

A second language for every high school student

May 9 2011, By Cynthia Haven

All high school students should be fluent in a language other than English, and it's a matter of national urgency. So says Russell Berman – and as president of the Modern Language Association (MLA), his opinion carries some clout.

"To worry about globalization without supporting a big increase in language learning is laughable," the Stanford humanities professor wrote in this summer's MLA newsletter, in an article outlining the agenda for his presidency.

In conversation, he is just as emphatic, calling for "a national commitment to ramping up the quality of education."

"Budget attacks on language programs from the Republicans and Democrats are just the contemporary form of a xenophobia that suggests we don't need languages – and it's deeply, deeply misguided."

Berman noted that "barely a dozen states require any foreign language study to graduate from high school."

"You can't expect that we can eliminate language, eliminate the arts, dumb down history and English and have intelligent achievers come out of secondary schools," he said.

So far, according to MLA Executive Director Rosemary Feal, Berman's remarks "have been well received by MLA members as well as by the

larger academic community. Professor Berman has taken a bold stand and his leadership has generated a good deal of respect."

Support among academics

Indeed, some MLA members are rallying to the cry. "We will never attain such a goal – and I do think it's critical to strive for it – if we don't begin to raise consciousness now," said Lynne Tatlock, director of the Committee on Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis. While Berman may be "asking for what may now seem impossible," Tatlock asked, "How hard can that be if we put real resources into it and keep at it over time?"

Berman, who teaches German culture and language and comparative literature, is an expert on cultural relations between Europe and the United States. He also has been an associate dean in the School of Humanities and Sciences and director of Stanford's Overseas Studies Program. He is well equipped to handle doubters.

For example, some argue that English is now spoken everywhere, blunting the necessity for American students to learn another language. Berman scoffed. "English has become the universal language if you spend your life in airports and international hotels. It's not the lingua franca of humanity. It's a fairy tale we tell ourselves."

Monolingualism, he said, "is a disadvantage in the global economy. If you get off the plane in Germany and take a cab, you can't count on the driver speaking English," said Berman. "I would call that a disadvantage."

Of course, our schools are already linguistic melting pots, and teachers are buckling under the pressure of teaching English in classrooms where a welter of native languages and dialects jostle. "Americans are

extraordinarily skilled at making excuses for its educational system," Berman replied. "We are experts at doing students a disservice by depriving them of the opportunity to learn."

Berman's remarks come a few months after an [MLA report](#) showing that enrollment in foreign languages in higher education is on the upswing over the last decade, and spreading to include a far broader range of language studies. (Particularly stunning: Enrollments in Arabic language courses jumped 46 percent between 2006 and 2009.)

According to MLA's Feal, "Our college and university language enrollment figures show that students want to study a wide variety of languages. If students had more access to languages before entering the postsecondary system, their path to fluency would be more efficient."

U.S. lags behind other nations

She pointed out that virtually all other industrialized countries require second or third language study in the school system: "The United States should be a leader in this global competency and not be seen as lagging behind."

Karin Ryding, who teaches Arabic at Georgetown University, agreed. She pointed to an upcoming conference in Sweden that is considering quadrilingualism, particularly for the countries of Northern Europe. She cited research showing that third and fourth languages are easier to acquire once a second language has been mastered.

One of the advantages of learning foreign languages has always been its importance in teaching the structure of language itself – including one's native tongue. Such advantages extend even to such languages as Latin, which has been credited with giving its students great cognitive boosts.

"I always advise those who ask about preparing to learn Arabic to study Latin, mainly because it teaches them how morphology and syntax interact, for example, in the system of case-marking. This is a good step forward for learning Arabic structure," said Ryding.

According to Washington University's Tatlock, "Some [high school](#) students have been raised bilingually and can already move with ease across language communities. These are the lucky ones. Shouldn't bilingualism be more than a mere accident of family circumstance and instead an opportunity available to all U.S. [high school students](#)?"

Instead, native languages are often treated like a handicap to overcome, rather than as a cognitive skill and a resource that should be maintained as the students become fluent in English. Berman assailed the lack of support for the home languages of the students who arrive on our shores from Vietnam, the Ukraine and El Salvador, whose skills would be enhanced by helping them use their household language in public or academic settings.

Berman decried a "national onslaught" against the humanities and languages. Foreign language departments at many universities are facing budget cuts, mergers with other departments or closure – witness the recent shutdown of [language](#) programs at the State University of New York at Albany. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the Fulbright-Hays programs, which support educators studying abroad, also have had their budgets shorn.

While the outlook for languages is not promising, "this is no time for modest proposals, and the fight for the humanities is not for the faint of heart," Berman wrote.

Provided by Stanford University

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