through a mandate is that Americans would be more hospitable. In addition to the biblical teachings mentioned before, the Bible calls for our showing hospitality to guests or "sojourners." As stated in the Bible, "show hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 4:9). Because our nation continues to welcome and embrace sojourners, we, as Americans, should continue to show our American hospitality. How can we show hospitality? The best way we can show our hospitality is by communicating and building relationships with our guests/sojourners.

Frequently, however, these "sojourners" to our country, which includes immigrants and visitors, do not speak English, the prevailing language in the US. Many of these sojourners come from non-English speaking countries. "The predominant majority of US immigrants hail from neighboring Mexico and other Latin American countries" (Burton 1). The native language these immigrants speak is Spanish, and the majority do not know English well, if at all. This language barrier hinders the ability of many Americans to show hospitality through oral communication. Therefore, in order to welcome foreigners hospitably, we need to be ready to welcome those who are from foreign countries. With regard to incoming foreigners who may not speak English, the best way to welcome them would be to communicate in their native languages. The easiest

way to fulfill the need for hospitality is by communicating with those who are immigrating to or visiting our country.

Sadly, most Americans today are only fluent in English and are unable to cross these language and communication barriers. Though some may have studied a foreign language at some point in their schooling, most cannot use that language in oral communications. In the article posted by *WBUR*, "...more than 231 million speak only English at home, and don't know another language well enough to communicate in it." To break down these communication barriers and welcome those coming into our country, Americans need to become conversationally fluent in at least one foreign language. To accomplish this goal moving forward, the U.S. government should implement a mandate establishing criteria for foreign language fluency as a graduation requirement.

The second reason the U.S. government should change the foreign language requirements for graduation through a mandate is the alignment with needs for life after high school. As stated before, many Americans are unable to fluently communicate or converse in a second language, which most likely stems from the lack of stringent regulations or requirements surrounding second languages in American public schools. According to the Education Commission of the States, 21 states have no regulations regarding foreign languages, 21 states have 1 or 2 credit requirements, 5 states have 3 or more credit requirements, and the remaining states allow the regulations to be decided by each district (*What Are the State's Course Requirements for High School Graduation 1*). The current high school regulations cannot fully prepare for fluency in, nor, in some cases, develop any knowledge of a foreign language or its associated culture.

Further, a lack of language or cultural knowledge leaves our students unprepared to meet the need for communication in our country or the diverse international business environment. Having students leave high school with little to no understanding of foreign languages leaves America in a deficit and graduates with a less effective resume. Our ability to communicate only in English renders our citizens incapable of being useful in a largely non-English speaking world. Because only about 25% of the world speaks English, American citizens are only prepared to communicate with a small percentage of the world, locally or internationally (Stein-Smith 1).

This is another reason the lack of strong high school foreign language regulations not only diminishes America's ability to communicate effectively and hospitably but also decreases high school graduates' acceptance into most college programs. The majority of competitive college programs require that applicants have completed at least two years of a foreign language, whereas the more competitive schools require more years of foreign language study (Grove 1). The current regulations do not prepare students for collegiate pursuance. Although these foreign language credits are desired by colleges, the lack of motivation to study in preparation for a career in a foreign language has harmed many colleges. In fact, there has been a large decline in the number of foreign language programs in many American public colleges. "Researchers at the Modern Language Association recently found that colleges lost 651 foreign language programs from 2013 to 2016 – dramatically more than the one foreign language programs that higher education lost between 2009 and 2013" (Stein-Smith 1). Researchers felt this has come about because of a decline in college students wanting to study foreign languages. This decline could be attributed to a fear of failure, a lack of exposure, or a

misunderstanding of the need. Without motivation to study a foreign language, funding disappears as does the need to keep the foreign language as a course option.

Moreover, the lack of students wanting to pursue a career in foreign languages leaves schools experiencing a shortage for language teachers, which in turn causes a deficit in classes being offered - a continuous cycle that must be ended. This cycle does not look like it will end anytime soon. "About a year ago, it was reported that only 7% of college students were enrolled in a foreign language course" (Fritz 1). This current outlook is not bright, but by enforcing more nationwide requirements regarding studying foreign languages in public schools, the motivation can be increased, and the deficit can be filled.

Other countries have benefitted from nationwide mandates. Many European countries have national mandates that require the instruction of foreign languages, a major difference between Europe and the United States. The median level of students studying a foreign language in European countries is 92%. Many of the countries are around the median level with the lowest percentage being Belgium with 64% (Devlin 1). The European median is high because a few of the countries have 100% of their students studying a second language. Still, even the lowest percentage out of the European countries does not compare to the low average that the United States holds. According to a study completed by the non-profit American Councils for International Education, "throughout all 50 states and the District of Columbia, 20% of K-12 students are enrolled in foreign language classes" (Devlin 1). This is a large difference when it is compared to the instruction within the European countries. Though America may not look to change all educational policies to align with Europe, Americans must

increase their foreign language fluency to keep up with the influx of immigrants entering the country and stay on pace with their European peers.

In addition, Curacao, a constituent country of the Netherlands, has requirements about learning foreign languages as well. When interviewing Sheilah, a native and current resident of Curacao, she explained that their students are required to learn at least three languages: English, Dutch, and Spanish. They also have a native blended language, Papiamentu, which they learn as well. The instruction of these languages allows them to compete as a well-known tourism spot because they are able to communicate with tourists. Their economy is booming, and it is because they are able to welcome in many affluent tourists, make them feel comfortable by speaking in their native tongue, and show hospitality. For these reasons, Curacao and many European countries with regulations that implement foreign language instruction have benefitted both in population and tourism.

The third reason the U.S. government should change the foreign language requirements for graduation through a mandate is to positively impact America's diverse economy and to improve diplomacy and foreign relations. America's booming economy is a large draw for the "American Dream," which is the idea that one has the freedom to pave one's own way, earn one's own pay, and build oneself a life in freedom. This "dream" is part of the reason that immigrants want to live here, but the inability to break down the communication barriers can be devastating to one trying to reach his "dream." America's immigrant population is often unable to communicate with the rest of the citizens, which causes issues for both the English speaker and the non-English speaker.

In addition to the local economy, Americans need to be fluent in foreign languages to improve our national economy. In order to compete in different markets or expand into foreign markets, communication is key. “According to Mohamed Abdel-Kader, the deputy leading the DOE’s language-education arm, one in five jobs are tied to international trade” (Friedman 1). If business owners are unable to communicate with those who could be employed, then the business owners are discouraged from expanding their businesses and potentially helping other economies and the American tax base. The option of using a translator does exist, but there is a small number of translators who can fill the positions needed. “Meanwhile, the Joint National Committee for Languages reports that the language industry—which includes companies that provide language services and materials—employs more than 200,000 Americans” (Friedman 1). Now, 200,000 employees may seem like a large number, but when compared to the population of the United States, which is a little over 229,000,000, this number becomes minute (*U.S. World Population Clock 1*). This point is only further emphasized in Friedman’s article as she interviews Kirsten Brecht-Baker, the founder of Global Professional Search, who states, “Americans are in danger of needing to import human capital because insufficient time or dollars are being invested in language education domestically” (Friedman 1).

To add to that, business requires a lot of personal interaction, and the use of a translator will not allow for those interactions or business relationships to happen and flourish. Along these lines, if students are not studying foreign languages, then there will be a shortage of American translators for said business. For these economic reasons, American high schoolers need to be instructed and fluent in foreign languages. As stated before, America has a large need for people who speak multiple languages in many career paths. In order to fulfill that

need, the U.S. must start instructing students in foreign languages as early as possible. “A 2018 study found that this ability to more easily learn a language lasts until about age 17 or 18 – which is longer than previously thought – but then begins to decline” (Stein-Smith 1). Waiting until students are older will reduce the opportunity to become completely fluent, thereby, reducing the positive impact on our economy.

The career opportunities, when fulfilled, will help to reduce the possibilities for high poverty levels. If one pursues the foreign language field, the jobs can range anywhere from teaching the foreign language to becoming an interpreter. Although these fields have a need for people who are bilingual, all fields benefit from employees who speak multiple languages. With America being as diverse as it is, conversing with people who speak languages other than English is very important. If someone who cannot speak English is rushed to an English-speaking hospital, and no one can speak to him, the patient may not be helped in time. The language barrier that has arisen can be overcome; the right steps just need to be taken.

Moreover, Americans have the ability already in place to educate our citizens to speak other languages. In fact, we even provide programs to teach English to non-English speakers. The issue that arises centers on the fact that English is a more complex language to learn. It would be simpler and quicker for our students to learn a foreign language than for the immigrants to learn ours. Being unable to communicate with speakers of other languages prevents one from understanding the culture and languages, which means there is no engagement (Abbott 1). Engagement with the rest of the world is essential to compete on the same diplomatic level as the rest of the world.

Our diplomatic leaders should be able to communicate with foreigners, not just lingually, but also culturally. As English speakers, we have our own culture, our norms. Foreign countries also have their norms. When our leaders do not understand the culture, then they could offend a nation, harm our relationship, or risk a necessary trade or treaty. Language is in all that we do, and we need to be able to communicate with the world around us. If America is unable to communicate with those within its borders, what expectations exist that it can effectively communicate with those outside of its borders?

The fourth reason the U.S. government should change the foreign language requirements for graduation through a mandate is to take advantage of the personal benefits of bilingualism. Studies show that it is easier to learn other languages once one is bilingual. Studies also show that many health benefits come with being bilingual; most notably is the positive effect of being able to understand and communicate with others. However, more impressively is that being bilingual also helps support one's health. By allowing one's brain to be more flexible and retain more, one can be emotionally secure and make rational decisions. "Bilingualism promotes overall cognitive development because a bilingual individual encounters the world from two different language perspectives, which prevents them from having a limited experience" (de Miguel 1).

Additionally, bilingualism provides resistance to and adds protection against brain deterioration. Alzheimer's is the disease that is most focused upon in these studies and has been shown to be delayed more when one is bilingual. "According to some studies, monolingual adults tend to show the first signs of dementia at the average age of 71. This is in

contrast to bilingual individuals who show their first symptoms around 76 years old” (de Miguel 1).

Benefits will have the most effect when the instruction of foreign languages begins at a younger age. Although it used to be agreed upon that it was a burden for a student to learn multiple languages, that opinion has changed because of studies done with students who are bilingual versus monolingual. These studies, administered by Katrin Weigmann and written about in *The Babylonian Effect*, showed that bilingual students scored higher on the test questions. They were able to switch focuses quicker and more easily. The bilingual students were able to do as the instructor had asked and focus on the structure of sentences rather than the context of the sentences, whereas those who were monolingual could not focus on anything but the context.

Although there are numerous health benefits, there are also career benefits that come with being bilingual. When one says that they are fluent in multiple languages, they automatically have an advantage, especially in international business. When dealing with non-English speakers, it is cordial and respectful to speak their native language rather than ask them to speak their non-native English. Being bilingual also makes an employee more valuable. One brings more to the proverbial table when he can communicate with people from foreign countries, whether a server at a local restaurant or an accountant for an international business.

Lastly, bilingual people are more appreciative of other cultures. Languages enable and shape cultures. When people learn the native languages, they can truly experience another culture and speak to people in their native language, which is a sign of respect. People can be

included in cultural activities without the added pressure of language barriers. Bilingual people are given the ability to see two different perspectives and bridge the gap between the cultures. They have the ability to stand in the native speaker's shoes and see things from their perspective.

To become more hospitable, increase alignment with needs for life after high school, impact America's diverse economy, improve diplomacy and foreign relations, and strengthen the health of Americans who are bilingual, a national mandate requiring high school graduates become fluent in at least one foreign language must be enacted. The national mandate requires students in public schools to complete at least four years of the same foreign language study. The focus is for study in one foreign language to reach fluency in that language, not a little knowledge of multiple languages. The goal is for the students to graduate high school being able to speak and understand a foreign language. These credits are to be completed in high school but can be started in middle school.

The cost associated with this mandate will be the employment of the teachers in the school. The average cost of a foreign language teacher's salary is \$59,098, according to Indeed.com, a job searching website. The price might be slightly inflated because of the current shortage of foreign language teachers, but by starting students studying a foreign language, we can motivate students to enroll in these programs and fill the need in the job market. Also, the mandate ensures the need for foreign language teachers throughout the country.

The public schools' funding comes from different places depending on the state and district. Though some funding comes through the federal government, the remainder is paid

locally. "Total public school expenditures were \$607 billion with 12.7 percent coming from the federal government, 43.5 percent from the state and 43.8 percent local expense" (Joseph 1). To avoid raising taxes, the local budgets can be adjusted to accommodate these foreign language salaries.

Because the mandate requires fluency, the plan must also address who is determining "fluency" and how it is measured. National tests would be developed to measure written fluency and would be administered by the local foreign language teachers after the student has completed the required four years. The written test should include language rules, definitions, and reading comprehension, but be short enough to allow for an oral section to ensure that students are truly conversational in the language. This part will be completed orally and is graded by the local teacher. If the student can pass the exam and complete the oral part of the test, then the student should be prepared to communicate in that language; thereby, achieving the mandate's goal of fluency.

Though this mandate has strong valid reasons for implementation and studies have shown the need, some might question certain aspects. Some think that these negative points outweigh the positive, and therefore, the mandate is rendered unnecessary. However, with closer scrutiny, one can surmise the truth and support the mandate.

The first issue that is brought up is the question of prioritization. Why are foreign languages prioritized over other possible classes? This mandate would not change any other requirements; in fact, these foreign language classes could take the place of electives, or the school could simply add extra credits for graduation. Further, as far as prioritization goes, these

foreign language classes should rank high on the list because of the positive impact this will have not only on our economy and our country's overall hospitality but also on the students themselves. The health benefits, as mentioned before, are many. The progress of the brain when one is bilingual is astounding, and the ability to delay some brain diseases is a reason in and of itself. In addition to health benefits, foreign language classes prepare students for the future. If the students graduate high school and decide to not pursue higher education, they would still benefit by being able to apply for better jobs than they would have been able to get had they not been fluent in a second language. This mandate will help the students to be prepared for life outside of high school, no matter which path life takes them.

The second issue questions which foreign languages will be chosen for instruction and inclusion in the mandate. The mandate will only increase the requirements of the number of classes taken, but not specify which foreign languages must be offered. The foreign language selection will be decided locally by each district, but would most likely be closely linked with the population's need and the secondary language that has the most speakers in the local area. The district will find out the language spoken in the area through a poll that will be taken with the national election every four years. If there is not enough of a turnout in an area, then the question would be asked when the U.S. census is taken every ten years. The goal is that students would be able to communicate with those in their local community as well as internationally.

The third issue raised is the question of restricting the freedom of students. Education is not an issue of freedom. Students are not given the option to choose their basic core classes such as math, science, reading, etc. These classes have the requirements necessary to prepare

the students for life outside of school, so why do foreign language classes not receive the same requirements?

The fourth issue that comes about is the question of over-burdening American students. If one questions whether the foreign language classes are burdensome, the answer is no. As the students grow to understand the language more and their brain is exercised, the students have shown signs of improvement in their academic functions. Bilingual students have scored higher on tests and are more adept problem solvers. "A growing number of studies have further demonstrated that bilinguals are better at cognitive tasks that fall in the category of *executive function*" (Weigmann 1). The use of certain parts of the brain for constantly switching back and forth between languages helps to strengthen the rest of the student's abilities.

Because the benefits overwhelmingly outweigh the negatives, the U.S. government should change the foreign language requirements for graduation through a mandate. Doing so would result in greater hospitality among citizens, increased alignment with needs for life after high school, improve America's diverse economy, diplomacy and foreign relations, and strengthen the health of Americans who are bilingual. This is important because until America changes the status quo, our need for bilingual citizens will not be filled. Our country will not be able to keep up with international competition within such a diverse world. That is why we must implement this mandate and change these regulations.

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