



ISSUE BRIEF | FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS: LOST IN TRANSLATION

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the threat of foreign terrorism, and foreign policy challenges from the Middle East to China have created a critical need for language skills in the State Department, the Department of Defense and the intelligence community. The stakes are high—federal employees must be able to detect foreign threats in real time and communicate with local populations around the world in order to defend the nation and protect U.S. interests abroad.

The U.S. government is aware of these pressing needs and has made some strides in recruiting and training employees with foreign language skills, but it must do more. The demand is particularly critical in hot spots in the Middle East and Asia, where language skills are needed in Arabic, Dari, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, Pashto, Persian and Urdu.

GROWING NEED FOR MISSION-CRITICAL SKILLS

More than 80 federal agencies employ individuals with critical translation and interpretation skills in more than 100 different languages, and the demand is growing.¹ Since 9/11, the FBI has increased its number of linguists by 82 percent, to more than 1,400.² According to Defense, the need for military and civilian personnel with basic foreign language skills increased from 80,000 in 2006 to 141,000 in 2008.³ The State Department is projected to hire more than 1,100 foreign service officers in the next two years, in addition to other positions that require foreign language skills in the 180 countries where the department has posts.⁴

Due to the increased demand for language proficiency, additional training is needed for current employees. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 31 percent of foreign service officers in positions overseas did not meet foreign language speaking and reading proficiency requirements.⁵ Achieving sufficient staff competency in Dari, which is spoken by half the population in Afghanistan, has been especially challenging. GAO found that 66 percent of foreign service officers required to speak Dari failed their proficiency tests. Training for Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employees is also an urgent need—only about 30 percent of the officers serving overseas speak a second language.⁶

BARRIERS TO FILLING THE DEMAND

The federal government gives strong priority to hiring U.S. citizens, which shrinks the applicant pool by discouraging non-citizens with foreign language skills from applying. An applicant's background can pose a barrier to entering the federal workforce, even for U.S. citizens. At CIA, for example, applicants may fail a security clearance if they have family members living in countries with significant terrorist activity or have traveled recently to certain countries, such as Iran.⁷

¹ The National Language Conference, *A call to action for national foreign language capabilities* (February 1, 2005).

² Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Language Services* [cited June 9, 2010]. <http://www.fbi.gov/aboutus/transformation/language.htm>

³ House Armed Services Committee Testimony of Gail McGinn, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Plans (September 10, 2008).

⁴ Partnership for Public Service, *Where the Jobs Are* [cited June 9, 2010]. <http://data.wherethejobsare.org/wtja/field/2051>

⁵ Government Accountability Office, *Department of State: Comprehensive Staffing Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls* (September 2009).

⁶ WashingtonPost.com, *CIA Announces Push to Improve Agency's Language Proficiency* (May 30, 2009).

⁷ WashingtonPost.com, *Farsi fluency sought, but classes must fill in for immersion method* (April 26, 2010).

Another barrier is the lack of people studying critical foreign languages in U.S. colleges and universities. Chinese and Arabic represent less than 5 percent of the total enrollment in language courses in the United States—and few students actually receive degrees in those languages. Of students who majored in foreign languages, fewer than 3 percent receive degrees in Chinese, Arabic, Middle and Near Eastern languages and South Asian languages combined.⁸

Furthermore, few U.S. colleges and universities offer advanced courses in several of the languages that have become vital to our nation's interests: only 17 colleges and universities offer Farsi, 10 offer Hindi/Urdu, 1 offers Pashto and 1 offers Dari.⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Partnership recommends the following to generate more federal foreign language experts:

Congress

- **Pass the *National Foreign Language Coordination Act of 2009***, which would create a National Foreign Language Coordination Council to oversee the nation's foreign language strategy and measure the status of foreign language expertise and needs in federal agencies.
- **Increase oversight of agency language programs** to ensure resources are allocated to effective programs in the most critical languages.
- **Pass the *Roosevelt Scholars Act of 2009***, which would create a “civilian ROTC” program by offering scholarships for study in mission-critical fields—including foreign languages—in exchange for a federal service commitment.

Federal Agencies

- **Make greater use of existing programs**, such as the National Security Education Program, which awards scholarship assistance to students to study foreign languages in return for a term of federal service.
- **Invest in strategic workforce planning to identify long-term goals and project hiring needs** for acquiring foreign language talent from all channels—new and current employees, contractors and volunteers.
- **Intensify efforts to train and retain employees** who speak mission-critical languages by evaluating and improving existing education programs and expanding the number of languages taught.
- **Partner with colleges and universities** to promote federal opportunities for foreign language speakers and to recruit top talent into public service.

Colleges and Universities

- **Encourage students to study critical languages**, which will provide them with valuable skills for future federal employment.
- **Create new and support existing programs** that offer mission-critical languages.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The U.S. government faces numerous challenges and threats in the 21st century that require federal employees with diverse foreign language skills. Congress, federal agencies, and colleges and universities must work creatively and collaboratively to provide more opportunities and incentives for students and federal workers to learn the foreign languages essential to our national security and crucial diplomatic efforts.

⁸ National Center for Education Statistics, *Bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions* (2007).

⁹ Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, *Less Commonly Taught Languages Database* [cited June 9, 2010]. <http://www.carla.umn.edu/lct/db/index.php>