



## The Evolution from “Ignorant American” to “American Polyglot”

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### Abstract

*The state of multilingualism in America is abysmal. With less than 18% of Americans speaking a foreign language other than English [1], it is no wonder the “Ignorant American” label has stuck. America’s multi-linguals are typically immigrants having just arrived in the country, who speak English as a second language. Abroad, Americans are seen as lazy, resting on the English language’s status as the global lingua franca. This however does not mean, contrary to international public opinion that Americans don’t want to, or are incapable of learning foreign languages.*

*Americans desire to learn about foreign cultures and languages, is well documented and backed by statistics. While most American high school students do not have a foreign language requirement, they take foreign language courses as electives. This points to the fact that American students understand the value of learning foreign languages. Adults agree in overwhelming numbers that learning foreign languages gets less attention than it deserves in school. The US government had taken note of this deficiency and was spending unprecedented amounts of money to encourage the learning of foreign languages, only to more recently make budget cuts. Even the American business community has begun to realize the disadvantage it is at when negotiating internationally.*

*In this paper we examine how the educational system has failed Americans in the field of foreign language study, how new technologies blended with traditional learning methods are critical to solving the problem, and how entrepreneurial companies are going to lead the language revolution in the United States.*

### 1. Introduction

The term “Ignorant American” has existed for decades. It refers to the ignorance of American citizens with regard to foreign language and culture. While travelling overseas Americans have a reputation for being loud, not absorbing the culture, and only communicating in English. One reason this stereotype endures is because of the fact that only 18% of Americans are able to speak a second language other than English [1]. This compares to the 54% of Europeans and the over 90% of Dutch and Swedish people who speak a second language [2]. One cause of this may be that English is the global and business lingua franca. There is a belief not only in the US, but also in many English-speaking nations, that there is little to no need to study a second language. The sad fact remains however, that the US lags far behind even most English-speaking countries including the UK and Ireland where 39% and 40% of the respective populations are fluent in a second language [2]. This is another reason that the “Ignorant American” label persists. America seems to be the bottom rung on the world language ladder. The question becomes, is this the result of a lack of interest in the study of foreign language, an absence of ability, or something altogether different?

Studies have consistently shown that Americans are in fact interested in the study of world languages. US based multinational corporations also recognize the problem the language deficit creates and in the interest of their bottom line would like to see it corrected. Even the US government acknowledges the need for better K-12 and collegiate language instruction, and has stated the need for more of its own foreign language speakers. Yet still such a small percentage of American citizens have that ability. This indicates that there is a fundamental flaw in the system. The US government, its education system, and existing language training programs will not correct the issue. The problem will be solved by American and international entrepreneurs aware of the changing landscape in education, who are able to move quickly and develop innovative programs based on the ever-changing environment.

### 2. Myth Dispelled

Despite the wide spread belief that Americans have little interest in foreign language and culture, there is high demand for language programs. One study of American parents found that 70% “either completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement children need to learn a foreign language to succeed in the world today” [3]. Americans know that they are putting themselves, their children, and their government at a fundamental disadvantage with other countries. Furthermore, as of 2010 only 7 states had a world language requirement for high school graduation that did not allow for substitution



with other coursework or parental opt-out [4]. With the budgetary cuts that took place in 2012, discussed in more detail below, it is likely that this number has fallen further. Despite this 44% of US high school students choose to study a foreign language [5]. These are elective courses that are chosen over other interests such as physical education, music, drama, history, and business among other more glamorous subjects. This illustrates the fact that it is not only parents, but also students who believe that language acquisition is essential to their future. It also disproves the notion that Americans simply don't have the desire to learn.

### 3. American Business

The language deficit in the UK, which as seen above is much smaller than that of the US, costs the country 3.5% of GDP [6]. The US, with a much larger language deficit, is likely to have an even greater loss of GDP. American multinationals know that their insufficient language skills are costing them money. Because of this the ability to effectively communicate in a foreign language has become an important asset, an asset multinationals are willing to pay for. Depending on the language and position, bilingual and multilingual American employees can expect between 5% and 20% higher pay [7]. Reasons for this include the increased efficiency within an organization and better cooperation with local partners that results from having bilingual employees. Respect is another important factor. Overseas American employees able to communicate directly with the people with whom they work, in their mother tongue, allows them to gain the respect of their foreign colleagues. This concept goes for entry-level positions all the way up to the president of the overseas office. Business has taken notice of the fact that America Inc. needs to achieve foreign language proficiency in order to increase not only efficiency, but also profit.

### 4. US Government

The US gov't frequently expresses a need for fluent speakers of foreign languages. It needs these people to fill its embassies, consulates, diplomatic posts, and the military. It needs them to help restore America's image abroad and promote military cooperation. For the same reason an American businessperson gains respect by acquiring the language of the country they do business in, so to can US government officials. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is a great example of this; by speaking Mandarin with Chinese officials he was instantly popular not only with those officials but also the Chinese people. Furthermore the government knows that GDP is lost because of the language deficit and that it has an obligation to help American business. Despite knowing all of this, and in the early 2000's having finally begun spending unprecedented amounts of money to address the issue, in 2012 Congress reversed course. The government reduced funds to support world language programs by 40% [8]. The reasoning behind these cuts was to reduce cost. There are only so many school days each year, and only so many hours in each day. The easiest courses to drop were the newly implemented language programs.

Government spending cuts however, isn't the only flaw in public education's attempt at language training. The cuts are one of many shortcomings. The course material is outdated, the teaching quality poor, and the time spent in the classroom inadequate. Proof of this lies in the fact that 75% of Americans under the age of 50 have taken language courses at school [3], while only 18% of the population is fluent in another language. It is clear that while the US government recognizes the problem and wants it corrected, that it does not have the financial wherewithal or the expertise to "go it alone."

### 5. Conclusion

The US government can't provide the language training American citizens and businesses demand. Existing American language tutoring companies, both electronic and traditional, have also failed. A recent study found that 81% of Americans own a laptop, 65% own a smartphone, and 48% own a tablet [9]. It is with these devices that the teaching of languages will be transformed. Technological innovations are reshaping the educational landscape and the general public in the US is receptive to that change. After 10 straight years of growth, a total of 32% of higher education students took at least one online course in 2011 [10]. It will be entrepreneurial companies that take advantage of the acceptance of online learning, and create programs specifically for use on these electronic devices that finally close the supply and demand imbalance in the US.

Incubators, co-working spaces, and accelerators are springing up across the America. These are the breeding grounds of innovation; New York City went from having only 1 such place in 2008 to over 100 by March of last year [11]. The companies within are developing flash card apps, automatic translators, voice recognition systems, and automatic interpreters. While many of these companies

and their applications are in their infancy, as technology continues to advance the companies will refine their product. However, no product that is 100% technology dependent can sufficiently replace a good teacher. Flash card applications rely on rote learning. Memorization of single words and standardized sentences is uninteresting to students and results in difficulty actually communicating. Automatic translators leave users dependent on the application, without learning the language. This is also true of automatic interpretation, which is still far from a reality. The problem these applications face for true language learners is that without a teacher, and the ability to customize courses, they are nothing more than a supplemental learning tool.

The key to solving America's language deficit lies in companies that successfully blend the traditional with the future. "Blended Technological Learning," or blendTech, is a language teaching method involving advanced technology along with the use of traditional face-to-face instruction. An example of this is the use of a computer and Internet connection to bring the finest teachers from China, to students in the US via video conferencing. However there is much more to it than that. It also involves using today's most advanced technology to create on-screen content, placed beside the teacher, that is interactive and engaging. This allows for courses that are customized, within the framework of the program, to each student's needs and interests. Students interested in business, for example, can study business from day one of the course. Those interested in politics can talk about elections, or lack of elections, happening in their area. It provides for real life situational learning and cultural training. This creates an atmosphere in which the student stays engaged. Keeping the student interested in the content is the quickest way to successful language acquisition, especially for Millennials. The companies in the incubators of Silicon Valley, California, Silicon Alley, NY and around the world that realize this first will disrupt an industry. These entrepreneurs will give birth to the language revolution in the US and help transform the "Ignorant American" into the "American Polyglot."

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