

Is This Language Necessary?

Traditionally, Americans have refused to learn a second language—and most colleges have acquiesced. But “not required” and “not needed” are not synonymous. Foreign languages could be making a comeback.



By **DONNA MURPHY**

Nurses gesture frantically — their actions reminiscent of a game of charades — as they attempt to help a Spanish-speaking woman give birth to her first child. Too often, the brown eyes, round with fright, signal they do not understand what the nurses are asking her to do.

Two Italian businessmen turn from their American guest to debate in Italian the merits of a business proposal the American has just proffered in English. He sits by idly unable to defend or explain the points they may be questioning. *Continued on Next Page*

Dr. Daniele McDowell helps art history major Susan Baker in the modern language laboratory.

A Soviet soldier weary from battle and frightened enters an American embassy in Afghanistan seeking asylum, but no one there can speak Russian.

World neighbors are being brought closer together through electronic communications and air travel, yet language remains a major barrier to businessmen, politicians, students and ordinary citizens as they encounter their foreign counterparts.

This ignorance of other countries' language and culture is the center of a controversy being debated on college campuses nationwide: Should the study of language be a requirement, much like English or American History?

"There are many practical situations where it would be appropriate for a person to know a foreign language," notes Professor Peter Brueckner, chairman of the University of Oklahoma department of modern languages and literatures. "Some professionals would 'cut a better figure,' as you say, if they could intermingle without waiting for an interpreter. But beside the practical reasons, a well-rounded education simply requires exposure to foreign languages and cultures."

In recent years, however, the study of foreign language in the United States has declined, reaching its lowest level since World War I last year when only 15 per cent of secondary school students across the nation were enrolled in a language course. Oklahoma, which has growing Hispanic populations and a large Indian citizenry, had half the national percentage of its students enrolled in languages with only 7.6 per cent.

Higher enrollments are recorded on the east and west coasts. Experts believe this is because these states are more industrialized and many of the older, prestigious schools, like Harvard and Princeton, are located there and have re-established foreign language requirements for their students.

The recent decline in the number of Oklahoma high school language students is said by some to be a backlash of OU's decision three years ago to do away with its foreign language requirement. Until then, OU had the state's strongest language requirement for students in its College of

Arts and Sciences, which Brueckner believes indirectly supported modern language programs in Oklahoma public high schools.

A state department of education specialist in foreign language education, Alfred Gage, agrees with Brueckner. "I have had many, many teachers tell me that when a state's major university has a requirement, it programs the schools — the teachers, counselors, students and parents — to aim for those goals in preparing students for college even if the student later goes to a junior college or smaller school. So anytime a major change occurs in the requirements of the university, the whole pattern breaks down.

"If a course is not required by the major state universities, then students in high school often don't give it a second thought," Gage said.

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"I think we are in a sad situation in Oklahoma," he added. "People in the state say we don't need to deal internationally, we're just an agricultural state. But Oklahoma has more than 500 companies that deal internationally. We also sell our grain worldwide, and someone has to handle the sales, marketing and shipping. It is not all done in English, either."

OU's decision in 1977 to drop all its language requirements was controversial. For arts and sciences students the requirements had meant five hours of intermediate-level language courses. If they had had little or no language study in high school, the students often first had to take up to 10 hours of beginning language courses.

The OU decision was prompted by the articulation policy passed by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher

Education in 1975. It said, in effect, that students transferring from a two-year school to a four-year school would not have to pick up an unnecessarily large number of core courses in order to graduate. The requirements for degrees at one university would closely approximate the core requirements of all others in the state system.

The situation was further complicated in that the articulation policy was an outgrowth of concerns raised by the Adams Case, a civil rights case still ongoing that deals with the issues of segregation. An opinion rendered implies that the state system of higher education, not just the individual schools, is responsible for ensuring affirmative action and free access. Since many black students enter the state system at two-year schools, some people believed the core requirements of four-year schools discriminated against blacks.

Foreign language was not the only OU requirement affected, however. OU also had stiffer requirements in the humanities, social sciences and sciences. When OU accepted the articulation policy, its two most visible requirements — modern languages and earth sciences — were among those that disappeared.

"I think it was simply an everything or nothing situation for modern languages," said Brueckner. OU now has no required language study — not even the beginning courses — although Oklahoma State University still lists some beginning language skills for a B.A. degree.

"I honestly think the articulation policy decision was not a good one," Brueckner said. "The two major state universities should have been excluded. I don't think anyone is really happy about it because it was a radical surgery."

Dropping the requirement had devastating effects on the OU department of modern languages and literatures. Spanish was hurt the most, but the entire department suffered. Its enrollment at all levels dropped from approximately 3,000 students three years ago to approximately 1,100 this past fall.

"As I remember, it hit hard the first summer," Brueckner said. "Out of about 60 students who had pre-enrolled for beginning Spanish, only

eight actually took the course."

Most of the decline was at the lower division levels, but the upper division suffered, too, because the department lost a large number of graduate assistantships.

"In spite of that, OU's degree programs are still well established," Brueckner said. "I believe we've reached a plateau on which we can slowly rebuild."

OU teaches six languages on a regular basis — French, Spanish, German, Italian, Russian and Japanese — and this spring will again offer Chinese. Doctoral degree programs also are offered in French and Spanish and a master's program in German, which are the only language graduate programs in Oklahoma.

"I have a few worries that go beyond the university," Brueckner said. "My colleagues and I feel that any student who calls himself educated should be exposed to foreign language in college or high school.

"Outside the United States, language programs are very efficient and well entrenched," the OU professor noted. "In that respect, the United States is in bad, bad shape. We also display a form of arrogance by feeling that foreigners know English so why should we learn their language."

As an example, Brueckner noted that many American foodstuffs are imported by foreign countries. Tomatoes canned by two large, well-known United States firms were sold in German grocery stores. The picture of the tomato on the label was the only way non-English-speaking Germans knew it was a can of tomatoes. Bulgaria began to send canned tomatoes to Germany also, but everything on the Bulgarian cans was in German, plus they added a recipe, also printed in German. Imports of Bulgarian tomatoes increased tremendously, forcing the United States companies to print their labels in German.

"I can't say that 10 hours of German will raise your salary or that you can talk with a German businessman on an intelligent level, but I think exposure to a second language and another culture is important," Brueckner said.

OU's dean of business administration, Lawrence McKibbin, concurs. "Language enhances what the stu-

dent has to offer. Language broadens their perspective and the scope of their interests and makes them more marketable."

Students first must have the technical background to work efficiently in business and establish themselves in an organization, McKibbin said. The value of a second language then comes into play.

All the traditional languages are beneficial, but McKibbin noted that Chinese and Arabic have great potential because of growing business ties that are developing as China opens to the West and as the world continues to seek oil from the Arab countries.

Spanish is becoming increasingly important within the United States. An estimated 19.8 million Hispanics now live in this country and may outnumber blacks as the nation's biggest minority by the end of the decade.

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Oklahoma's Hispanic population also is growing by leaps and bounds, according to a spokesman at the state Human Rights Commission. The state's Mexican-American population was estimated at 36,000 in 1970, was revised upward to 50,000 in 1975, and is expected to top 100,000 with the completion of this year's census report.

Two counties — Harmon and Tillman — must print all official materials in both English and Spanish because of their large Hispanic population and the 1981 census report may show that a large number of other counties in Oklahoma will be similarly affected. Oklahoma City also is affected by growing numbers of Hispanic residents. Hospitals are in dire need of nurses and physicians who can communicate with Spanish-speaking patients, according to Maria

Chavez of the Oklahoma Human Rights Commission.

The city operates a bilingual school program designed to teach English to Spanish-speaking students in grades kindergarten through fifth. The Hispanic children are placed in classes with English-speaking children in four Oklahoma City grade schools. The program has been successful in moving the Spanish-speaking children into the regular school system, but a problem has been finding bilingual teachers. Only one of the 19 teachers in the program can speak both English and Spanish.

The fact that America has served as a melting pot for many nationalities and cultures is another reason Dean McKibbin believes a study of language is important. "I perceive a great need for managers to understand cultures," he said. "We need to study more than the mechanics of speech; we need to develop empathy for the cultures we study — their values and mores. We then will be better able to deal with them.

"I can't imagine not having the language training I've had," added McKibbin, who speaks Afrikaans, Spanish and some German. "It has played an important role in my own development and sets the general tone of how one faces life."

The national trend, Brueckner believes, now seems to be moving toward re-establishing language requirements in line with the "return to basics" drive.

The question hasn't been raised officially at OU for some time, although some on campus still bemoan dropping the language requirement.

The OU department of modern languages and literatures has long since begun to rebuild and is helping high schools retain their language programs. Each year the department hosts workshops, minicourses and lectures for state teachers, and invites high school language students and teachers to such festive events as Pan-American and French days.

"I think this has helped to keep up morale of the teachers and their students," Brueckner said. "Developing language programs in public schools and in colleges and having them available for people to perfect their expertise are very important tasks for the future." ■