

AMERICANS & LANGUAGE

PART III: AMERICANS AND LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE

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Americans & Language, Part III
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“What do you call a person who speaks two languages?”

Bilingual.

“What do you call a person who speaks three languages?”

Trilingual.

“What do you call a person who speaks one language?”

An American.

In Part I of *Americans & Language*, we explored the role of English as a main vehicle for opportunity and financial success in the United States and the world. As the world’s most valuable language, English is the cornerstone upon which global business and global understanding are built. The reach of English crosses conventional borders to extend to every corner of the globe, and its importance continues to grow.

Later, we examined the rates of bilingualism in other major English speaking nations around the world. The exploration of low rates of foreign language learning and the possible reasons behind these rates in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and Ireland made up the basis for Part II of our language study.

Given what we learned in Parts I & II about the differences in opportunity faced by native English speakers and speakers of other languages, Americans can hardly be faulted for placing a lower priority on foreign language learning than in non-English speaking nations. While some people may still choose to find fault with the United States and its citizens by pointing out low levels of foreign language knowledge here, there is only one major problem with this fuel to the “stupid American” fire – it simply is not true.

Foreign Language Knowledge

As we learned from our examination of foreign language knowledge rates in Part II, it is impossible to establish a concrete figure for the number of Americans who speak more than one language. The only large scale study of Americans and the languages they speak comes from the decennial census, which asks each respondent to list the language he speaks at home. If that language spoken at home is English, no additional information is requested. The respondent might speak five other languages or zero other languages, but the Census does not request that information.

The only glimpse we get into bilingualism among Americans comes from respondents who indicate that he or she speaks a language other than English at home. In this case, the person is asked what language he speaks, and his degree of English fluency. The ability to speak English is self-reported with one of four possible answers, “very well,” “well,” “not well” or “not at all.”

It bears mentioning again that the degree of fluency is self-reported. While Census respondents get no benefit from lying on the form, the categories are broad and subject to personal interpretation. No benchmarks for the different levels exist - what is “very well” for one person might be considered “well” by another. Furthermore, the Census asks how well the individual *speaks* English. Language understanding is a multi-level process, one that includes speaking, reading, writing and comprehending the spoken word. For many foreign language users, speaking the language is often easier than writing or comprehending the speech of others.

Therefore, while the Census figure for bilingualism may be the only one that covers a sample size in the millions, it is a seriously flawed figure. Unfortunately, some proponents of the “stupid American” model choose to use this number as they castigate Americans for their supposed shortcomings.

When legislation was introduced in the U.S. Senate designating 2005 as the “Year of Foreign Language Study,” it contained this fact among its findings, “Whereas according to the 2000 decennial census of the population, 9.3 percent of Americans speak both their native language and another language fluently” [1].

Now 9.3 percent would be a shocking number... if it were true. The 9.3 percent figure was calculated by taking the number of Americans who speak a language *other* than English at home *and* speak English very well (25.63 million) and dividing it by the total number of Americans age five and older (262.38 million), as reported by the U.S. Census.

Under this erroneous calculation, Juan Doe who speaks Spanish at home and speaks English very well, is bilingual, while Jose Doe, who speaks English at home, but speaks Spanish too, is not. Neither are Jane Doe (a U.S. born English speaker who majored in Spanish at college), or John Doe (a U.S. born English speaker who spent 15 years in France and now works as a translator). In the end, the 9.3 percent figure ignores nearly every native-born American. Yet the honesty of this figure was never questioned by the Senators. Shocked into action by this flawed figure, the Senate passed the bill unanimously on 17 February 2005.

The number of Americans fluent in more than one language does not approach that of some of the nations in Europe where English is not the native language, such as Luxembourg and Slovakia. But the percentage of Americans who are bilingual is definitely higher than 9.3 percent. Given what we do know, it is quite likely that if we use the definitions of bilingualism set forth by Statistics Canada (“Able to hold a conversation in another language”), the United Kingdom and Ireland (“Know another language well enough to have a conversation”), then our rate of bilingualism is likely between three and four times the figure cited by the Senators.

According to the figure cited by the Senate, of the 262,375,152 Americans age five and older, only the following are considered bilingual:	
Americans who speak a language other than English at home and speak English very well	25,631,548 (9.3%)
The Senate resolution assumes the following groups of Americans do not have a <u>single</u> bilingual member:	
Foreign born who speak English at home:	5,212,041 (2.0%)
Foreign born who speak a language other than English at home and speak English well:	6,704,401 (2.6%)
Native born who speak a language other than English at home and speak English well:	3,629,155 (1.4%)
All other native born Americans who speak English at home:	210,211,156 (80.1%)
[Source: Census 2000]	

Starting from the Beginning

From the Census data, we find that 47.0 million Americans speak another language at home, and 36.0 million of them speak English “very well” or “well.” While the Census labels individuals who speak English “well” as limited English proficient, it is hard to imagine that those who meet this designation cannot have a conversation in English. Using those 36.0 million bilingual individuals as a base, this means that one-seventh of the U.S. population is bilingual, even if we pretend that not a single American who speaks English at home can speak another language as well [Census 2000].

A Glimpse of American Bilingualism: Facts From Census 2000

Americans, age five and older:	262,375,152
Speak English at home:	215,423,557
Speak a language other than English at home:	46,951,955
<i>and speak English “very well” or “well”:</i>	<i>35,965,104</i>
and speak English “not well” or “not at all”:	10,986,851

Key: Definitely bilingual population in *italics*; unknown bilingual status in **bold**

Such a hypothesis would take a lot of pretending. While not everyone who took three years of language classes in high school or college can be classified as fluent, there are plenty of people who may have taken a single year of foreign language classes, or even a single class, and be able to hold a simple conversation in that language. In many cases, the pronunciation and grammar may be imperfect, but the message will get across. Though a complete understanding of the language may be lacking, this is still effective communication. Moreover, there are many additions to our one-in-seven figure.

Nationwide Polls

Nationwide polls also offer insight into the rates of bilingualism among Americans. According to a 2001 Gallup poll, 26 percent of American adults surveyed said they could speak a language other than English well enough to hold a conversation [2]. This rate alone is already three times the rate quoted in the Senate legislation. Yet this figure, like nearly all American polls conducted by English speakers and during traditional polling hours, is likely to undercount minorities and immigrants, especially those who speak their native language at home.

The polling data is consistent with prior figures, which in 1983 found that 29 percent of Americans adults could speak a language other than English well enough to be understood [3]. In 1977, 32 percent of Americans said they could speak a foreign language well enough to be understood [4].

Dual Language Knowledge in the United States: Selected Polls

1977, Roper: Speak a foreign language well enough to be understood

32%

1983, Roper: Speak a language other than English well enough to be understood

29%

2001, Gallup: Speak a language other than English well enough to hold a conversation

26%

Given the fact that the older generation of second language speakers – those who immigrated or whose parents immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century, is being replaced by a younger generation of second language speakers – recent immigrants and college students – who are less likely to be polled, the recorded decline is not surprising. As we will discuss later, other indications show that the rate of foreign language learning is likely on the increase.

While foreign language learning cannot be seen as a proxy for bilingualism, it can offer a fair indication of how many people might have a basic understanding of a language. Again, a class or series of classes will not prepare a person for life in another language, or even enough to watch foreign language television or read foreign language periodicals. It may, however, provide enough instruction for the basics of communication, such as ordering a meal, asking for directions, or obtaining emergency assistance.

Using this metric, more Americans have taken language instruction than might be assumed, and it is likely that this number is rising. In 1988, a National Geographic Society poll found that 51 percent of Americans had studied a foreign language in school, with 36 percent of Americans taking two years or more of foreign language study [5]. A 1995 Gallup poll found that 62 percent of Americans had taken a foreign language class in elementary, middle, junior high or high school, and that nearly 75 percent of those under the age of 50 had done so [6].

While we may be left to debate the effectiveness of these foreign language courses, or consider whether Americans maintain different criteria by which to call themselves bilingual, the evidence that most Americans have experienced some type of foreign language training is incontrovertible. Proponents of the “stupid American” stereotype are going to be even more disappointed when confronted with another unquestionable fact. The number of Americans enrolled in foreign language training is rising.

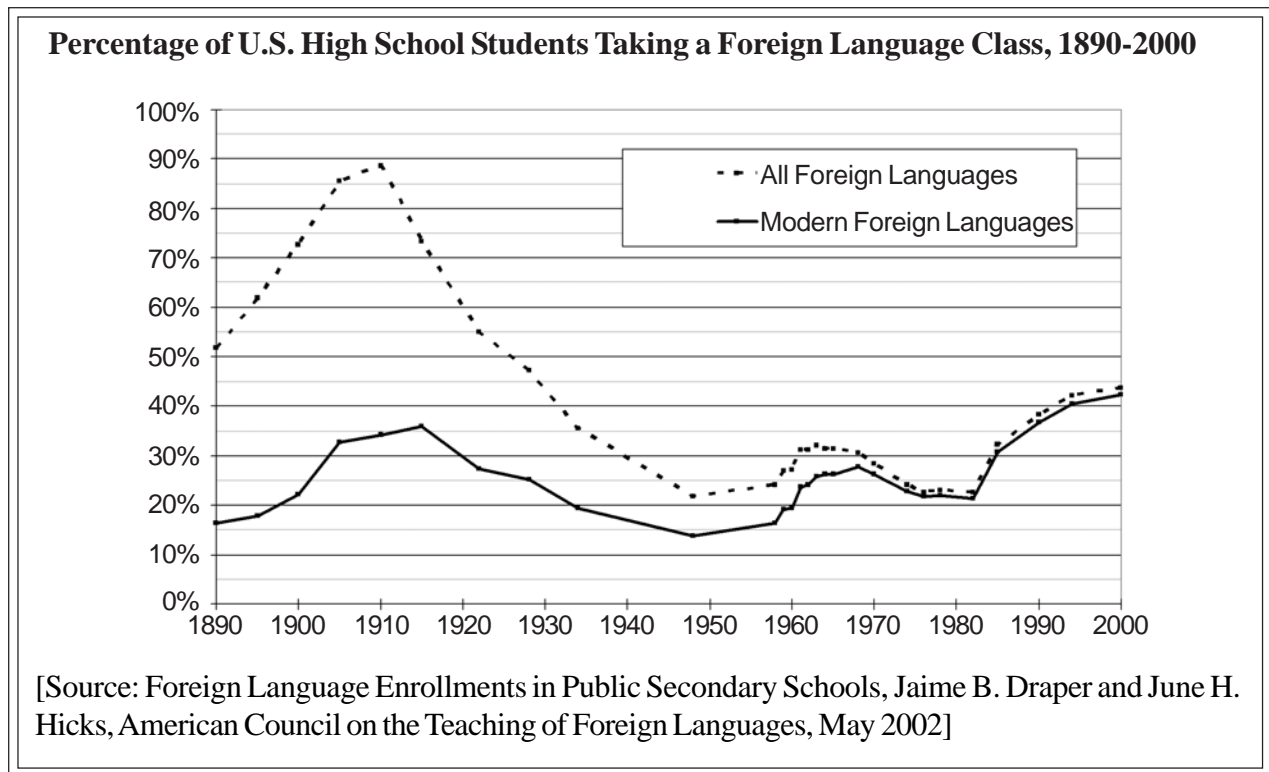
Foreign Language Classes

Statistics reveal that the number of Americans enrolled in foreign language courses has continued to increase in recent years. According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 43.8 percent of American high school students in 2000 were enrolled in a foreign language class [7]. This represents a significant increase from the mark of 32.3 percent of high school students who were taking foreign language classes in 1985. In fact, the number of high school students enrolled in foreign language classes doubled between 1982-2000, even though high school enrollment only increased by four percent over this span.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Foreign Language Students</u>	<u>Total H.S. Students</u>	<u>Pct.</u>
1905	540,368	609,702	88.6
1915	972,821	1,328,984	73.2
1928	1,583,322	3,354,473	47.2
1948	1,169,974	5,399,452	21.7
1958	2,204,659	7,897,232	24.2
1968	3,890,390	12,721,352	30.6
1978	3,200,113	13,941,369	23.0
1985	4,028,871	12,466,586	32.3
1994	5,001,864	11,847,469	42.2
2000	5,898,138	13,475,780	43.8

[Source: Foreign Language Enrollments in Public Secondary Schools, Jaime B. Draper and June H. Hicks, American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, May 2002]

The 43.8 percent figure represented the highest proportion of students taking a foreign language since 1928. When one considers that 47 percent of the foreign language learners in 1928 were taking Latin (down from 71 percent in 1905, and 51 percent in 1915), the 2000 figure may represent the largest portion of the American high school population taking a foreign language that is in general circulation. [7].



While it is impressive that a growing number of American high school students are taking a foreign language class, it is even more impressive that they are electing to do so even absent a foreign language requirement for graduation. According to the Education Commission of the States, only two states and the District of Columbia had a language requirement for a basic high school diploma for the class of 2007. In none of these three jurisdictions did the mandatory foreign language provision exceed two years of instruction [8].

In the remainder of the states, more than two-thirds have no foreign language requirement for the high school diplomas they sanction. Only 14 states mandate foreign language classes in order to obtain an advanced high school diploma, often known as a College Preparatory Diploma or Advanced Diploma [8].

These foreign language requirements are well intentioned. A U.S. English survey of 19 major public universities in the United States found that the vast majority of them have a minimum requirement for high school foreign language study [9].

<u>University</u>	<u>Foreign Language Requirement</u>
Alabama, Univ. of	1 year of foreign language study
Arizona State Univ.	2 years of a single foreign language
Auburn University	No specific foreign language requirement
California-Los Angeles, Univ. of	2 years of a foreign language
Colorado, Univ. of	3 years of a single foreign language
Georgia, Univ. of	2 years of a single foreign language
Illinois, Univ. of	2 years of a single foreign language
Indiana University	No specific foreign language requirement
Miami University	2 years of a single foreign language
Michigan, Univ. of	2 years of foreign language study
Minnesota, Univ. of	2 years of a single foreign language
Missouri University	2 years of a single foreign language
North Carolina, Univ. of	2 years of a single foreign language
Oklahoma, Univ. of	No specific foreign language requirement
Penn State University	No specific foreign language requirement
South Carolina, Univ. of	2 years of a single foreign language
Tennessee, Univ. of	2 years of a single foreign language
Virginia, Univ. of	2 years of foreign language study
Washington, Univ. of	2 years of a single foreign language

In the United States, foreign languages are, for the most part, an optional addition to the core curriculum. Though they may be taken for the purposes of receiving an advanced diploma or to graduate from college, foreign language classes are not required for the majority of students obtaining public education. This stands in stark contrast to nations such as Denmark, which requires three years of English classes and three years of an additional foreign language; the Netherlands, where English classes are compulsory in high school; and Hungary, which requires a foreign language as part of both primary and secondary school education.

Again, most Americans are not required to take foreign language classes. Yet as we learned from the figures above, many do. The conclusion drawn from the difference between requirement and reality stands the “stupid American” stereotype on its ear. Each year, millions of Americans voluntarily take foreign language classes that for most will have little effect on their income, job, or day-to-day lives. And as further research shows, the so-called “Stupid American” doesn’t just take foreign languages classes for kicks, they understand the value of even more foreign language classes.

The Value of Foreign Languages

Though English will likely be the only language most Americans need in order to do their jobs effectively, most see the value in foreign language learning. This benefit, even beyond that of graduating from high school and getting into a university, is understood almost universally.

Polls validate this belief. In 2002, seven-in-ten Americans said they completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement “children need to learn a foreign language to succeed in the world today” [10]. Two years earlier, nearly five-in-eight Americans called foreign language learning “as valuable as math or science in school” [11]. Furthermore, only four percent of respondents to a 2005 Gallup poll said the school their oldest child was attending was placing too much emphasis on foreign languages [12].

This trend is nothing new;

- * In 1997, 83 percent of registered voters called knowing how to speak a foreign language very important, fairly important or somewhat important for getting ahead in the future [13].
- * A 1985 study by the National Institute of Education found that nearly 60 percent of Americans said that college bound students in their local community should be required to take two years of a foreign language in order to graduate from high school [14].
- * In 1983, a Merit survey found that 61 percent of Americans believed public schools should require all students with the ability to study a foreign language to do so [15].
- * In 1979, when the population speaking a language other than English at home was half of what it was in 2000, 43 percent of Americans still called foreign language teaching “essential” for all high school students, according to a Gallup poll [16].

It appears that even with the endless list of opportunities that come with being able to speak English, Americans remain strong supporters of learning other languages besides the native tongue. With majority support for foreign language learning, how is it that expectations fail to match reality?

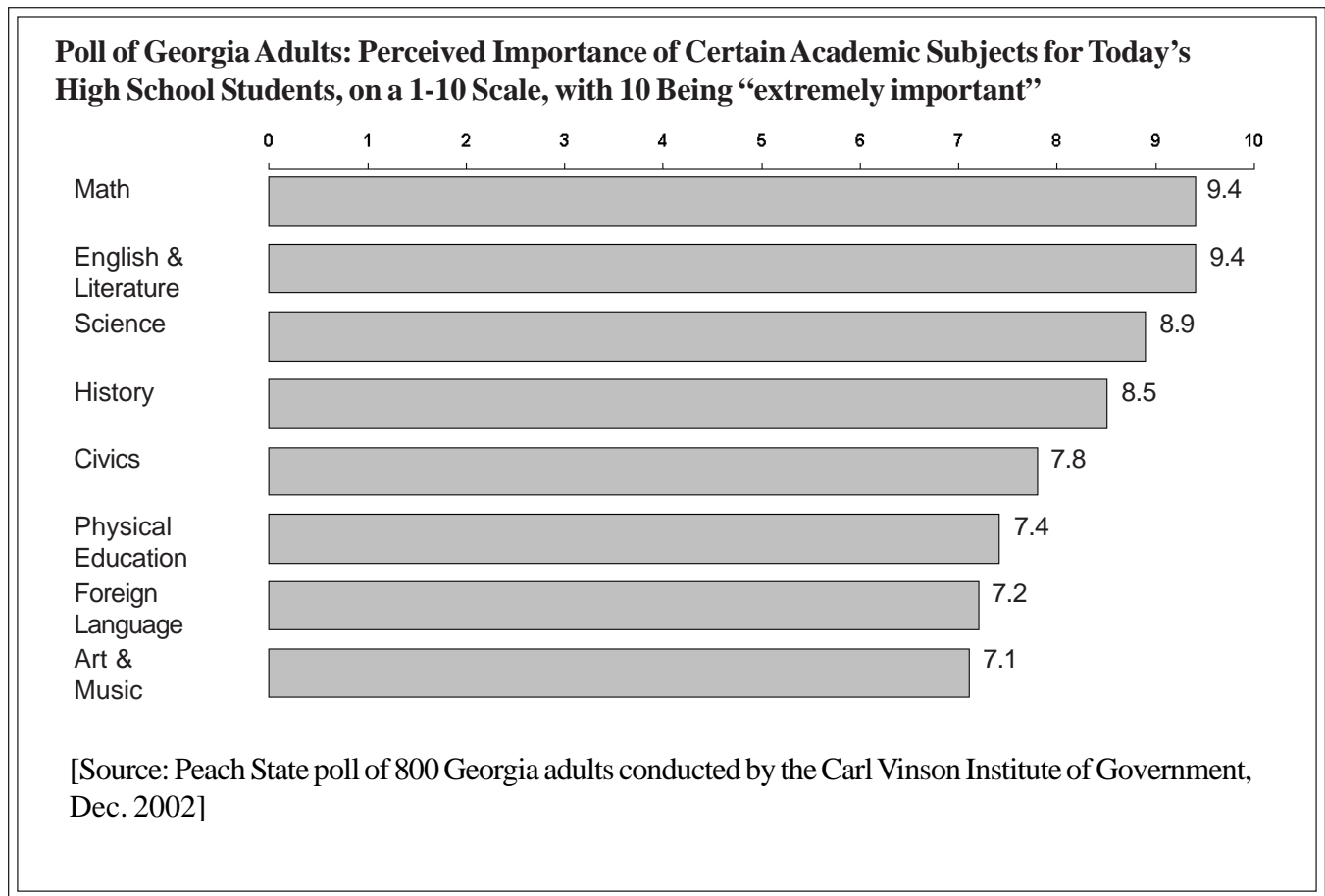
The Delicate Balance

Some of the gap between expectations and reality can be explained in a manner that applies to nearly all discrepancies between desire and truth – the unwieldy combination of competing pressures and time. While Americans may support their foreign languages, these classes compete against others within a limited school day and a limited school year. And when foreign languages compete against those classes that directly affect success in the United States, such as English grammar or mathematics, Americans are reluctant to give up the latter in exchange for the former. While it may be a parent’s dream to teach Mary to be bilingual, it is not in a parent’s best interest to have Johnny fluent in Spanish, but unable to add two plus two.

Striking a balance between need and desire is a decision we all make on a frequent basis. College students, who find themselves facing a list of seemingly endless educational choices, may find dozens of classes that interest them. However, even as the student may be *interested* in sampling classes in geology, African history, modern literature and drama, that same student knows he or she can’t take too many “elective” classes at the risk of failing to fulfill the requirements of his/her major.

An examination of polling data demonstrates how the strong support for more language classes collides with the an even stronger need for education in core subjects. A 2002 poll of 800 Georgia adults conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government found that 69 percent of respondents had taken a foreign language course in high school and that 64 percent believed that high schools should require a foreign language course. When these individuals were asked to rank foreign language classes on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being an “extremely important” class for high school students to take, foreign language classes averaged an impressive 7.2.

However, when compared among the eight different subjects polled, foreign language classes placed *seventh*, only narrowly beating out art and music classes, which averaged a 7.1 on the same scale. When graded for importance for high school students, foreign language classes ranked behind physical education classes (7.4) and civics classes (7.8) and finished considerably back of math classes (9.4) and English and literature classes (9.4) classes [17].

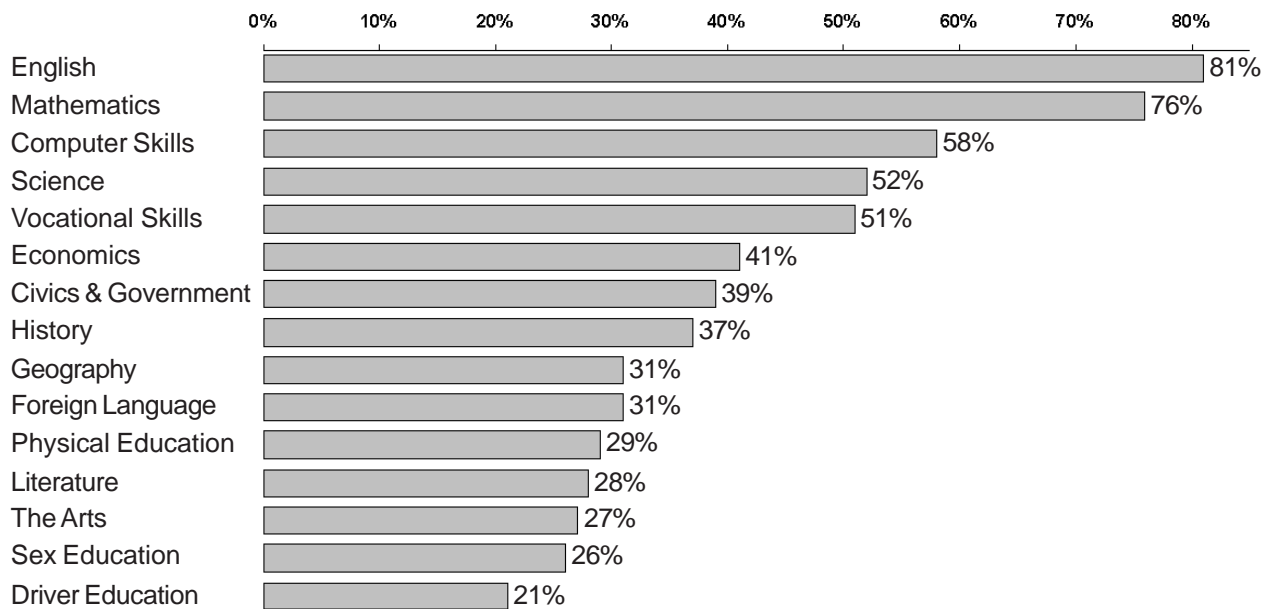


The sentiment that foreign language courses are important, but other classes are more vital has been measured for years. In 1983, the Roper Organization asked 2,000 adults about their feelings regarding certain subjects taught in the public schools. Respondents were offered a list of 15 subjects and asked to note those topics which they believed public schools should give "a lot more attention."

Nearly one-in-three of those polled said foreign languages deserved more emphasis, an impressive stand-alone number. When compared to other subjects, however, foreign languages ranked toward the bottom of the priority list. While one-in-three favored more foreign language instruction, four-in-five said that English grammar, reading and writing should be given more emphasis, three-in-four sought a greater dedication to math, and more than one-half wanted more science education.

Foreign languages (31 percent) was tied with geography (31 percent), just ahead of physical education (29 percent), the arts (27 percent) and sex education (26 percent) among subjects that adults felt deserved greater attention in the public schools. Taking the bottom figure [sex education] as the baseline, foreign languages were deemed as requiring more attention by only five additional percent of those polled. English grammar was cited by more than 55 percent over the baseline figure [18].

Poll of American Adults: Percentage of Respondents Who Say Schools Should Give Specific Academic Subjects “A Lot More Attention”



[Source: Roper Organization poll of 2,000 adults, June 1983]

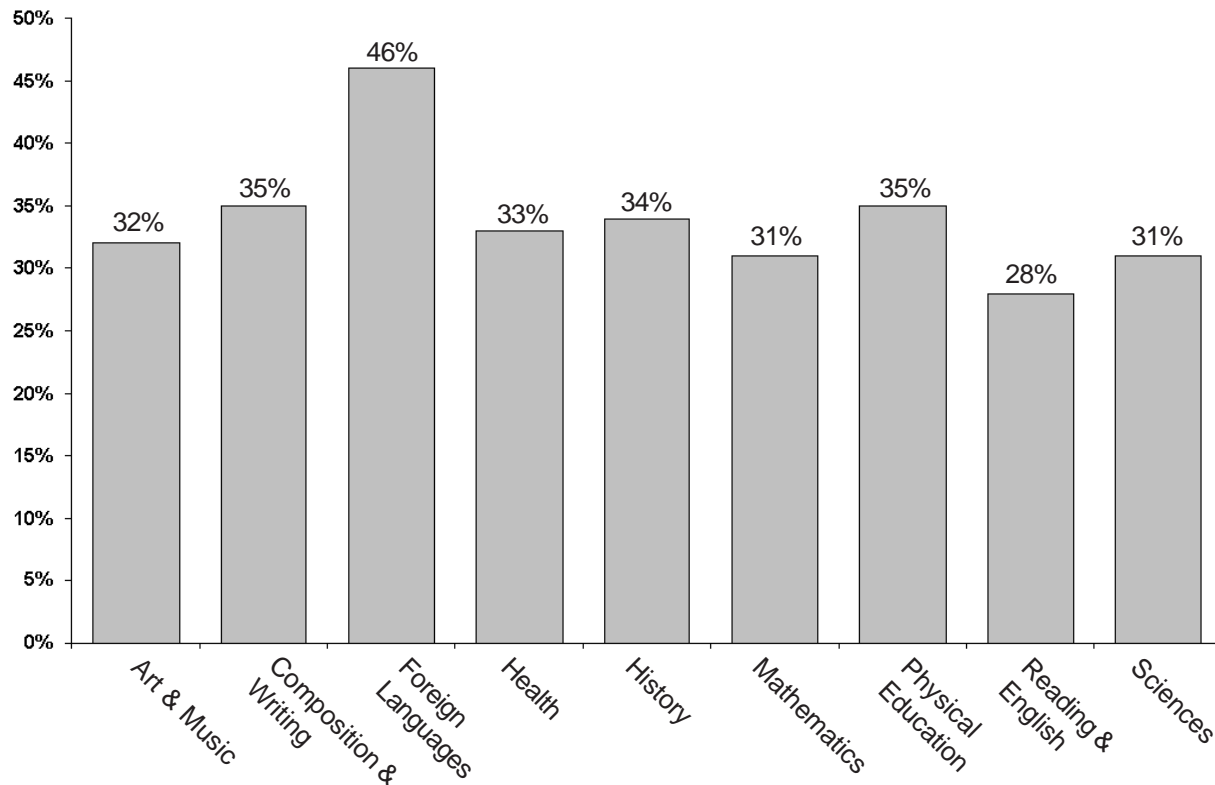
Given that 100 percent of American public schools already devote considerable time to teaching English, math and science, the implication of the poll results sends a clear message regarding American’s beliefs about education. It appears that while bonus side orders of foreign language and arts education are enticing to some, a larger helping of the core subjects appeal almost universally.

In 2005, a Gallup Organization poll found that Americans still believe certain subjects need more attention in school. That year, a survey of 1,001 American adults offered a list of subjects and asked respondents to note whether children today receive “too little education” in that subject.

Nearly half of those polled said that children today receive too little education in foreign languages, which led the list of nine choices. Yet at the same time, one-third of respondents cited a shortage in composition and writing, one-third noted a shortfall in history classes and one-third said that children did not receive enough health education. When compared to the entire list of subjects needing more attention, the placement of foreign language at the top of the list loses some luster [19].

As shown in the chart on the next page, at least 28 percent of those polled found fault with the current level of teaching in each subject. While the tally of foreign languages did exceed that of any other area, it was a mere 18 percent above the “baseline” figure.

2005 Gallup Poll: Percentage of Americans Who Believe There is “Too Little” Education for Children, in Certain Subjects



[Source: Gallup Organization poll of 1,001 adults, 8-11 August 2005]

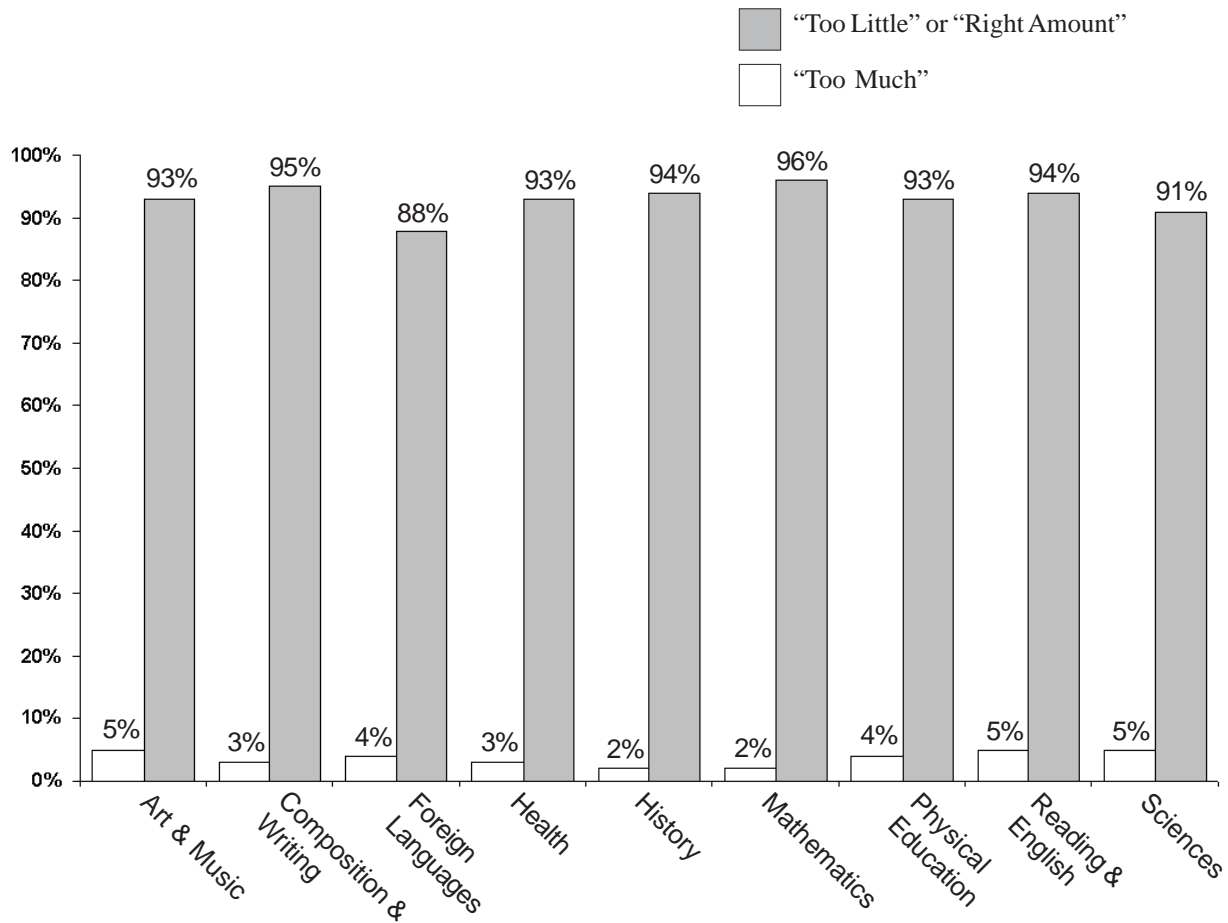
The poll results demonstrate that American adults support more education in certain topics. But an expanded look at the responses also demonstrate the biggest challenge facing additional instruction – no one wants to make cuts.

In addition to asking which subjects had “too little” education, the same Gallup Survey also offered adults the option of whether students were given the “right amount” of education in a subject or “too much” education in a subject. Ideally, one would hope that there would be strong support for cutting back on certain subjects with “too much” education. However, the results indicate that Americans almost universally deny that such a glut of instruction exists.

With no extra time to build into the school day, and no subject matter to cut, the lowest level priorities are forced to the sidelines in favor of those classes which will provide the greatest benefit. For the vast majority of school districts in an English-speaking nation, this means that when the tough choices are made, foreign languages fall to the bottom of the list.

This is not a result of xenophobia, nativism or a dislike of other cultures. It simply is a realization that a student who has a firm grasp of the “3 R’s” will be far more likely to be successful in the United States than a student who has command of 2 “R’s” and a foreign language.

2005 Gallup Poll: Percentage of Americans Who Believe There is “Too Much” or “Too Little” Education for Children, in Certain Subjects



[Source: Gallup Organization poll of 1,001 adults, 8-11 August 2005]

Tying it All Together

While it may be the “in” thing to bash Americans for being monolingual English speakers, such an act is done in defiance of the facts and without regard to the side effects of a possible solution. Americans have long been interested in studying foreign languages, and the numbers are on the increase despite the subject remaining an elective course for most high school diplomas. When considering foreign languages as a single subject, Americans understand the value of this knowledge, whether to meet college requirements or simply to expand students’ learning opportunities.

However, when the value of foreign languages is weighed against the many other subjects that must fit into the school day, it is perceived to be of far less value. As we learned in Part I of *Americans & Language*, Americans who speak English already have access to the vast majority of the world's news, documents and entertainment. Like in the many English dominant countries we examined in part II of *Americans & Language*, given many choices but limited time, it behooves most Americans to round out their educational experience with subjects that will expand their employment opportunities in the United States, not expand their knowledge of world languages.

This focus may make Americans less “worldly,” but it should hardly be the punchline of a joke. After all:

“What do you call a person who lives in the second most productive nation in the world?”

Japanese.

“What do you call a person who lives in the third most productive nation in the world?”

German.

“What do you call a person who lives in the most productive nation in the world?”

An American.

Footnotes:

1 - S. Res. 28. Congressional Record. Feb. 1, 2005: S. 822

2 – Gallup Organization. March 26-28, 2001. Question: “Do you personally speak a language other than English well enough to hold a conversation?” Method: National telephone survey of 1,024 adults.

3 – Roper Organization. Jan. 8-22, 1983. Question: “Here is a list of some foreign languages. (Card shown respondent) Which of these languages, if any, do you happen to speak—that is, at least well enough to make yourself understood?” Method: Personal interview of 2,000 national adults.

4 – Roper Organization. Jan. 8-22, 1977. Question: “Here is a list of some foreign languages. Which of these languages, if any, do you happen to speak—that is, at least well enough to make yourself understood?” Method: Personal interview of 2,006 national adults.

5 – Gallup Organization, for the National Geographic Society. April 30 – May 8, 1988. Question: “How many years did you spend studying foreign languages in school?” Method: Personal interview of 1,611 national adults.

Footnotes, continued:

- 6 – Gallup Organization, for U.S. News & World Report, CNN and IBM. Nov. 16-19, 1995. Question: “Did you take a foreign language in elementary, middle school, junior high, or high school?” Method: National telephone survey of 824 adults.
- 7 - Draper, Jaime B. and Hicks, June H. “Foreign Language Enrollments in Public Secondary Schools.” May 2002. American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. 17 Sep 2007 <<http://www.actfl.org/files/public/Enroll2000.pdf>>.
- 8 – Dounay, Jennifer. “Alignment of High School Graduation Requirements and State-Set College Admissions Requirements.” April 2006. Education Commission of the States. 17 Sep 2007 <<http://www.ecs.org/clearing-house/68/60/6860.pdf>>.
- 9 - U.S. English Foundation Research
- 10 – Views of a Changing World. The Pew Research Center for the People & The Press, June 2003
- 11 - National Opinion Research Center. Feb. 1 – June 25, 2000. Question: “(Now please tell us whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of these statements.)... Learning a foreign language is as valuable as learning math and science in school.” Method: National telephone survey of 2,817 adults
- 12 - Gallup Organization. August 8-11, 2005. Question: “(For the next series of questions, we’d like you to think about your oldest child who will be attending kindergarten through grade 12 this year)... Now think about the school your oldest child attends, do you think there is too much emphasis, the right amount, or too little emphasis on... (subject)?” Method: National telephone survey of 1,001 adults.
- 13 – Peter D. Hart Research, for Milken Family Foundation. May. 29-31, 1997. Question: “(Let me read you some different skills that young people may need to get ahead in the future. For each one, please tell me how important you think it is in getting ahead—very important, fairly important, somewhat important, or not that important.) How important do you think...knowing how to speak a foreign language...is in order to get ahead in the future—very important, fairly important, somewhat important, or not that important?” Method: National telephone survey of 1,012 registered voters.
- 14 – Market Opinion Research. Nov. 1984 – Jan. 1985. Question: “In your opinion, in order to graduate from the high school in your local community... should college-bound students be required to take at least two years of a foreign language?” Method: National telephone survey of 1,200 adults.
- 15 - Audits & Surveys, for Merit. Sept. 6-11, 1983. Question: “Do you think that our public schools should or should not require all students with the ability to study a foreign language to do so?” Method: National telephone survey of 1,207 adults.
- 16 – Gallup Organization, for Charles F. Kettering Foundation. May 3-7, 1979. Question: “Public schools can teach many different things. Will you tell me in the case of each of these high school subjects, whether you regard it as essential for all students, or not too essential? Foreign language?” Method: Method: Personal interview of 1,511 national adults.
- 17 – Carl Vinson Institute of Government, Peach State poll. Dec. 13-21, 2002. Question: “On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being extremely important and 1 being unimportant, how important are the following subjects for Georgia’s high school students?” Method: Telephone survey of 800 Georgia adults.
- 18 – Roper Organization. June 4-11, 1983. Question: “Here is a list of some different subjects that are taught in the public schools. Some you may feel are overemphasized these days, some you may feel are underemphasized, and some you may feel are treated about right. First, would you read down that list and call off all those you think should be given a lot more attention in public schools?” Method: Personal interview of 2,000 adults.
- 19 - Gallup Organization. August 8-11, 2005. Question: “(For the next series of questions, we’d like you to think about your oldest child who will be attending kindergarten through grade 12 this year)... Now think about the school your oldest child attends, do you think there is too much emphasis, the right amount, or too little emphasis on... (subject)?” Method: National telephone survey of 1,001 adults.

