

Foreign Languages

An Imperative for Adventist Schools

By Lourdes Morales-Gudmundsson

Colleges and universities across the United States are reinstating their foreign language requirement. Adventism's tradition of evangelistic outreach to peoples of all nations and tongues is sufficient justification for the study of languages at our schools. Yet over the years foreign languages have suffered on Adventist campuses. The reasons for this are probably similar in both parochial and public schools.

In some cases the teachers have been inadequately trained. There has been student indifference to language study brought on by frustration or by being unconvinced of the "usefulness" of foreign language study. The lowering or elimination of language requirements for graduation has certainly contributed to the decline. Some may feel national chauvinism also contributes to the problem. ("Why doesn't the rest of the world learn English?")

This is a time of significant social and political change in the United States. The forces driving change will inevitably influence both secular and parochial education.

The social and political climate of the Eighties has caused American educators and business leaders to view foreign language study as an essential part of secondary and higher education. However, the growing national interest in learning a foreign language probably has less to do with altruistic pedagogical considerations than with questions of political and commercial competition with Japan and other nations in the world market.

America's functional illiteracy problem encompasses both English and other languages. With the renewed emphasis on the basics has come a renewed interest in foreign languages, which in years gone by were considered a necessity only for the few who aspired to scale the academic ladder to a baccalaureate degree.

Foreign languages have historically suffered on Adventist campuses for the same reasons they have languished in the public schools.

While there is an air of repentance in recent discussions about foreign language study, supporters need not become overly optimistic. Recent history shows that enthusiasm about foreign language rises and falls with the political and social climate. In the 1950s the threat that Russians would conquer space sent Americans back to study languages. In the do your own thing Sixties, it became almost fashionable to say that one was studying Yoruba or Tagalog. But the euphoria had worn off by the early 1970s when Harvard University summarily eliminated the foreign language requirement, and everyone else followed suit. America's educators no longer saw the need for foreign languages.

Administrators (particularly financial officers) heaved a sign of relief. This reaction was as evident on Adventist college campuses as anywhere else, since, historically, monetary concerns tend to override pedagogical commitments. The bottom line on a campus that is struggling to retain students and meet its financial obligations is keeping FTE's (full-time students) happy with the curriculum and the accounts in the black.

For some years foreign language study at American Adventist colleges, as in their public counterparts, has not been a student priority. Indeed, its importance has not always been evident even to educators, many of whom recall their foreign language classes with attitudes ranging

from fondness to indifference and even horror.

But the foreign language cause has been fostered by America's need to foster international trade. The 1983 report by the Commission of Foreign Language and International Studies fell like a bomb on the business and educational world.¹ Teachers and business leaders, for once, found themselves in agreement. As the educators lamented the sorry state of foreign language study, the business sector wrung its hands over the linguistic incompetence of Americans on the international scene. Foreign language study, they concluded, was crucial to America's survival in a shrinking world. Furthermore, the nation's ability to compete in the international marketplace was not only a business advantage, but also a matter of national security.

In another document promoting foreign language education, the tone of alarm related to concerns about America's security:

Nothing less is at issue than the nation's security. At a time when the resurgent forces of nationalism and of ethnic and linguistic consciousness so directly affect global realities, the United States requires more reliable capacities to communicate with its allies, analyze the behavior of its adversaries, and earn the trust and the sympathies of the uncommitted... the President's Commission believes that our lack of foreign language competence diminishes our capacities in diplomacy, in foreign trade, and in citizen comprehension of the world in which we live and compete.²

The report went on to point out that foreign language study at the high school level was down 20 percent from 1965, a decline that was continuing at the time of the report (1980), that only one out of 20 high school students studied language more than two years (four years being considered a minimum requirement for fluency); and that only 8 percent of Amer-

ican college and universities required foreign language for admission (compared with 34 percent in 1966).

The report deplored American language deficiencies, in contrast with Japan's linguistically advantaged professionals, and decried the exorbitant government expenses required to train foreign affairs agency officials because they had received inadequate language study in school.

Along a different but related line of thought the report also lamented the geographical illiteracy of American students, citing statistics indicating that 40 percent of 12th graders could not locate Egypt and more than 20 percent did not know where to find France and China on a map.

This report and others³ jolted the American conscience. Enrollments in foreign language classes doubled between 1983 and 1988, and the foreign language profession has been busy upgrading teachers and developing programs to meet the growing demand not just for foreign language study, but for language proficiency. Denise Asfara, language specialist with the Educational Testing Services,⁴ recently commented: "What we're seeing now is a national effort to catch up... and this country has come to realize the negative consequences of linguistic isolation."

Language Tradition in Adventism

Adventist schools will not be benefitted by public monies to develop programs and train teachers, but we can draw on our traditions and resources to meet the new challenge. On the side of tradition, the Adventist Church has been mission-oriented since its very beginning. The fervor for carrying the gospel to every nation and tongue and people has not, however, always been accompanied by an equal concern for learning those people's languages. Our church has been blighted by the American resistance to the learning of a foreign language.

Misunderstanding Ellen White has not helped the situation. Being a practical woman, she insisted that an ability to write and speak English would stand an Adventist in better stead than acquiring a foreign language,⁵ and certainly be much better than learning a dead language.⁶

When she spoke in these references regarding language study her primary reference was to the so-called "dead" or classical languages and works selected as the texts used in teaching them. For a pioneer leader in a work that sought to reach the entire world, she would hardly have had much enthusiasm for Advent believers spending precious time learning languages more suited to scholarly pursuits than to the spread of the gospel.

Ellen White did make it clear that "familiarity with different languages" would be a help in mission work,⁷ and in one publication clarified her position on the study of foreign languages.

I do not say that there should be no study of the languages. The languages should be studied. Before long there will be a positive necessity for many to leave their homes, and go to work among people of other tongues; and those who have some knowledge of these languages will be able to communicate with those who do not know the truth.⁸

Learning the language in the foreign country seemed to her the most practical way to do so, and time has shown that she was correct. But she also exhorted: "Young men should be qualifying themselves for service by becoming familiar with other languages, that God may use them as mediums through which to

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communicate His saving truth to those of other nations."⁸ Our own mission and evangelistic tradition, then, give us adequate reason to promote foreign languages in the curriculum and to demand the highest quality of teaching for communication.

Defining the Mission Field

In fact, the "mission field" increasingly consists of our own immigrants. This poses a new challenge and opportunity for foreign language study in Adventist schools. The everyday opportunities to use foreign languages have motivated students to study Spanish and other languages. In a recent survey of 10 private and 16 secondary schools, enrollment increases in Spanish classes were attributed to student perception that the language was more "useful" than the others.¹⁰

Indeed, the Hispanic population is growing at a much faster rate than the rest of the U.S. population (one in every 14 Americans is now Hispanic).¹¹ This growth has been brought about by immigration from Mexico, Cuba, South America, and the war-torn nations of Central America. One need not look far for an

opportunity—or even a need—to speak a foreign language. For Adventists, this new influx poses a linguistic opportunity and an evangelistic challenge, both of which can be incorporated into the general or the modern language curriculum.

Opportunity or Threat?

Unfortunately, this influx of non-English speakers is generally perceived not as an opportunity, but as a cause for concern, as shown by the revived push in the political arena for making English America's official language. Once again the American people—and Adventists as well—are grappling with the tension between isolationism and cultural diversity, both historically fundamental elements of the American way of life.

The language problems created by the recent immigration of nationals of Asiatic and Hispanic backgrounds, for example, cannot be dealt with through one blanket type of curriculum or legislative action.

Educators need to recognize that languages do not exist in a vacuum; they are products of peoples and cultures. It is important to recognize a people's right to their language while at the same time claiming the privilege of learning that language.

Opportunities for language study exist in America and in Adventist schools today undreamed of only a decade ago. With careful planning, our schools, on all levels, can enhance their foreign language programs without too much added expense.

Principles for Success

The survival of foreign language study in Adventist schools rests firmly on an institutional commitment that is based on these principles:

1. A recognition that the Adventist Church is an international institution called to evangelize in foreign languages, inside and outside the mainland United States.
2. The Christian call to respectful coexistence among peoples of different cultures and languages, which includes the right of both English and non-English-speaking Americans to retain their own language even as they acquire competence in a new language.
3. A recognition of the Adventist Church as part of a shrinking world where effective communication is critical to international understanding, both inside and outside the church.
4. The conviction that the study of foreign languages promotes general literacy, including literacy in English.
5. The belief that foreign language skills are essential not only in an increasingly multilingual America, but also

most steadily serving others.¹⁴

Maintaining the delicate balance between job market concerns, intellectual growth, and living together in mutual respect is the renewed challenge of Adventist education in foreign languages. □

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Published in "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, U.S. Department of Education by the National Commission on Excellence" (Washington, D.C.; GPO, 1983).

² "Strength Through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability: A Report to the President From the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies," *Modern Language Journal*, 64 (1980), pp. 11, 12.

³ Richard D. Lambert, ed., "Beyond Growth: The Next Stage in Language Area Studies. A Report by the Association of American Universities," Washington: Association of American Universities, 1984); "Recommendations of the Commission on Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics," *Profession* 86 (1986), pp. 46-49; Richard D. Lambert, "Proposal to Create a National Foreign Language Center," mimeo (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1986); Association of American Universities, "To Strengthen the Nation's Investment in Foreign Languages and International Studies: A Legislative Proposal to Create a National Foundation for Foreign Languages and International Studies" (Washington: Association of American Universities, 1986), Richard D. Lambert, "Points of Leverage: An Agenda for a National Foundation for International Studies" (New York, SSRC, 1986).

⁴ Denise Asfar in "Explosion of Interest in Language Studies Results in New Standards for Teachers and Students," *ETS Developments*, 33:2 (Fall 1987), p. 5.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 234; _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1913), p. 208.

⁶ *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 382.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 497, 518; _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1923), p. 187.

⁸ *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 497.
⁹ *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 508.

¹⁰ Carol E. Klein, "What's Happening in High School Spanish? Forces and Sources of Change," *Hispania*, 71:1 (March 1988), pp. 171-175.

¹¹ As of 1986 there were 16.9 million Hispanics in the U.S. By the year 2000 Hispanics will constitute the single largest racial minority in the country.

¹² William Loveless in "The Customer—the Student—Is Numero Uno," one of a cluster of articles entitled "Do Adventist Colleges Have a Future? A Symposium," *Spectrum*, 18:4 (April 1988), p. 35, cites the American Council on Education as estimating the "75 percent of freshmen entering college now say that they are doing so to get a better job and that is the most important reason they have gone to college."

¹³ Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

¹⁴ *Spectrum*, p. 44. This article is a condensation of Dr. Stafford's series of presentations for the Scales Lectures at Pacific Union College in November 1986.

in the national and international job market.¹²

6. A moral and financial commitment to teacher-training programs that prepare educators to teach foreign languages and English as a Second Language in order to meet the increased demand for qualified instructors in both of these fields.

Adventist education is called upon to lead rather than to follow. As we seek solutions to new challenges, we would do well to keep in mind what Robert Bellah wrote in *Habits of the Heart*: Historical tension between individualistic isolationism and the pursuit of "community" has characterized American life over the years.¹³

Otilie Stafford has aptly pointed to Adventist colleges as centers where this tension can be resolved. Our institutions

can be "communities of memory" that bridge past and future, preparing students for compassionate living here and now. Her words, though applicable to all disciplines, speak with particular eloquence to the future of foreign languages in the Adventist curriculum:

The mission of the church and its colleges is to create communities that do not condemn society, but remind it of what being human truly means. [Their] mission is to create communities whose traditions remind us that to be truly human we must live beyond contemporary self-interest, communities where we realize that if we scorn others we diminish ourselves. Our colleges are to be communities that draw us out of individual isolation into identification with others, young and old, rich and poor, weak and powerful, women and men, communities in which we respect both the lowly and highly placed in society, in which we learn that we are most fully human when we are