

# The Need for Second Language Learning

By Dr. Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Dr. Bronwyn MacFarlane, and Ariel Baska

Since the 1700s, the study of world languages has long been a valued component of a rich liberal arts education. However, an insidious shift began in the early 21st century with the decline in local resources for second language course offerings. The need for second language learning has not abated, but the availability of second language learning opportunities certainly has.

Why has the pendulum swung against second language educational opportunities? This decline may be attributed to a variety of influences, including the current accountability movement that has taken focus away from world language electives in the K–12 arena and increased the attention of educators, politicians, and community members to the core content areas of language arts, mathematics, and STEM. Perhaps the trend toward globalization

has focused more on the preparation of scientists and other STEM-related career professions than on the preparation of those able to communicate successfully in a second language.

However, one might argue that the need to provide second language learning to students in this country has never been greater. Dual language acquisition can provide a profound global perspective, and students with skills across multiple languages can

## History of Teaching Second Languages in the U.S.

- **1787:** Thomas Jefferson states that American children up to 16 years old should learn Latin, Greek, and romance languages.



- **1803:** U.S. purchases Louisiana Territory from France.



- **Mid 1800s:** Greatest number of immigrants to the U.S. are from Europe.



- **Mid 1800s:** Increased focus on French and German as second language.



- **1939–1945:** Linguists train U.S. Armed Forces for espionage, interrogation, and monitoring radio transmissions during World War II (called “Army Method”).



In addition, a new level of concern has been reached about the United States' relationships with other countries—the need to engage with them in partnerships on trade and the economy has become imperative. Moreover, the lack of tolerance and understanding toward other cultures and religions has heightened, with little hope of being reduced in the absence of understanding others to a greater degree and showing empathy for their beliefs and values. The learning of other languages is an important antidote to cultural intolerance while simultaneously addressing the needs of globalization.

Second language learning carries high interest and a natural connection to another symbol system that can provide high challenge and complexity, two preferences the gifted have for learning. An “optimal match” between the characteristics of the learner and available opportunities can be considered appropriate interventions. Here are a few examples of how second language learning is an appropriate match for the verbally talented student.

of words from other languages, especially Latin and Greek, which may be found in English, thus enhancing English vocabulary fourfold or more.

The gifted have complex thinking abilities that are enhanced by linguistic comparative analysis. Gifted learners can enjoy the



- **1980:** National Foreign Language Center founded.







complexities of the study of a language that has many characteristics similar to English but also is different in its grammatical structure and forms. They can engage in a constant comparative analysis of language through such study. Vocabulary study can yield many new words and insights about language that should delight and astound them. They may also enjoy learning about the lives of famous people and events associated with the culture of these world languages.

The gifted have the capacity to make connections among diverse ideas. This trait in the gifted is best nurtured by the access to ideas from multiple disciplines that allow connections to be made. The study of a second language promotes *interdisciplinarity* in its attention to diverse cultures and resulting languages, allowing students to experience the art, philosophy, history, and

literature of another culture through the native language.

The gifted love to create and invent, from imaginary friends to new objects created from scraps. Because the gifted are creative, they will learn to appreciate deeply the capacity for building and creating structures in new forms and modes. Manipulating the vocabulary and syntax of another language to create meaning provides an expressive and creative outlet for gifted learners—especially for those who are verbally talented—that goes to the heart of good differentiation.

### Acceleration of Second Language Learning

In addition to providing challenge and complexity, it's also true that gifted students are capable of beginning formal study of a second language earlier than high school. Often, it's possible

- **1983:** College Board recommends extending basic skills to foreign language for all students.



- **1990s:** 30% increased in enrollment in modern languages in U.S. colleges and universities. Movement to teach less commonly taught languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi, and Farsi.

- **1994:** More than 6 million students are studying languages in the U.S.



- **1999:** Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley proposed second language study as the method to raise student performance on standards.

- **2000:** National Education Goals support the need for second language learning.





to offer enrichment language opportunities before fourth grade with serious subsequent study. Gifted students are also capable of learning a second language more rapidly, many times completing two years in one. Potentially, they can easily access more than one additional language during their K–12 career if they have early opportunities for such learning.

Gifted students are able to do this because they: typically possess early verbal abilities; have general interest in words and language; often are early readers with advanced English vocabularies; and a have desire to make connections among linguistic patterns. These abilities and interests make them ready candidates for second language learning, taught on a model of content acceleration.

The study of a second language is much like the learning of mathematics—highly sequential in respect to skills, cumulative in respect to mastery, and uniform in respect to content or what needs to be taught. Gifted learners often have access to advanced mathematical topics early, typically beginning by fourth grade. Many gifted students have mastered geometry by the end of eighth grade, with an eye to taking AP Calculus BC before graduating from high school. Since there is so much similarity between the learning of math and a second language, a similar path of talent development might be provided for students in this area of the curriculum as well. An accelerative model of learning a second language as early as fifth or sixth grade may provide gifted students an advanced verbal opportunity in which they will benefit and thrive.

### Interdisciplinary Learning through a Second Language

Second language learning also offers an important interdisciplinary curriculum that provides an integrated understanding of the politics, social mores, the arts, the literature, and philosophy of a second culture. A second language provides a shorthand course in the study of another civilization.

It connects the ideas of a culture to their expression, and it opens up new ways of seeing other people through artifacts they have created to represent their world. A young boy once asked his Latin teacher: “*Why did Romans have neuter nouns?*” Another asked his Spanish teacher: “*Why did Picasso paint Guernica and name it as he did?*” In each case, the student was asking about the connections of culture and language, wanting to see the reasons for actions not understood without understanding the interdisciplinary convergence of ideas within a place. Thus second language learning for the gifted provides a template for grappling with the concept of “interdisciplinarity” on a daily basis and enhances cross-cultural competence and communication skills.



- **2001:** Shift begins: Decline in local resources for second language offerings.



- **2002:** World language enrollment at U.S. universities has dropped to 8%, from 16% in 1960.

- **By 2007:** College Board reduces number of foreign language AP options, eliminating 3 course examinations, including French, Italian, and Latin Literature.

#### Timeline Sources

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The need for language programs in our schools is as strong as ever, particularly among gifted students who need the depth and complexity provided by a world language program. Gifted students will benefit from exposure to global cultures, a deepened emphasis on conceptual learning, and an appreciation of world issues that shape our contemporary place in the world. 🌐

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### Authors' Note

**Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Ph.D.**, is the Smith Professor Emerita at William and Mary in Virginia where she developed a graduate program and a research and development center in gifted education. She has published 30 books and more than 600 refereed journal articles, book chapters, and scholarly reports. She has received numerous national and international awards for her work.

**Bronwyn MacFarlane, Ph.D.**, is professor of gifted education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She has received several awards, published numerous articles, and recently served as editor of *STEM Education for High-Ability Learners: Designing and Implementing Programming*.

**Ariel Baska** teaches Latin in Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia. She received her bachelor's degree in classics from William and Mary, and her master's degree in curriculum studies with an emphasis in gifted education at George Mason University. With her mother, Joyce VanTassel-Baska, she co-authored a Latin curriculum guide targeted for elementary and middle school gifted students.

### Second Language Learning for the Gifted: Connection & Communication for the 21st Century

Joyce VanTassel-Baska  
Bronwyn MacFarlane  
Ariel Baska



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