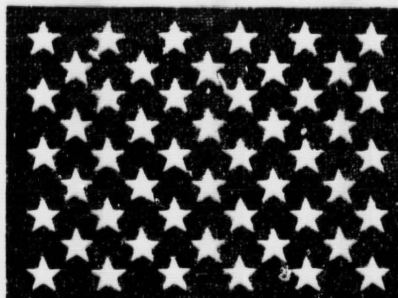




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# Foreign Language— A Vital Role in the Federal Government



ARABIC • AUSTRAL • MANX • LATIN  
 RUSSIAN • GERMAN • JAPANESE  
 BERBER • ORAON • MONGOLIAN  
 FRENCH • ENGLISH • PORTUGUESE  
 DANISH • HAWAIIAN • CASTILIAN  
 ETHIOPIAN • NORWEGIAN • GREEK  
 GYPSY • AVESTAN • MURMI • IRISH  
 MANDARIAN • ZULU • DUTCH • SWEDISH • EGYPTIAN • GAELIC  
 FLEMISH • TAHITIAN • SORBIAN • SUDANESE • KURDISH • TAMIL  
 SWAHILI • POLISH • ITALIAN • ESTONIAN • SLOVIC • AFGHAN  
 CHINESE • ALBANIAN • MAGYAR • TAGALA • LIVONIAN • BIHARI  
 SPANISH • LITHUANIAN • FINNISH • CHAM • LAPP • TINO • KUKI  
 BASQUE • GARO • SHAN • MALTESE • SOYOT • SCOTTISH • HEBREW

During a speech in Poland in early 1978, an interpreter accidentally told the Polish people that President Carter was "lusting" for them. Much was written about this *faux pas* both humorously and critically. Improperly communicating, however, is not a laughing matter, especially when dealing with foreign relations. This is a prime example of the insufficient training of foreign languages in the United States. This example emphasizes the need for skilled foreign language employees by the U.S. Government.

## What Can Happen When You Don't Know the Language?

In addition to President Carter's interpreter, the following examples will show how important it is to be skilled in communicating in a foreign language. These examples specifically affect the daily lives and work of U.S. Government overseas operations.

- A State Department consular officer said he used an interpreter for at least 20 percent of his contacts with local nationals, most of whom are reluctant to deal through an interpreter.
- During a congressional debate, lack of foreign language skills was

blamed in part for the assassination of a U.S. Ambassador in Afghanistan; and the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Iran.

- An International Communication Agency officer who is in a position requiring a reasonable level of foreign language proficiency has none. Since 50 percent of his contacts speak no English and he cannot read the local newspaper, he said he misses opportunities for developing helpful contacts.
- A Marine security guard answered an embassy telephone and failed to recognize a bomb threat because he could not speak the language. Precious minutes were lost locating someone who understood the language. (Fortunately, there was no bomb.)

These examples show how critical it is for the U.S. Government to have employees with foreign language skills.

Just what does the Federal Government need in terms of foreign language employees? How well is the Government able to meet those needs? How can the situation improve? These are some of the questions which GAO has addressed in reviewing various aspects of the U.S. Government's foreign language needs and programs during the past 7 years. These reviews

have resulted in several reports to the Congress with numerous recommendations.<sup>1</sup> Within GAO, the International Division recognizes the value of foreign language skills at its overseas offices and has provided training time and funds to its staff.

During the most recent review (see ID-80-42 listed below), it was discovered that the U.S. Government has over 30,000 positions that require proficiency in at least one of 45 foreign languages. More importantly, it was evident that the educational and assignment systems are not meeting the demands for skilled bilingual personnel.

### Historical View on Language Needs

The need to communicate and conduct U.S. foreign affairs in other languages has been recognized as important since the early days of our Nation. Benjamin Franklin was the U.S. representative in Paris during the Revolutionary War and he complained that he could not speak or even understand French very well. Over a century passed before the language problem was recognized and attempts were made to reach a solution. An initial step was taken in 1924 when an independent, nonpolitical Foreign Service was established. Following World War II, Foreign Service officers began dealing with more people in foreign countries on a wide range of postwar programs. However, language continued to be a problem. Another step was taken in solving the language problem when the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and its School of Language Studies opened on November 13, 1946.

During the next 30 years, events continually reinforced the need for U.S. personnel to have foreign language abilities. During the 1970's, independence and interdependence among all nations grew to the point where no nation could survive alone. Diplomacy has changed and has become more complex than when Benjamin Franklin voiced his complaint about language needs. Today the United States operates embassies and consulates in many countries around the world. Many languages other than English are spoken, and U.S. personnel must deal with such diverse issues as economics, agricultural assistance, trade, energy, military affairs, foreign diplomacy, and inter-

national terrorism. Unfortunately, Mr. Franklin's complaint is still too frequently applicable today.

### Federal Agencies' Language Needs

In the United States the Federal Government is the largest employer of people with foreign language skills. In fiscal year 1979, about 30,000 positions required the skill in at least one of 45 foreign languages. During that same year, Federal agencies spent over \$39 million training nearly 11,000 people in foreign languages, or only about \$3,500 per person.

Table 1 shows the numbers of positions in the Federal Government, excluding most intelligence positions, which require language competence.

The three foreign affairs agencies—Department of State (State), Agency for International Development (AID), and International Communication Agency (ICA)—are the only agencies required by law to designate overseas officer positions that require a "useful knowledge" of a foreign language. Although not required by law, several other agencies also have language-designated positions.

The FSI has developed a 5-point scale to measure speaking and reading capabilities. The five levels are

1. elementary proficiency,

2. limited working proficiency,
3. professional proficiency,
4. distinguished proficiency, and
5. native or bilingual proficiency.

Many agencies use the FSI proficiency scale to designate language requirements for positions overseas. For example, an agency determines that a certain political officer position requires a proficiency Speaking-3/Reading-3. This means that whoever holds that position should have received that score on FSI's proficiency test and should be able to speak and read with professional proficiency. This type of position is called a language-designated or language-essential position. Depending on their needs, agencies use various combinations of the FSI speaking and reading skill levels. For example, State and ICA have defined "useful knowledge" as having speaking and reading ability at the 2 or 3 proficiency level. AID, on the other hand, requires only speaking ability at the 2 or 3 proficiency level.

Table 2 shows the number of Federal Government positions which require knowledge of a specific language. The languages are divided into 2 groups: "world" for primarily the Western European languages, and "hard" for all other languages. "Hard" usually means the degree of difficulty involved in learning or mastering the language.

TABLE 1

U.S. Government Positions Requiring Foreign Language Skills

Overseas:	Number of Personnel
Department of Defense .....	13,597
Peace Corps .....	7,072
Department of State .....	1,320
Agency for International Development .....	687
International Communication Agency .....	421
Drug Enforcement Administration .....	204
Internal Revenue Service .....	168
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service .....	112
Foreign Agricultural Service .....	60
Other .....	141
Total .....	<u>23,782</u>
Domestic:	
Immigration and Naturalization Service .....	4,000
Library of Congress .....	1,284
Voice of America .....	564
Federal Bureau of Investigation .....	226
General Services Administration .....	138
Foreign Service Institute .....	65
Other .....	250
Total .....	<u>6,497</u>
Total Language-Essential Positions .....	<u>30,279</u>



**TABLE 2**  
Authorized Language-Designated Positions\*

Languages	Sample Countries	Language-Designated Positions
<b>World Languages:</b>		
Danish		9
Dutch		12
French		814
German		183
Italian		81
Norwegian		10
Portuguese		126
Spanish		1,228
Swedish		10
<b>Hard Languages:</b>		
Afrikaans	South Africa	1
Amharic	Ethiopia	1
Arabic	Egypt, Saudi Arabia	83
Bengali	Bangladesh, India	2
Bulgarian	Bulgaria	7
Burmese	Burma	8
Chinese		31
Czech		11
Finnish		7
Greek		21
Hebrew	Israel	6
Hindi	India	3
Hungarian		11
Icelandic		1
Indonesian		62
Japanese		44
Korean		13
Lao	Laos	2
Macedonian	Yugoslavia, Greece	1
Malay	Malaysia	3
Nepali	Nepal	2
Persian (Afghan)	Afghanistan	5
Persian (Iranian)		12
Pilipino	Philippines	6
Polish		33
Romanian		18
Russian		67
Serbo-Croatian	Yugoslavia	31
Slovenian	Yugoslavia	1
Swahili	Kenya, Tanzania	7
Thai	Thailand	46
Turkish		41
Urdu	Pakistan	9

\*Department of Defense language positions are not included.

tions. AID had 27 percent or nearly 150 of its positions not properly filled, and ICA had 30 percent or 120 positions. The Department of Defense, with the largest number of language positions, had 32 percent of their positions inadequately filled. Although these figures appear severe, they do not give a complete picture. They do not account for (1) personnel in non-language-designated positions who know the local language, (2) outdated test scores which may not accurately reflect current abilities, and (3) personnel in language-designated position with some knowledge of the required language.

Agencies cite many reasons why they have difficulty in adequately filling their language-designated positions. One reason in particular is the pressure to fill vacancies quickly because of uncontrollable events such as medical emergencies, retirements, and changing conditions in the host country. Agencies have little control over these types of problems because of the limitations of money and positions. However, many personnel policies over which the agencies do have some control also contribute to inadequately filled positions. Among these personnel policies are: mandatory rotation every 2 to 4 years, waivers of language training prior to reporting to a new assignment, lack of career enhancement through language capabilities in some job categories, numerous disincentives to study hard languages, and monetary incentives to learn and maintain language capabilities.

Agencies have greater difficulty filling language-designated positions in the hard languages. The world languages are technically easier for Americans to learn and are more likely to be used again in a career. For example, the standard FSI course to teach an individual Spanish for a Speaking-3/Reading-3 proficiency level takes 20 weeks, but it takes almost 2 years to reach the same level in Japanese. Furthermore, there are many more jobs which require Spanish than Japanese. The State Department has over 400 Spanish positions in 20 countries, compared to only 21 Japanese positions—all in Japan.

## Solutions and Conclusions

As international cooperation continues to grow in importance, so too does the necessity to communicate in

## Overseas Language Positions Not Adequately Filled

The Federal Government has not satisfied its overseas foreign language requirements. Overseas language-

designated positions are often staffed by persons who do not have the required foreign language qualifications. For example, in 1979 the State Department had 29 percent or over 350 of its language-designated positions filled by persons who did not have the required foreign language qualifica-

other languages. We cannot continue to assume or expect that all others should speak English.

The Federal Government has made great strides in improving its language capabilities. More changes are needed in such areas as (1) training more people in foreign languages before assignment overseas (i.e., spending more money on training and maybe to hire more people), (2) assigning the right person to the right job, and (3) offering incentives to employees to acquire and, more importantly, maintain their foreign language skills.

Although a 100-percent occupied rate of language-designated positions with fully trained personnel is the ultimate goal, it is at the same time unrealistic. Continued improvements and small gains toward that 100 percent, though, will help eliminate Ben Franklin's 200-year-old complaint.

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<sup>1</sup>"Need to Improve Language Training Programs and Assignments for U.S. Government Personnel Overseas" (B-176049, Jan. 22, 1973); "Improvement Needed in Language Training and Assignments for U.S. Personnel Overseas" (ID-76-19,

June 16, 1976); "Need to Improve Foreign Language Training Programs and Assignments for Department of Defense Personnel" (ID-76-73, Nov. 24, 1976); "Study of Foreign Languages and Related Areas: --Federal Support --Administration --

Need" (ID-78-46, Sept. 13, 1978); "More Competence in Foreign Languages Needed by Federal Personnel Working Overseas" (ID-80-42, Apr. 15, 1980).