

# FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE NEW TECHNOLOGY

By: Congressman Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.)

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In a classic lecture in 1922, Alfred North Whitehead noted that by age 15, children should have command of English, be able to read French fluently, and Latin should become to them easily so that they could start Greek...The more gifted children, he said, could of course go further.

Whitehead would have found it hard to imagine a college student who was not fully acquainted with these languages, as well as German and Italian.

Paradoxically, as the world has shrunk in the past 60 years to a global village, Americans seem more tongue-tied than ever—even in our own language.

The following facts from H.R. 1310 hearings emphasize the seriousness of the language problem in the U.S.:

- In 1980, the Presidential Commission on Foreign Languages was profoundly alarmed at the serious deterioration in U.S. language capacity.
- Only 15% of all high school students in the United States study foreign language, vs. 24% in 1965.
- Only 8% of the U.S. colleges require a foreign language for admission, vs. 35% in 1966.
- Fewer than 1% of college students are studying the languages used by three-fourths of the world's population, and only a small number will become fluent.

## Why?

Why is there such a decline in language interest? One reason may be found in tradition or the mind set caused by tradition. Authors of a new book on artificial intelligence claim that traditionally Americans have always been suspicious of intellect. As Americans, we believe that *intelligence* is something you're born with and that anyone can see intelligence at work and admire it in action.

*Intellect*, on the other hand, has to be acquired with practice in those suspect places called classrooms, especially in colleges and universities. Americans see knowledge of foreign languages as intellectual, something not practical that people can do without.

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND TECHNOLOGY

There are two areas in which popular prejudices which hinder or negate personal and national growth are most apparent:

*Learning foreign languages* - Americans think everyone should learn English; in some countries, people find it hard to believe *anyone* could learn their language.

This attitude is implied in the story of an American born and raised in Japan who stopped in a remote rural area and asked directions from a farmer. The farmer answered, and then smiled at his questioner, saying, "I never knew English was so easy to understand!"

How often do we hear intelligent, skilled professionals say, "I just don't have an ear for languages."

It is even sadder to see language prejudices among people in areas where there are large immigrant populations - a problem by no means confined to the United States.

*Coping with new technology* - We can identify at least three fears that are common and widespread among those who come in contact or even hear about new technology:

Fear of unknown

1. 1984 - the idea of loss of privacy through technology as supported by the fact that George Orwell's book is setting new sales records. Also the current Apple commercial for new Macintosh system uses ideas from 1984.
  2. Frustrated expectations - a recent Carnegie Foundation report notes: Virtually every new piece of hardware introduced (in schools) in the past three decades has been oversold, misused and eventually discarded.
- With the foregoing facts in mind it is obvious that any group that sets out to teach foreign languages to Americans, and do so by exploiting new technology, certainly has its work cut out for it.

## **EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY**

I'm not an expert on foreign languages or on new technology, but I am in a unique position to see the importance of both. I am also in the position of having to act on these matters. From my perspective I see several areas which could and should be changed in order to combat the problems previously mentioned. Some of these areas for improvement lie within the lawmaker's jurisdiction but many lie in your jurisdiction.

### **Need to Redefine Education**

For hundreds of years, education has been the same - someone standing up and lecturing. For the first time, we can now approach the ideal of teaching students at their own rates through applications of technology.

Furthermore, the traditional education system was too often passive. Computer technology is most often intrusive and constantly challenging.

Computers have fundamentally altered our ability to do things, but as they get smaller and faster, the problems of putting them to work, especially in an academic setting are more challenging than ever.

In the educational context, technology expands the user's reach to potentially unlimited dimensions. What, then, is a student? A teacher? A classroom? These are profound questions for society, and are among the greatest problems facing policymakers at all levels.

### **Human Dimension**

To most people, technology means new developments in electronics, new materials, new manufacturing processes. But the other side is human ingenuity — ideas, often simple ones, which allow us to get the most out of what is available.

The ultimate decision-maker is still the human being. We must put out ingenuity to work. We must rethink what is worth teaching, and how we can improve this process with computers. Electronic page-turning is not an acceptable application either of the new technology or our human ingenuity.

### **Consortia**

Legislation, like the new National Science Board report, recognizes the importance of consortia in guiding the development of educational technology. Groups like CALICO and others will assume a greater importance in this area. Such groups open lines of communication, offer chances of coordination of effort, aid in the collection of vast amounts of experiential and experimental data, and help provide a means of dissemination of the information contributed to the consortium. It is obvious that the efforts of consortia can and will be invaluable in the task of breaking down the barriers of prejudice and fear surrounding both language learning and new technology.

### **The Federal Role and Legislation**

During the 1950s and 1960s, the federal government encouraged the growth of computing, and research methods were transformed in discipline after discipline.

In the 70s - as minicomputers, microcomputers, and many computer-dependent tools became available - government support fell off, and academic facilities no longer kept pace with other sectors.

The Vice-provost for computing at Carnegie-Mellon has said: 'unless something changes drastically, the nation's best universities won't take part in this revolution.'

Today we would be hard pressed to find a school keeping up with the student demand for computers. Extraordinary sums are being spent on university computers - \$1.3 billion a year. But more than half is for administration, no instruction or research.

The amount spent on academic work is only about \$20 per student per year.

Furthermore, as applications increase, many schools blanch at the thought of having to provide computer access not just for science and engineering, but for literature, history, sociology and foreign languages.

Nevertheless, all studies have concluded that the biggest barrier to adequate education is not the shortage of hardware, or inadequate software, but the lack of qualified teachers.

House Bill *H.R. 1310*, which has now passed the House, covers several areas concerning the future of education (including foreign languages) in this country and provides for the following:

- national teaching scholarships
- competitive grants for undergraduate curriculum development
- summer institutes
- studies of effective educational methods and programs, including instructional uses of information technologies for teaching and learning foreign languages.

### **The Challenge**

From the lawmaker's perspective many things are being done to overcome these barriers which are perceived as barriers to personal and national growth. Many more things of course need to be done. But other remaining barriers are more personal and political than technological or legislative.

Too many schools are reluctant to insist on a significant level of literacy in foreign languages — as with science — because they are thought to require special effort.

Too often children are not encouraged to tackle a subject because it is assumed that many or most are incapable of making the effort.

The real crisis in our schools is not that the educational effort has been made and failed - that our students have proved incompetent - but that it has rarely been tried.

Technology provides us with an alternative - it will never do more.

The rest is up to us.

**Editor's Note:** *Congressman McCurdy has requested that members of CALICO and other interested individuals write their congressmen and senators regarding the importance of HR 1310 and subsequent legislation in support of applying high technology to the teaching and learning of languages.*