Which Languages Schools Should Offer

ACTFL believes that the opportunity to learn any second language is more important than the specific language that is learned since research shows that generally learning a third or fourth language is facilitated after learning a second. The language offerings of a school or institution of higher education should reflect the needs and interests of the communities and students they serve, as well as national and international needs. Offering a variety of languages prepares students for future economic, diplomatic, educational, and personal endeavors.

Early Language Learning

Since research shows that an early language learning experience generally results in the development of native or near-native pronunciation and intonation, ACTFL recommends that students be provided the opportunity to learn a second language as early as possible in school. This early language learning experience not only helps to develop native-like pronunciation but also promotes higher levels of proficiency if the student continues in a well-articulated sequence of language learning. Research corroborates additional benefits including strengthening of literacy in students' first language, raising standardized test scores in other subject areas, and developing comfort with cultural differences. These benefits accrue with instruction that is continuous throughout the school year, connected grade to grade, and more frequent than twice per week, adding up to at least 90 minutes per week, at both the elementary and middle school levels

General Principles of Language Learning

As part of its mission and vision, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) provides guidance to the profession and to the general public regarding issues, policies, and best practices related to the teaching and learning of languages and cultures. ACTFL is a leading national voice among language educators and administrators and is guided by a responsibility to set standards and expectations that will result in high quality language programs. With those goals in mind, ACTFL has adopted the following general principles that provide the foundation for implementation and expansion of language programs at all levels of instruction:

1. All students should learn or maintain at least one language in addition to English.
2. Learning languages should be a central part of the curriculum at all levels of instruction, from young learners through graduate school and adults (Pre-K through 20).
3. Language learning should be offered in extended, well-articulated sequences that develop increasing levels of proficiency at each level of instruction by teachers who are well qualified in language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and teaching skills.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Recent studies indicate a current and prospective shortage of language teachers. The recruitment and retention of a highly qualified teaching force is essential. Recognizing the reported 50% attrition rate of teachers new to the profession, we support high quality professional development for experienced teachers and mentoring services for new teachers. The recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers must occur for all languages, including, but not limited to, those deemed critical by the federal government and by the business community with special efforts to attract the nation's heritage speakers. To that end, ACTFL and its member organizations

- Initiate and support the active recruitment of teachers into the profession through various incentives
- Provide leadership in new teacher induction and ongoing professional development for mentors to provide the necessary in-service training for teachers new to the profession
- Work to ensure that high quality professional development is available to language professionals through national, state and local education agencies and professional communities.

Diversity and Inclusion in Language Programs

ACTFL and its members are committed to developing and maintaining a teaching and learning environment that reflects the broad diversity of American society. We welcome teachers and students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds to language programs. We believe that all children should have the opportunity to learn other languages and support full access for all students to language programs. In this effort, ACTFL and its member organizations

- Support a teaching and learning environment where diversity is appreciated and respected
- Advocate diverse language learning opportunities for all socio-economic levels in urban, suburban, and rural communities
- Work to develop, support, promote and enhance the language skills of Native American and heritage language learners
- Initiate and support efforts to recruit and retain a diverse teaching force in the language profession
- Work to ensure that the organization's structure, services, professional development, and policies address the needs of our diverse profession
- Promote awareness and differentiation of language instruction to accommodate students' diverse learning styles; exceptional learning needs; cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds; and personal interests and goals
- Encourage the selection and use of instructional materials that integrate multicultural and diverse perspectives throughout the curriculum

Federal Legislative Priorities

In developing new federal legislation and/or revising existing legislation, the ACTFL Board of Directors endorses the following initiatives as priorities for the foreign language profession in order to build the nation's language capacity:

1. Ensure that ALL languages are supported in our educational system, not just the languages that are deemed critical for today. Since research supports the notion that after learning a second language, the third and fourth languages come more easily, it is important to support any language that a school system considers important for its community and for which teachers are available.
2. Encourage and support the creation of articulated, continuous sequences of language courses beginning in the earliest grades and continuing through college, with immersion and language study abroad as key components.
3. Include funding for the development of a consistent program of assessments starting in the earliest grades to measure student progress toward proficiency in foreign languages.
4. Since learning a foreign language increases performance in other core subject areas, make foreign languages truly a part of the core curriculum in every school.
5. Provide assistance to community colleges and universities offering specialized foreign language instruction focused on combining language instruction with other majors, and for special purposes, such as law enforcement, health care, and first responders.
6. Provide incentives to enhance teacher recruitment and retention, such as loan forgiveness, and ensure teacher quality through the teacher education and certification process.
7. Require intensive training for teachers recruited from abroad so they understand how to teach in American schools, and provide professional development for teachers currently in the classroom on how to incorporate standards-based teaching into their curriculum.
8. Develop the skills of our Heritage Language speakers by encouraging the continued learning of their native language as well as English.
9. Fund research into a wide range of areas, including enrollments, best practices, and longitudinal studies to examine the effects of language education on the cognitive development, as well as the academic and career success of students.
10. Provide funding for public education initiatives such as the Discover Languages…Discover the World campaign. Policy makers and business leaders need to support efforts to change public attitudes toward foreign language learning.

Coauthorship

1. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages supports collaborative research and publication because studies that are conducted across levels, languages and disciplines contribute to the development of theory and practice in Foreign Language Education.
2. Jointly authored publications should be valued in decisions measuring scholarly production such as merit, tenure and promotion.
3. According to the guidelines issued by the Modern Language Association and published online at http://www.mla.org/advice_for_authors, "Only persons who have made significant contributions and who share responsibility and accountability should be listed as coauthors

of a publication. Other contributors should be acknowledged in a footnote or mentioned in an Acknowledgment section. The author submitting the manuscript for publication should seek from each coauthor approval of the final draft. The following standards are usually applied to coauthored works: when names of coauthors are listed alphabetically, they are considered to be equal contributors; if out of alphabetical order then the first person listed is considered the lead author. Coauthors should explain their role or describe their contribution in the publication itself or when they submit their publications for evaluation."

Language Learning for Heritage and Native Speakers

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and its members encourage learning environments that support heritage and native speakers of languages other than English. It is critical that these students be able to continue to develop their heritage linguistic and cultural skills in order to become fully bilingual and biliterate in today's global environment. By doing so, they will be well-positioned to live and work in an increasingly multilingual environment in the U.S. Native speakers (those raised in an environment using mainly a language other than English) and heritage speakers (those raised in an environment where the language was most likely spoken in the home) benefit from instruction that draws on and enhances their native or heritage language skills and cultural knowledge. In addition, research has shown that continuing to learn their native and heritage language benefits them in their acquisition of English language proficiency.

In keeping with the goal of an educated citizenry that reflects the rich multicultural and multilingual nature of U.S. society, ACTFL encourages the active recruitment, training, and retention of heritage and native speakers as teachers. ACTFL further supports pre-service training and ongoing professional development for all language teachers to help them address the unique learning needs of heritage and native speakers.

Successful language programs ensure the academic success of heritage and native speakers by providing:

- curriculum design that reflects the fact that the needs of native speakers and heritage students are often significantly different from non-native and non-heritage speakers;
- challenging curriculum that builds upon the existing linguistic skills and the cultural heritage and knowledge of the students;
- assessments that integrate language, culture and literature for all students Pre-K through 16;
- opportunities for heritage and native speakers to become involved in their language communities beyond the classroom; and
- systems to award credit or appropriate placement for oral and written proficiency and prior learning for native and heritage speakers.

Use of the Target Language in the Classroom

Research indicates that effective language instruction must provide significant levels of meaningful communication* and interactive feedback in the target language in order for students to develop language and cultural proficiency. The pivotal role of target-language interaction in language learning is emphasized in the K-16 Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century. ACTFL therefore recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom. In classrooms that feature maximum target-language use, instructors use a variety of strategies to facilitate comprehension and support meaning making. For example, they:

1. provide comprehensible input that is directed toward communicative goals;
2. make meaning clear through body language, gestures, and visual support;
3. conduct comprehension checks to ensure understanding;
4. negotiate meaning with students and encourage negotiation among students;
5. elicit talk that increases in fluency, accuracy, and complexity over time;
6. encourage self-expression and spontaneous use of language;
7. teach students strategies for requesting clarification and assistance when faced with comprehension difficulties; and
8. offer feedback to assist and improve students' ability to interact orally in the target language.

*Communication for a classical language refers to an emphasis on reading ability and for American Sign Language (ASL) to signed communicative ability.

Maximum Class Size

Since the goal of a standards-based language program is to develop students' ability to communicate, there must be opportunities for frequent and meaningful student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction, monitored practice, and individual feedback during instructional time.

Therefore, while ACTFL recognizes the fiscal realities faced by schools and institutions of higher education, ACTFL supports the recommended class size of no more than 15 students, made by both the National Education Association (NEA) and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL). Since the most important consideration in determining class size should be pedagogical efficacy, ACTFL's position applies to both traditional and online classroom settings. Where larger class sizes exist, teachers must be provided with additional support in order to maintain sound pedagogical practices.

Role of Technology in Language Learning

It is rare to find a language class that does not use some form of technology. In recent years, technology has been used to both assist and enhance language learning. Teachers at K-16 levels have incorporated various forms of technology to support their teaching, engage students in the learning process, provide authentic examples of the target culture, and connect their classrooms in the U.S. to classrooms in other countries where the target language is spoken.

Further, some technology tools enable teachers to differentiate instruction and adapt classroom activities and homework assignments, thus enhancing the language learning experience. Distance learning programs can enable language educators to expand language-learning opportunities to all students, regardless of where they live, the human and material resources available to them, or their language background and needs. In sum, technology continues to grow in importance as a tool to assist teachers of foreign languages in facilitating and mediating language learning for their students.

While technology can play an important role in supporting and enhancing language learning, the effectiveness of any technological tool depends on the knowledge and expertise of the qualified language teacher who manages and facilitates the language learning environment. In some cases, however, school and university administrators have permitted technology to drive the language curriculum and have even used it to replace certified language teachers. Language technology companies have made unsubstantiated claims about their products' abilities to help students learn languages, thus confusing administrators into thinking that these technologies can be an effective cost-cutting measure. There is currently no research to indicate that students will acquire a second language effectively through technology without interaction with and guidance from a qualified language teacher. In fact, to the contrary, a recent study of a popular software program concluded that the program does not incorporate important language-learning principles and "does not provide the dynamic environment required to practice using the language in context" (Neilson & Fraynik, 2008, University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language).

Position Statement

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) acknowledges and encourages using the potential of technology as a tool to support and enhance classroom-based language instruction. ACTFL also acknowledges the potential of well supervised and articulated distance learning programs to fill a need where classroom teachers are not available. However, because language is one of the most complex of all human activities and interactions ACTFL also recognizes the pivotal role of a qualified language teacher to incorporate and manage the implementation of technology so that it effectively supports the language learning experience.

The use of technology should never be the goal in and of itself, but rather one tool for helping language learners to use the target language in culturally appropriate ways to accomplish authentic tasks. Further, all language learning opportunities whether provided through technology or in a traditional classroom setting, should be standards-based and help develop students' proficiency in the target language through interactive, meaningful, and cognitively engaging learning experiences, facilitated by a qualified language teacher.

Therefore, ACTFL strongly advises school and university administrators to place the responsibility for language instruction in the hands of qualified language teachers rather than solely in technology programs. Cost-cutting measures such as replacing teachers with software or online programs for language learning or launching new language programs using language software or other technologies will disadvantage language learners if learners will have significantly fewer opportunities to develop language proficiency under the necessary conditions of a dynamic environment and interaction with and guidance from a qualified language teacher.

Source: Neilson, K., & Fraynik, S. (2008). Rosetta Stone Version 3 Falls Short of Manufacturer's Claims. University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language. Retrieved from

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