

Some Aspects of the Current State of Foreign Language Education In the United States

David Barnwell

There is no reference to language in either the American Declaration of Independence (1776) or the Constitution of the United States (1789). Hence by default the Constitution places responsibility for education in the hands of the individual states. There is, therefore, no federal policy on languages in education - the only exception being the 1990 Native American Languages Act, which states that it is the goal of the United States to preserve these languages. The United States education system is characterised by a high degree of local autonomy and decentralisation. Though there is a federal Department of Education, primary responsibility for education rests on the 'several states'. In just about every aspect of public administration there exists a long tradition of suspicion towards conceding power to the government in Washington. Indeed it is quite common to hear suggestions that the federal Department of Education be abolished, and a number of Republican candidates for President have included this among their policies.

These facts are relevant to the shape foreign language education has taken in the United States. There is no national curriculum; what will be taught in schools is decided and developed by local officials and teachers, at state, county and school level. Rather surprisingly, not all schools that teach foreign languages have a curriculum - over 10% report they do not¹. There is no countrywide exit exam at the end of high school. Nationally administered exams - such as the College Boards' Advanced Placement tests - do exist, but these have specific purposes and are generally oriented towards the most capable students.

Educational planning, from macro to micro, must be carried out within this loose structure.

Even such an apparently simple matter as teacher certification/accreditation is affected. A teacher fully recognized and certified in one state may have to go once more through the whole tedious process of certification if she decides to move to another state. In order to establish her credentials, she will have to supply documentary evidence of all the years she is claiming in teaching experience, get official transcripts of degrees and courses taken, and argue her case for acceptance of all her teaching experience for seniority and salary credit. Obstacles such as these are made even worse in the case of foreign language teachers, since state certification agencies are notoriously unable or unwilling to allow credit for experience or study abroad. Moves to set up a federal or nationwide basis for teacher credentialing have been under way for some time, but are making slow progress.

Decisions which affect education tend to be made by legislators, the courts, and national and state commissions. At the local level, most influential are the school boards, democratically elected bodies which administer all the public schools in an area. State-wide, it is the legislators - members of the state's senate and house of representatives - who have responsibility for policy on education. Except for a minority of states, teachers' unions are not strong, but other professional groups take an active role in educational advocacy. Almost every state will have its foreign language teachers association, while countrywide bodies such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the various American Associations of Teachers of German, French, Spanish and Portuguese, and the venerable Modern Languages Association can count many thousands of members.

All of this is not to say that the federal government exerts no influence on matters of language education or of education in general. As has been noted, there is a federal department of education, headed by a Secretary for Education². Federal programs number more than 100, about 8% of the total spent in the United States on public education. They carry considerable weight because they offer to match funds from state and local educational agencies. Washington can set the policy agenda with reforms aiming at increasing opportunity and improving equity. If states wish to obtain federal monies for certain programs, they have to comply with federal requirements, and Washington uses its funding resources to leverage actions at state and local level. In fact there is ample precedent for federal government involvement in foreign language teaching. This began as early as the drive to teach languages to US military personnel during the Second World War (Angiolillo, 1947). A little later, the National Defense Education Act of 1955 gave much impetus to language teaching in the Cold War climate of the day. The activist federal government of the 1960s was responsible for several initiatives of relevance to language education. These included the Bilingual Education Act of 1965 and the Voting Rights Act (1968) which outlawed English literacy requirements for voters who had been educated through languages other than English, an endorsement of the status of Spanish among Puerto Ricans at home and on the mainland.

Often the federal involvement in foreign language education has arisen from seeing language competence as an issue with implications for national defense. The government has been especially interested in the less commonly taught languages, with a bias towards whatever areas abroad happened to be of greatest concern in US foreign policy. At various times the teaching of languages such as Vietnamese and Farsi has attracted federal funding. The 1992 National Security Education Act provides for the training of cadres of specialists in less commonly studied languages and regions of the world. The federal government has also involved itself directly in language teaching through such agencies as the Foreign Service Institute of the State

Department, the Defense Language Institute of the Department of Defense, together with the language schools run by the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Peace Corps³. In the last few years there has also been significant federal investment in the creation of a chain of Foreign Language Resource Centers throughout the country⁴.

On the whole, the greatest contribution of US federal involvement has been in the area of language testing. As early as the Second World War, Washington was encouraging the development of assessment instruments that would measure a soldier's ability to use a language for communication rather than his knowledge of discrete grammatical points (Kaulfers, 1944). In the 1950s this philosophy of testing was embodied in the creation of the Foreign Service Institute Oral Interview and rating scales (Rice, 1959). The format, in various manifestations, survives to this day and indeed has come to dominate many theoretical models for foreign language testing in the US and beyond. Federal money also helped to adopt the FSI test to the academic world, in the form of the ACTFL/ETS oral proficiency interview (ACTFL, 1982, 1986).

Recently, the federal government has attempted to introduce more centralisation into the education system. Perhaps the genesis of this may be traced to the 1979 *Strength Through Wisdom* report commissioned by President Carter, a document which expressed disquiet about the low level of national competence in foreign languages (Report, 1979). Carter's defeat and the arrival of the Reagan administration sidelined language study from the national agenda, but impetus was renewed by President Bush's calls for a long-term national educational strategy for the United States. These came to fruition in the document known as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (US Department of Education, 1994). One of the mandates of Goals 2000 was 'to improve language instruction at all levels and to facilitate sequential learning'. For the first time ever, the stated national aim is for every student to graduate from high school with proficiency in a second language, Goals 2000 seeking to promote this by the development of

recommended goals and standards along the way. Foreign languages are considered core subjects in Goals 2000, actually a rather significant step forward for language education in the United States, since for so long it was viewed as optional, even peripheral.

Elementary Schools

The United States possesses a tradition of significant accomplishment, or perhaps more accurately effort, in the teaching of foreign languages at the primary or elementary school level. In the later 1950s and through much of the 1960s, FLES (Foreign Language in the Elementary School) programs were instituted throughout the country. These sprang up from the soul-searching about national educational standards that occurred in the wake of events such as the Soviet launch of Sputnik (1957) and Yuri Gagarin's space flight (1961). The 1970s saw something of a decline in attention to foreign language, and many of these programs atrophied. However, renewed interest from the early 1990s onwards saw a large number of states adding foreign language to the elementary school curriculum (Lipton, 1992). By 1997 the proportion of elementary schools offering a language had reached almost one in three (Branaman and Rhodes, 1998). When translated into student numbers, it should be stated, the figures are considerably less striking, since in many schools only a minority of pupils may actually be taking a foreign language. Further, the definition of what is entailed by foreign language learning is probably so wide as to preclude generalisation.

Leaving aside those caveats, some facts emerge clearly. Pupils at private schools are more likely to be studying foreign language. That language is probably Spanish, which is now installed in 79% of the elementary schools offering a foreign language. French has lost ground; from 41% of elementary schools offering foreign language instruction to 27% in the past decade. Most elementary schools offer foreign language classes for the entire school year, though there is a significant group which offers language for a limited period only, ranging from a couple of weeks to a semester. Nearly half of elementary schools report that one or more of their foreign language teachers is a native speaker of the

language being taught. These figures are undoubtedly highest for Spanish, though in the American context the definition of native speaker of Spanish is not without ambiguity. The rapid expansion in the teaching of foreign languages in the elementary schools has produced a near crisis in staffing and training. Many states - North Carolina for example - which enthusiastically introduced a requirement for foreign language in every elementary school, found that recruiting personnel sufficient both in training and in numbers proved more problematic than had been envisaged. This has led to large class sizes and the use of teachers who are often less than ideally prepared for the job they are to do.

On the positive side, a stronger tradition of methodological innovation at elementary school level exists in the U.S. than in Europe. This creativity was evident both in the FLES programs of the '50s and '60s, and continued in the '70s and '80s with such developments as Total Physical Response (TPR). This methodology for teaching a second language to young learners, devised and popularised by James Asher (1996) in California, enjoys considerable support in the U.S. elementary system. By requiring physical rather than linguistic responses from the learner, TPR capitalizes on children's energy and love of movement. Further, the method claims to mimic how children learn their first language. Learners pass through a silent period, during which they build a 'comprehension base' while the language is becoming internalised.

The TPR method has been widely used with younger children but has also been shown to exhibit some serious limitations. It relies almost solely on imperative mood, to the exclusion of vast areas of the language, and focuses on short phrases or single-item vocabulary words. As a result, language learned via TPR alone never develops the narrative and descriptive modes needed for meaningful communication. In addition, TPR teachers and students eventually get tired of executing commands. In the light of this critique, recent years have seen the development of TPRS (Total Physical Response Storytelling). This methodology, developed in the past decade or so by Blaine Ray (1996), has

attained widespread popularity among teachers of foreign language in American elementary schools. It builds on the foundation of TPR, but adds the narrative mode, supplemented by a repertoire of visual aids that enable children to manipulate the story line and tell and retell it. TPRS is highly regarded in the United States, and its practitioners are in constant demand to offer workshops and presentations to elementary school teachers.

Only a minority of elementary schools offer programs that set proficiency in a language as a main goal. Most schools aim at various kinds of introductory exposure to the language. This is often set in the context of FLEX classes. Foreign Language Exploratory or Foreign Language Experience (FLEX) courses remain popular in the US, though a number of language teaching organizations have expressed doubts about their worth. FLEX curricula at particular schools are mostly put together by the teachers, often on an *ad hoc* basis. Generally, these programs aim to give students a foundation for foreign language study, equipping them with a rudimentary knowledge of how languages work, and imparting study skills that will be useful later in acquiring mastery of a specific language. They focus not so much on learning a language as on learning how to learn one. Some language study does go on in the FLEX classroom - often in the form of an introduction of basic elements of a number of languages, such as greetings, numbers, days of the week etc. The goal is to impart some consciousness of language itself and expose children to the fact that not everyone speaks English and that thoughts can be expressed in other languages. If the teacher has taken a little linguistics at college level, it would be common to see the course offering some treatment of non-human languages, be they animal communication or artificial systems such as Morse code or computer language. As the teacher of such a course does not need to be highly proficient in the languages she presents, it is not unusual for pupils to be introduced to rudiments of languages such as Japanese or Russian - the Cyrillic alphabet, for example - in addition to the more common choices. Black pupils may receive some exposure to an African language such as Swahili. There is invariably a strong

cultural and interdisciplinary element in FLEX courses, with classes studying a little of the history, geography, cuisine, customs etc. of other societies, as well as finding out something of how languages have evolved and are related to and influence each other. The study of basic grammatical terms and concepts, useful for the future foreign language learner, may obviously also dovetail with what is going on in the English class. Additionally, these programs may help children decide which language they should later study in more depth. In this respect, they can aid recruitment for languages other than Spanish, as well as fostering language study generally.

FLEX courses have many adherents, but a significant proportion of language teachers decry them. They charge that students emerge from such courses with perhaps a smattering of a few words in a few languages, but with no usable proficiency in any, and little basis acquired for future learning. In their view, the time spent on FLEX could better be devoted to rigorous study of one particular language, study that would provide the foundation for rapid acquisition of proficiency when the child goes on to the high school.

High School and College

It would be fallacious to believe that foreign language education is today a central concern of the majority of Americans. Whenever national soul-searching about low educational standards is provoked by the release of studies which adversely compare American children's attainment to that of children in other countries, it is striking that it is maths or the sciences which are at issue, not foreign language proficiency. It bears comment that about over half of American high school students do not study any second language. A disproportionate element of these would be of lower socio-economic background, and/or black, and/or living in city centres or in small rural communities (Finn, 1998). American education traditionally offers more choice to students than is the case in Europe. One of the ways in which this is done is in the 'elective' - that is to say a course or subject which the student may freely choose to take or not. In many American high schools, foreign languages have up to now been

counted as electives; hence it is quite possible to graduate from a high school without ever having taken a language. Young people who have no ambitions to go on to college often follow this route.

Yet all fifty states include foreign languages in their curricula. Forty states have laws requiring that public school students have at least two years of foreign language study available to them, usually on the secondary level. Ten states require that college-bound or advanced/honors secondary students study a foreign language. Numbers for foreign languages in the high school have stayed relatively stable in recent years. The percentage of secondary schools teaching foreign language has changed little - 87% in 1987 and 86% in 1997. Over seven million high school students (out of 13.5 million) are studying foreign languages, though as in other instances what precisely is meant by studying - how many hours per week, for how many years - is not uniform. Students at private schools are more likely to take foreign language than those at public, girls more than boys and for longer (Draper & Hicks, 1996). Spanish is offered in almost every secondary school that has a foreign language program. Japanese grew in popularity a few years ago but may have reached a plateau, while other languages are either marking time or slipping back.

Study of a foreign language is an admission requirement at 26% of the colleges and universities in the U.S. For graduation, almost 35% of the institutions require language study for all students; over 40%, for some students (Huber, 1992). Yet despite the fact that there are a lot of young people studying foreign languages, the number who specialise in the subject is small. For instance, in 1991-92 among the 1.5 million degrees conferred at all levels, only 18,000, or slightly more than 1%, went to specialists in foreign languages and literature. In high school Spanish, nearly one in three students do not continue their first year's study of the language into another year. This becomes almost two out of three who did not continue from second year Spanish to third year. Ninety per cent of students discontinue Spanish before they reach the fourth year, the stage at which they might be expected to be acquiring

worthwhile proficiency in the language (Schwartz, 1985; Brod and Huber, 1992; Barnwell, 1992). The American education system presents a picture of attrition to the point of wastage - given the large numbers of students who take languages in high school and college, the end result is poor in terms of numbers of language majors or proficiency among majors or non-majors.

Generally, language learning is almost entirely seen in the U.S. as an activity of the traditional academy - school or college. Apart from the biggest cities, there are few private businesses offering language tuition on a commercial or specialist basis - little or no Berlitz. This even applies in the case of English as a Second Language - there is no counterpart of the myriad English language schools that one sees in Britain and increasingly in Ireland. Many thousands of people come to the United States every year to study English, but they do so within the framework of colleges and universities rather than private academies.

Articulation of foreign language instruction from one level to another is quite inefficient in the United States. There is no standardised, nationally-mandated measure of language proficiency for secondary schools. Instruments and methods vary among states, institutions and even among teachers in the same school. The CAL survey showed that it is common to place children who studied a language at elementary schools in the very same classroom in high school (Beginners' Level I) right alongside children who have no prior knowledge of the language. This also often occurs at college level. Students, who in many cases must have studied a foreign language in order to be admitted to the university or college, still enrol for a Beginners class. It is a commonplace that many people spend their entire educational sequence taking and retaking Elementary Spanish. In this respect there has been little progress, for as early as the 1920s foreign language teachers were making the same complaint (Wood, 1927).

Evaluation is for the most part a matter of relatively informal achievement testing on the part of teachers of individual classes. The teacher determines the letter grade for each

student based on a combination of attendance, performance in class, and scores on teacher-generated quizzes and tests. According to the CAL survey, the top three assessments, in order of use, are selected-response tests (multiple choice, matching, etc.), short-answer tests, and students' presentations or demonstrations. Class participation is given a heavy weighting, as is homework. There is less stress on performance on one specific major exam than has been the case in Europe. Private enterprise dominates the US testing field in a way unknown elsewhere; college-bound students may choose from a number of standardised tests, such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) in French, German, and Spanish, the Scholastic Achievement Tests and the Advanced Placement tests. Apart from these American tests, a number of schools, especially those at higher socio-economic levels, have begun to prepare students for the International Baccalaureate, an examination system originally developed in Switzerland but now gaining ground in the US.

All of these tests are voluntary on the part of the student. They are usually taken in the final year of high school, scores being forwarded to the colleges/universities to which a student is applying. High scores can enhance students' chances for acceptance, or have the effect of exempting them from the one or two years of basic study of the language in college that is commonly obligatory. Such exemptions, though common, are not altogether healthy for foreign languages, since they mean that students who have attained a very good degree of proficiency in the high school often discontinue its study at college level. Some colleges seek to deal with this by requiring that students who have scored high on the high school exit foreign language exams take further upper-level classes on the college level.

In order to go beyond accepting 'seat time' as sufficient for the awarding of credit (the number of years one has studied a language, regardless of attainment) some states have established oral proficiency requirements for students at various grade levels or for graduation from high school. Oregon, for example, has mandated attainment of a minimum of Intermediate Low on the ACTFL/ETS scale as a requirement for a high

school diploma. A growing trend in secondary schools is the use of alternative assessments in the foreign language classroom. These evaluations often include student self-assessments and portfolios. The latter 'may contain a rich array of samples, including videos of class presentations and role-playing, audio excerpts of formal and informal interviews, drafts and final versions of written work, photographs and other descriptions of projects' (College Board 1996, 37). However, the spread of such evaluations is likely to be hindered by the fact that they are unwieldy and require a large investment in time and other resources.

Methodology

An issue which has aroused a good deal of controversy in recent years is that of block scheduling. Traditionally, schooling had been measured in what was known as the Carnegie Unit, equivalent to an academic hour (50 minutes, for practical purposes) per week of class contact. Educational institutions stipulated the minimum number of such units necessary for courses to be counted for credit. In the past few years, schools have begun to experiment with block scheduling, that is, a timetable which enrolls students in fewer classes each day, but in classes of longer duration. While several models exist, they have in common the desire to permit subject areas to be taught and learned in greater depth than is often possible with the traditional 50-minute class. For example, a student's timetable might comprise four 90-minute classes a day, five days a week. In such a case courses hitherto year-long now only run for half a year. This permits an increase in the number of courses that students can take during their four years of high school, since six courses per year is the norm within the traditional system. Further, since the course is now offered twice a year, student demand can be more easily satisfied and class size kept down. Advocates of block scheduling maintain that it offers a means of individualising instruction and fostering interdisciplinary methods and innovative teaching. On the whole, however, support for block scheduling appears quite tepid among language teachers, who express concern that a couple of absences in a block-scheduled course can cause a student to fatally fall behind in the language class.

As in Europe, almost all American secondary school programs include listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the foreign language instructional sequence. There is probably more overt attention to culture, especially in the 'small c' sense, in the US than in European schools. The 1997 CAL survey found a trend towards more oral work in the classroom. 22% of responding secondary schools reported that their language teachers use foreign language in the classroom most of the time (75% to 100%), vs. 18% in 1987. At the secondary school level, the three most common instructional materials used by schools with foreign language programs continued to be audiovisual materials, commercially-published textbooks/workbooks and teacher-made materials. The percentage of secondary schools that used these types of materials increased significantly since 1987. Authentic materials - taken directly from the target culture - are also used quite frequently, though provision remains informal, such as what a teacher brings back from a holiday abroad. The notion of 'proficiency', as articulated in the ACTFL Guidelines (1986) dominates thinking about language instruction, at high school at any rate. By far the most widely-used text in the preparation of future language teachers is Alice Omaggio's *Teaching Language in Context* (Omaggio-Hadley, 1993), a book which stands firmly within the proficiency paradigm. Often statewide commissions or adoption committees decide which textbooks to adopt, teachers being given a choice of texts from which to choose. At the larger language teachers' conventions, hundreds of exhibitors may seek to attract the interest of those seeking materials for classroom use. The competition between publishers is quite keen, and hence there is a wide range of materials available for the most commonly taught languages. Almost all texts claim to follow a communicative approach, however defined. Audio and video tapes usually accompany a basic textbook, though the latter remain expensive.

Many publishers offer ancillary materials, such as teachers' kits or CALL programs. According to the Center for Applied Linguistics survey, computer-based instructional materials are now used by over half of the secondary schools with

foreign language programs. The integration of the computer into the foreign language classroom had faltered a little in the early 1990s, since the pedagogical quality of so much on offer was poor, but it has received a fillip with the advent of the internet (Walz, 1998). Most schools now are scrambling to update their computer capabilities, and the investment in technology and hardware is the greatest since the big boom in the building of language laboratories in the '60s and early '70s. As a caveat, it may be pointed out that no evidence was ever produced that the language laboratory, so heavily invested in thirty years ago, increased proficiency standards. It is perhaps too early to look for such evidence in the case of computers, but many veterans of the 1960s rather cynically expect a similar outcome. As one source puts it - very much a friend of computer-assisted instruction - advocates tend to focus on what students could do with the computer, rather than on what they actually do (Schwartz, 1995). As so often in the past, the challenge of the next few years will be to marry methodology and technology.

Within the past year or two considerations of foreign language pedagogy have been highly influenced by the 'National Standards'. One of the principal goals of the Goals 2000 Act, passed by Congress in 1994, was 'to promote the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of skill standards and certifications'. Acting on this directive, professional bodies concerned with specific academic disciplines drew up national standards for instruction and learning. In the case of foreign languages, the major language teaching professional organisations in the US collaborated in the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, and their labor bore fruit in the shape of the National Standards document of 1996. This presents the following goals, organised around five main themes: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities. Students should:

- Communicate in languages other than English.
- Gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures.

- Connect with other disciplines and acquire information.
- Develop insight into own language and culture.
- Participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world.

The Standards are quite rich in the view they take of language learning - they certainly go much further than the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, which focused exclusively on language used in 'communication', mostly conceived of as face-to-face verbal exchanges. There is now much encouragement of content-based language learning, or teaching across the curriculum, as it is often called in the US (Moeller, 1994). In many cases the National Standards exist side-by-side with state and local curriculum frameworks and performance Standards. While they do not set out a curriculum, they furnish a way of conceptualising foreign language education, and can help the teacher reflect on what s/he is doing and communicate with students, parents, and administrators about what is happening in the classroom and why. Awareness of the National Standards is high among language teachers at elementary and secondary levels in the US. It is virtually impossible to attend a foreign languages teachers' conference which does not offer a session on the Standards. Some English-speaking parents, generally at higher socio-economic levels, are opting to enroll their children in immersion education, 'in which part, or in some cases, all of the instruction will be carried out in a language other than English' (Fortune & Jorstad, 1996: 163). In 1995, there were 187 such immersion schools, across 26 states. Languages of instruction include Spanish (most common), Arabic, French, German, Hawaiian, Japanese and Mandarin. But it remains rare for anglophone parents to enroll their children in bilingual classes, and the system does not encourage it. In addition to these programs, there are hundreds of mother tongue classes and schools which teach 'ethnic' languages to children and adults. These privately-funded schools aim to maintain the group's language and culture. They often meet only one day a week, on Saturday or Sunday, and are supported by community or church groups. This

is a comparatively unstudied area of language learning in the US, though in 1979 Joshua Fishman reported that there were over 5000 such schools and classes, teaching a diverse body of languages - from Hebrew to Irish.

Teachers

In 1990 there were at least 80,000 language teachers in the United States. In secondary schools, most of the language teachers are teachers of Spanish, about 4% of all teachers in secondary schools. Native speakers account for about 40% of the Spanish and Japanese teachers, but much smaller percentages for the other languages. Secondary school foreign language teachers are more highly certified than their elementary school counterparts. Eighty-two percent of high schools report that their foreign language teachers are certified to teach foreign languages at the secondary level, while only 9% of the responding elementary schools claimed that their teachers were appropriately certified. These results reflect the lack of available teacher training and certification programs geared toward the elementary foreign language teacher. In addition, many states do not yet require licensure or endorsement for elementary school foreign language teachers. As teacher certification, licensure, and credentialing is done on a state by state basis, there is a great variety of requirements across the U.S. and it is difficult to present a coherent national picture. All teachers in U.S. public schools are required by law to be certified, holding both academic (foreign language subject matter specialty) and professional (pedagogical) qualifications. Independent (private) schools differ in their requirements for teachers but increasingly they are calling for similar qualifications.

More and more states are demanding a graduate level degree to obtain teaching certification. This is in reaction to a criticism often articulated, that teachers in the US take too few courses in their subject specialty, and too many in pedagogy and psychology. Requiring a Masters will encourage trainee teachers to take more subject matter courses in their major. The same goal underpins the trend towards elimination of the undergraduate major in education - more and more those who hope to become teachers must pursue a regular

academic major in the discipline which they aspire to teach, essentially the same as in the Irish secondary teaching model. In the case of foreign language, these changes should raise teachers' language proficiency, by allowing them to enrol in more language courses than would be possible if they were taking all their education courses along with their language courses.

The American system encourages, indeed sometimes obliges teachers to upgrade their credentials and skills. Most states reward further study, be it in the US or abroad, and attendance at professional conferences and workshops. Obviously only a small minority of teachers can escape family commitments and study abroad. Those who stay home look to state and federal government funding for such things as summer institutes for teachers or materials and methodology workshops. Staff development and in-service teacher training has increased significantly in the past decade. In general, opportunities for upgrading teaching skills seem to be more readily available than those for upgrading language skills. In 1997, over two-thirds of elementary schools that offer foreign language classes reported that their language teachers had participated in staff development or in-service training. At the secondary level, over three quarters of schools with foreign language programs reported that their teachers attended staff development or in-service training.

Mention was made earlier of the bureaucracy often faced by teachers who move from state to state. The system does not encourage teachers to gain a variety of experiences. Indeed a teacher who had lived four or five years in a country whose language (s)he now aspires to teach would get little salary or credentials recognition of this from a state teaching agency. On the plus side, however, most states build incentives for further study into their personnel system, for example by encouraging teachers to attend in-service courses or pursue higher degrees. Teacher conferences and teachers' professional bodies (not related to trade union activity) have a much higher profile in the US than in Europe. Most teachers in most states are not unionised.

While it varies from place to place in line with local cost of living, on average a newly-qualified teacher can expect a starting salary in the middle 20s (dollars).

All evidence points to an increasingly veteran teaching force in U.S. schools. A significant number of language teachers will retire in the next twenty years. With the number of people entering the foreign language teaching field not equaling the demand, the departure rate may already exceed that of replacement. Traditionally in an expanding economy, recruitment to teaching has suffered, as university students had a range of career options before them. The American economy has been strong for many years now, with the consequent effect on teacher recruitment. (Draper, 1989). The teacher shortage is being addressed at the state or regional level through alternative routes to certification, recruitment incentives, and technology support, and at the local level through changes in student schedules to fit the available teachers. The shortage has reached such an acute state that it is now not unheard of for language teachers to be offered a 'signing-on fee' or bonus. Other incentives include student loan forgiveness programs, tuition reimbursement, scholarships etc.

Some states recruit teachers from abroad, especially teachers of Spanish. While no formal study appears to have been carried out on this, there is anecdotal evidence that such programs have not always been successful, as the foreign teachers found it difficult to adjust to the culture of the US educational system (Archibold, 1998). In addition, it has proven very difficult for foreign-educated teachers to negotiate the bureaucracy that often characterizes teacher credentialing in the United States. It is especially difficult for citizens of other countries (or the USA) to get teaching credentials if their undergraduate course work was completed abroad. Those wishing to do so must negotiate a nightmarish bureaucracy, involving such things as certified translations of their credentials, descriptions (that must be provided in English, in certified translation) of the courses they took at university, etc.

Instead of hiring new teachers, many school districts seek to solve the problem by directing students away from languages in which there is a teacher shortage and/or asking teachers to teach languages other than those in which they are qualified. This is quite a pressing issue, given indications as to the language proficiency of teachers in the United States. Though Carroll's groundbreaking study on the topic is now seen as flawed (Barnwell, 1996: 152) few would challenge the essential finding, that the foreign language proficiency of most language majors and many US language teachers is unacceptably low. If teachers are less than adequate in the foreign language they mainly teach, one can speculate on how ill-equipped they may be to teach a language in which they are even less prepared. Another solution lies in distance learning, be it to cater for the demand for Spanish or to provide an economically viable means of teaching minority languages such as Russian or Japanese. Such courses have a long tradition in the United States - as early as the 1920s and 30s radio stations were offering language courses. Communication between teacher and students, and among students, can now be achieved through such means as video-conferencing, satellite and computer networks (Glisan, 1998).

Dominance of Spanish

Though the language was spoken in what is now the west or southwest of the United States long before the advent of English, the predominance of Spanish in the language classroom is a fairly recent phenomenon. Throughout the nineteenth century, and as late as the First World War, German was the most commonly taught modern language in the United States. However, the anti-German attitudes that sprang up or in many cases were cultivated during the War cast the language into a chasm from which it never emerged. Before the war about 25% of all public school students had been taking German. By 1922 the figure had dropped to 1% (Barnwell, 1996). The 1920s and '30s saw French pre-eminent, though with the beginnings of interest in the teaching of Spanish. Latin was still far more widely taught than any modern language during these decades, and of course most high school students still did not study any foreign language. World War II and its sequel

proved damaging to enrolments in Latin, and the language became restricted to a tiny minority of schools. As to the modern languages, by the 1960s French and Spanish were about even, each language averaging a little more than 10% of all high school students. Since the 1970s, however, there has been a clear shift towards Spanish in schools and colleges throughout the country, with the result that today Spanish is by far the most commonly taught second language in the United States. At the primary level, over 6% of children study foreign languages, with Spanish leading the list at 4.5% followed by French with 1.5%, and German and Japanese each with 0.2% of enrolments. Spanish is the most popular at secondary level, studied by about 28% of all secondary school students, followed by French with 11%, and German with 3%. Less commonly taught languages, such as Russian and Japanese, have their adherents, particularly in specialist schools, but statistically barely reach proportions big enough to be counted. The imbalance might be even greater were it not for the fact that students who seek to take Spanish are often shunted towards taking another language instead. At university the balance may not be quite as uneven, but there is no doubt that Spanish hegemony is unchallenged here too.

A separate essay would be required to fully explore reasons for the popularity of Spanish relative to all other second/foreign languages. The first European language to be spoken in North America, Spanish has clawed back a little of the dominance it enjoyed up to a century and a half ago, when it was the primary means of communication over much of what is now the US West and SouthWest. Indeed, Spanish can hardly be truly termed a 'foreign' language in the US, and Latin America no longer ends at the Rio Grande. Among the non-Hispanic population, what one author terms 'an American Urban Legend' (Friedrich, 1997) reflects a stereotype that Spanish is somehow 'easier' to learn than other languages. This assumption has recently been challenged in several places, including - somewhat ironically - by the American Association of Teachers of French. However, the strength of the stereotype in popular culture has hardly been shaken. The situation might appear healthy for Spanish, but

it has brought its own drawbacks, ranging from the difficulty of finding qualified Spanish teachers to the problem of large class size. Indeed the hegemony of Spanish even causes concern among teachers of the language. A group of colleges in Massachusetts held a conference on the topic in September 1999, under the title 'The Future of Spanish Departments on College Campuses'. They were concerned that vast enrolments in lower level Spanish would change the Spanish department's role from that of focus for enquiry into literary and cultural issues to that of production line provider of countless elementary and intermediate language courses.

Estimates for the number of native speakers of Spanish in the US are unreliable, and probably underreported. However, it seems clear that at a minimum, the figure exceeds 20 million or some 8% of the population. California, Texas, and New York have the highest numbers, but there is now no state, from Alabama to Alaska, which does not have a sizeable Hispanic population (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1994). Spanish language media have 50 TV channels, over 800 radio stations, and at least 36 newspapers of significant circulation. Yet, despite the language's strength, provision for teaching Spanish to children of Spanish-speaking parents has been patchy. Most states are reluctant to encourage bilingual education, and even where such a thing exists it often is bilingual only in name, being better characterised as an effort to help immigrant children learn English so that they can do regular schoolwork with their English-speaking classmates and receive an equal educational opportunity. There have also been pedagogical problems in fashioning teaching approaches to serve the very heterogeneous population of Hispanic students. Many such students are completely fluent in Spanish, and received some of their earlier education through that language before coming to the United States. Others exhibit good listening comprehension but much inferior speaking ability and no range of registers in Spanish. Another significant minority of 'Hispanics' are Hispanic only in name, and come from monolingual anglophone households.

Immigration to the United States has always been characterized by a fairly rapid adoption of English and a concomitant loss of proficiency in the language(s) of the immigrant group. In the case of Spanish, this process has been offset by the continued influx of large numbers of Spanish speakers each year, but there are grounds for believing that the language is not being transmitted intergenerationally in the US. Reports from Florida indicate that teachers of Spanish now have to be recruited from out of state, many of them people of non-Hispanic or anglophone background. Hispanic students with names like Ramirez and Gonzalez are thus being taught Spanish by teachers with names like Kelly or Hoffman (Ariza, 1998). Further, it is by no means evident that all, or even a majority, of Hispanic parents want their children to receive 'bilingual' education, however defined. A significant part of the 60% majority which passed Proposition 227 in California, effectively ending that state's bilingual education program, appear to have been Hispanic. There are also variations within the Hispanic population of the U.S., with Puerto Rican parents being most favourably disposed towards a strong element of Spanish language in their children's schooling, Cuban parents being inclined to stress rapid acquisition of English.

Bilingualism is rarely a two-way street in the U.S. In other words, though speakers of other languages learn to use English, few people from the English-speaking culture reciprocate. Apart from teachers of Spanish, it would be very rare for people of English-speaking heritage to carry out any extended social or professional transactions through the medium of Spanish. Only two of the fifty states recognise official languages in addition to English: New Mexico (Spanish) and Hawaii (Hawaiian). In fact there have been many efforts to copperfasten the position of English. A number of states have passed resolutions or statutes declaring English the official language. In 1988 Arizona passed an amendment making English the official language, but in 1990 a federal judge invalidated it as an infringement of the rights to free speech under the Constitution. Adherents of a group known as U.S. English believe that this should be declared the official language of the

country, and call for the prohibition of the use of other languages in public situations such as voting or doing business with state or federal governments. Bills to declare English the official language of the nation have been proposed from time to time in Congress, but so far none of these has been put up for full voting by both houses. The cause of bilingualism has not been helped by heavy-handed federal interventions, such as requirements that anglophone teachers attend bilingual sensitivity training if they are to keep their jobs (Crawford, 1992).

Conclusion

A consideration of the place of languages in American education throws into relief some questions currently faced in Ireland. The overbearing position of Spanish has come about in the absence of any national policy to foster diversity among the languages on offer to American students. Though no one disputes the status of Spanish in terms of history, culture and numbers of speakers, there is now a growing realisation that efforts must be made to see that it does not squeeze out other important languages from the system. This parallels the increased consciousness in Ireland that French's hegemony in the schools is unhealthy for the country's needs, for the growth of other languages, and perhaps even for the good of French itself. The cases of Spanish in the U.S. and French in Ireland show that an interventionist role from educational planners and administrators is sometimes required to make sure that diversity of language choice may flourish, though Spanish also exemplifies how difficult it is to slow down a language's momentum once it becomes identified in the public mind as the one to be taught and studied. The history of technology in the U.S. foreign language classroom prompts the belief that innovation in this area alone is not enough to raise achievement levels, a point to be borne in mind as Irish schools continue to acquire computer capability. One more of many instructive lessons may be drawn from the case of languages in the elementary schools. The American experience shows that however laudable is the goal of providing a second language to young children, numerous practical difficulties are posed in terms of supply of teachers and materials, definition of objectives,

as well as articulation from the elementary sequence onwards. If we hope to find a permanent place for foreign language in the Irish primary school, we will benefit from study of how the United States has faced and sometimes solved these problems.

Notes

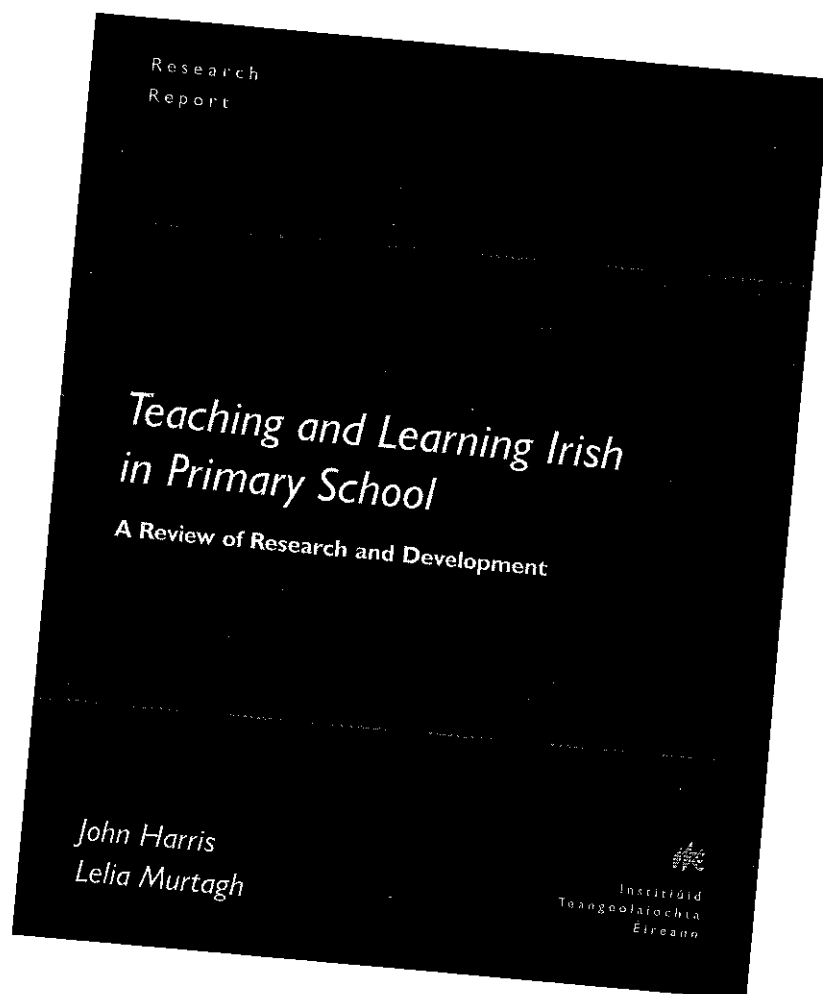
- ¹ The Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington DC (CAL) conducted a large scale survey of elementary and secondary schools in 1997 with a view to gathering information about current patterns in language enrollment, developments in curriculum and teaching methodologies, and trends in teacher qualifications and training (Branaman and Rhodes 1998). Unless otherwise specified, the statistical information cited here comes from the CAL survey.
- ² In fact the work of the present Secretary, Richard Riley was deemed so important that he was ruled out of consideration for the position of Ambassador to Ireland in order to permit him to remain in Washington.
- ³ All of these agencies operate web sites e.g. Defense Language Institute <http://www.dli.army.mil/> Central Intelligence Agency <http://www.call.gov>
- ⁴ Sample web sites may be viewed at Ohio State University <http://www.colums.ohio-state.edu/ilc/> and <http://www.educ.iastate.edu/nflrc/> (Iowa State University).

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