

## Foreign Language Skills are Crucial for America's Diplomatic, Business, & Security Interests

**Matthew La Corte**

Government Affairs Manager, Immigration Policy  
Niskanen Center

**Alex Voisine**

Research Intern, Immigration Policy  
Niskanen Center

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### Key Takeaways

- ▶ Being able to communicate in the native languages of our partners around the world allows the United States to project a more positive and friendly image of itself, better translating its goals and values. This soft-power advantage helps the U.S. attract and persuade other countries to work with the U.S. without employing coercive measures.
- ▶ And a 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on language proficiency at the Department of State finds proficiency “a key skill for U.S. diplomats to advance U.S. interests overseas.”
- ▶ But that report finds while foreign language proficiency improvements had been made, significant gaps in language proficiency still remained at the department. More specifically, the report found that 23 percent of positions were filled by people who did not meet the position’s language requirements.
- ▶ Countries where the U.S. has pressing diplomatic or military ties often tend to have flows of refugees and immigrants to the United States. Better capitalizing on these foreign-born individuals’ language skills can improve U.S. language proficiency at the government and business levels.

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## Introduction

Given its outsized role in international politics and economics, it should come as no surprise that the United States has an interest in having a citizenry capable of speaking a diverse range of languages. In an increasingly globalized world, having connections that span countries and cultures is a significant national asset for businesses expanding into new markets or diplomats de-escalating conflict in hostile regions.

Examples are not difficult to come up with: Native English speakers with a working knowledge of Russian or Arabic served as important representatives of U.S. interests during the Cold War and the War on Terror, respectively. Speakers of local languages continue to assist with military and diplomatic initiatives in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. Spanish speakers are able to foster business and diplomatic relationships with our Latin American neighbors, and a growing interest in Chinese language skills will yield both financial and diplomatic benefits as China becomes an increasingly important global actor.

However, the U.S. government has been warning for years that we have a foreign language deficit, which poses a unique and costly problem for our overseas interests. The government has recognized the importance of foreign language skills for decades, but improving those skills has proven easier said than done. Language gaps in the federal government — especially at the Departments of State and Defense — hamper our ability to operate effectively overseas.

## Benefits of multilingualism

Multilingualism generates soft power — a nonmilitary form of power that is based on the ability to attract and persuade other countries to work with the United States without employing coercive measures. Being able to communicate in the native languages of our partners around the world allows the United States to project a more positive and friendly image of itself, translating its goals and values into other cultural and linguistic spaces.

Individuals and institutions that operate in multiple languages are able to communicate with more depth and nuance, notably enhancing accuracy and mutual understanding, all while reducing the risks of misinterpretation. Deep knowledge of other languages that is supplemented by an engagement with local cultures, economies, and politics is especially advantageous.

A 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) [report](#) on language proficiency at the Department of State cites it as “a key skill for U.S. diplomats to advance U.S. interests overseas.” In a similar 2010 [report](#) that assessed State, the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security, the GAO said that “foreign language skills are an increasingly key element to the success of diplomatic efforts; military, counterterrorism, law enforcement and intelligence missions; and to ensure access to federal programs and services to Limited English Proficient populations within the United States.”

In a [report](#) about a proposed expansion of the language capabilities of U.S. officers, Army Col. Eric D. Homan echoes the GAO's points, saying that “cultural knowledge enables soldiers and leaders to understand the ‘how and why’ of foreign cultures and the roles that culture, religion,

and geography play in military operations. Foreign language capability enhances cross-cultural communication to facilitate mission success.”

Foreign language skills were essential to military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and continue to be vital in areas where the U.S. has ongoing military or diplomatic engagements, especially with respect to intelligence-gathering. Though it is widely believed that English remains a global language and machine-learning technology has made significant advances in rapid translation services, at present around 75 percent of the world does not speak English, and there is still a need for knowledge of local languages.

## Language gaps in the U.S.

Despite having over 65 million people who speak a language other than English at home, the United States is one of the least linguistically diverse countries in the Western world, with only 20 percent of primary and secondary students studying a foreign language. By comparison, in France, Spain, and Belgium, 100 percent, 96 percent, and 64 percent of primary and secondary students study a foreign language, respectively. A [2013 YouGov](#) poll found that 75 percent of Americans do not speak a language other than English. Even though there are around [350 languages](#) spoken in U.S. households, there seems to be a significant gap between languages spoken and languages taught/acquired.

In an [interview](#) at the Council on Foreign Relations, Esther Brimmer, the CEO of NAFSA: The Association of International Educators and a former assistant secretary of state for international organizations, cited a 2014 study that found that in a survey of 800 business leaders, 83 percent said they needed a more “internationally competent staff” and 40 percent said that they had lost business opportunities because their staff lacked adequate international competence.

In short, the United States is underutilizing its significant language resources and disadvantaging future generations of world leaders.

Perhaps more concerning than language deficiencies in the general public are the language gaps identified in some of the most prominent U.S. government institutions, each of which conducts important business abroad on a regular basis. Listed below are findings from reports by the GAO and RAND Corporation on the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and State.

### **Department of Defense**

In a [2010 report](#), the GAO recommended that DOD develop a more comprehensive strategy to increase and assess foreign language proficiency in its ranks. According to previous studies and testimony cited in the report, the DOD lacks sufficient foreign language proficiency, and these deficiencies have resulted in backlogs in the translation of intelligence documents, which has “hindered U.S. military, law enforcement, intelligence, counterterrorism and diplomatic efforts.”

Two years later, in a 2012 Senate hearing, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Readiness Laura Junor stated that while advances had been made, there still exists a significant lack in language capacity:

“Let me begin by stating that Defense Secretary Panetta has long believed that having a strong language ability is critical to our national security and we are committed to fielding the most capable force that we (can) deploy. Our mission success is directly connected to our ability to communicate effectively with local populations and international partners. Our current challenge lies in filling language-required positions with personnel that possess the requisite language skills. We have been reducing this deficiency but we need help.

### Department of State

In its 2010 [report](#), the GAO noted “persistent shortfalls” in the State Department’s language capacities and recommended a comprehensive strategy with feedback mechanisms and measurable goals and objectives. A 2017 GAO report on the department’s foreign language proficiency found that while improvements had been made since the 2010 report, significant gaps in language proficiency still remained. More specifically, the 2017 report found that 23 percent of State Department positions were filled by people who did not meet that position’s language requirements.

The regions with the most significant understaffing of language-proficient agents are South Asia, the Near East, and Africa. Officers who did not meet the proficiency requirements staffed 36 percent of positions that required Arabic. The figures were 53 percent for Dari, 36 percent for Farsi, and 44 percent for Urdu. In fact, some positions remain unstaffed due to the State Department’s inability to find a language-proficient person to take the position. Others were purposefully classified as not requiring a foreign language, even though foreign language proficiency is an important part of the position.

The report also includes interviews with State Department employees in various field offices, who have noted that language deficiencies have negatively affected their ability to work. One of the most concerning findings in the report is that field officers cited a lack of Arabic proficiency as a contributing factor to the diplomatic failure of the U.S. during the war in Libya. Field officers also said that the ability to speak the local language and understand the politics and culture of the placement country enhance the State Department’s overall diplomatic capacities; being able to read the local news, interpret statements made on the social media accounts of local politicians, and analyze economic trends or financial documents helps to identify the “subtle differences” that give U.S. diplomatic efforts a particular edge.

According to the report, State cited many factors that detract from its efforts to increase language proficiency, including: budgetary constraints; the inability to place agents with family ties to countries like China and Russia in those countries due to security clearance considerations; the high cost of language training, which can reach up to \$480,000 per agent for languages like Arabic and Chinese; and a generally small pool of language-proficient citizens to recruit from.

## Department of Homeland Security

Though the DHS conducts most of its operations domestically, foreign language skills are still useful for in-country operations, such as disaster assistance in immigrant communities, support for asylum-seekers at the U.S. border, counterterrorism efforts and infrequent but significant meetings in foreign countries. As of the 2010 GAO [report](#), the DHS only provided language training in Spanish, and many of the officials interviewed for the report were unaware of these language training programs. The report recommended that the DHS increase its foreign language proficiency efforts by developing mechanisms to assess shortfalls, increasing training, and offering monetary awards to speakers of languages other than English.

For its part, DHS' Federal Emergency Management Agency has employed a more proactive approach to its foreign language capacities, launching a program to identify its needs and develop strategies to better serve foreign-language communities, including communities where Bosnian, Farsi, Kirundi, and Somali are spoken. FEMA also has a reserve corps of speakers of less-spoken languages; in times of crisis, it contracts with these speakers.

## Refugee resettlement and immigration integration as a language-gap reduction strategy

All three government agencies and nearly all the speakers in the 2012 Senate hearing cited a generalized lack of language proficiency among the U.S. workforce as inhibiting their abilities to fill positions that require or could benefit from foreign language proficiency.

Addressing this requires a more intentional and long-term national effort to encourage foreign language instruction in schools and foster a culture of respect for multilingualism. In the short term, there are strategies that the U.S. could employ that would not only increase foreign language capacities but also provide avenues of opportunity for refugees and immigrants who speak languages other than English.

The countries from which the United States receives the most refugees also tend to be countries where the U.S. has pressing diplomatic or military ties. Countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Somalia have been the objects of U.S. military and diplomatic missions, and established refugee and immigrant communities from those countries can be consulted to prepare government agents with the language capacity and local knowledge necessary to be responsible and conscientious actors.

### **Hire refugee/immigrant language instructors at all levels**

One of the easiest ways to improve and diversify foreign language proficiency is to create opportunities for speakers of other languages to teach, and in so doing, to spread local knowledge drawn from real-life experiences living in a country where the target language is spoken. As mentioned above, over 65 million people residing in the U.S. speak a combined total of 350

languages, yet reports cite a national shortage of foreign language teachers and cuts to foreign language programs at all educational levels.

The Department of Education would do well to consider creating more opportunities for resettled refugees and immigrants to teach their languages in local schools or community centers. Many refugees arrive with high levels of education but lack the qualifications to continue in the field that they had been working in back in their home country; for some, teaching would be a valuable job opportunity that makes better use of their skill set than a low-wage service job. Some cities have launched initiatives to reduce the gap between immigrants/refugees and the public education system. Both New York and Chicago have educational programs that draw on immigrant language skills, and New Hampshire has created opportunities for language diffusion in communities with large populations of refugees.

Additionally, according to a RAND report on the costs of foreign language instruction in the DOD, civilian, nonveteran language instructors with upper-level proficiency in critical languages cost less and teach for longer than both military personnel and civilian instructors who are veterans. Hiring refugees to give language courses to government employees would reduce costs, and the contextual knowledge that refugees would offer, having lived in areas that are often of interest to U.S. diplomatic or military operations, would provide language students with important real-world perspectives.

### **Preserve heritage languages**

Heritage languages are minority languages that are spoken by first-generation immigrants and refugees but are at risk of being lost because the social environments of second and third generations privilege English over minority languages. Oftentimes, after two or three generations, the progeny of refugees or immigrants are unable to communicate in the language that their parents or grandparents spoke upon arriving. Some attribute this to the assimilatory nature of the U.S. education system, which provides limited opportunities for speakers of heritage languages to maintain their language.

Instead, the languages spoken by refugees and immigrants should be celebrated and valued, and not seen as a threat to assimilation. Georgetown University, for example, has a special program that does just this, called the English for Heritage Language Speakers Program. Participants, who must be U.S. citizens and speakers of a heritage language, are trained to work in the government and are also given English-language courses. The military's LEAP (Language-Enabled Airmen Program) and Flagship Program recruit and train participants in languages that they've learned growing up or in school. All of these programs could be expanded.

Additionally, heritage language preservation programs should start earlier, perhaps as early as elementary school. In tandem with an increase in access to language programs and more collaboration with refugee and immigrant teachers, universities and the Department of Education could consider offering scholarships or extra support for high school or university students who wish to continue fine-tuning their heritage language skills while simultaneously improving their English skills.

### **Initiate special recruitment programs for refugees/immigrants and their children**

To fill the gaps in the DOD, State Department, and other government agencies, programs like MAVNI or the O9L program offer an excellent framework for recruiting speakers of foreign languages. Though there are often added burdens during the security clearance process for U.S. citizens born abroad, the State Department has increased its recruitment of foreign or heritage language speakers by offering extra points on the foreign service exam. However, recruitment efforts have not been successful in filling the language gaps at State, despite the fact that refugees, immigrants and their children can often speak the languages that the department most needs. Current recruitment programs should be expanded and new programs ought to be developed.

Many speakers of heritage languages do not wish to enlist in the military or work for a government agency. Employers in other sectors should be encouraged to recruit heritage-language speakers and enable language retention.

### **Increase refugee resettlement from target countries**

Cuts to refugee admissions in recent years are blind to the growing need for speakers of minority languages. Refugee resettlement ought to be framed as a critical source of linguistic capital that will ultimately enhance security, increase access to global markets, and improve international relations. In tandem with better integration programs that value and make use of the languages of refugees, strategically resettling them in parts of the country with shortages of foreign language teachers would help to mitigate language gaps in the general public. The DOD, State Department, and other government agencies should include their language needs in discussions surrounding refugee-cap determinations.

### **Attach more cultural value to language learning**

To address general gaps in language proficiency, the public and private sectors should collaborate on a series of projects that instill a sense of respect for multilingualism. A cultural shift in the value attached to foreign language skills may encourage heritage speakers to not abandon their languages while also encouraging native English speakers to pursue foreign language study. For one, investments in international education for elementary and middle schoolers should be increased. This could go towards foreign language programs, classes about international topics, events celebrating other cultures, and clubs for language or cultural studies.

At the high school level, more opportunities for language exchange and access to reading and media materials in languages other than English, and the knowledge of foreign language as a college admissions benefit, would help to foster a more global intellectual curiosity.

At the university level, career advisors could help to increase enrollment in language programs by citing foreign language skills as an asset in the hiring process. Private sector recruiters should also list foreign language skills as an asset in the hiring process, and the private sector should be encouraged to invest in language programs for undergraduate students. More funding for study-

abroad programs should be made available and more efforts should be made to cultivate interaction among international students and their domestic counterparts.

At the national level, language diversity could be increased in public spaces to both normalize multilingualism and make public spaces more accessible to non-English speakers. Language courses for the general public could be subsidized, and community colleges in particular could become spaces for language instruction, again drawing from local refugee and immigrant populations for teaching positions. Fostering a culture of acceptance of multilingualism will make speakers of foreign languages feel less pressured to abandon their other languages and replace them with English.

## Conclusion

Slashing refugee admissions is a missed opportunity to enhance U.S. language capacity. Refugees and immigrants offer linguistic diversity and firsthand knowledge of the countries and regions that they come from. The significant gaps in language proficiency at all levels of U.S. society can be reduced by collaborating with refugees and immigrants in ways that are mutually reinforcing. Though a long-term paradigm shift in the value the United States attaches to language study would help to speed up the process of enhancing overall language capacity, there are short-term fixes that can initiate a trend towards valuing foreign languages as an asset, not a liability to be erased via aggressive processes of assimilation. National security, the economy, diplomacy, and intelligence-gathering are compromised by gaps in language skills.

Refugees, immigrants, and their children should be encouraged to embrace and share their rich linguistic and cultural traditions and thereby prepare future generations of Americans to be responsible and conscientious global leaders.