



TEACHING &amp; LEARNING • STACIE NEVADOMSKI BERDAN

# Language learning is today's 'Space Race'

**D**ID THE FIRST Chinese mission into space remind you of Sputnik? The Russian aerospace accomplishment was viewed as a major surprise in western nations in 1957 and inaugurated a 'space race' in the U.S. It also increased math, science and foreign language interest within American education. During a Cold War era, the government's education-related response was couched in military terms. Thus, the National Defense Education Act of 1958, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense, funneled \$1 billion into school curricula. Teaching the Russian language was understood to be critical to national defense.

Today space race is a people-based planetary phenomenon, and it's moniker is 'globalization.' The rising super economies of China, India, Brazil, Mexico and the new Russia are on many radar screens. Many of the people watching those screens believe success in a global economic arena may well be linked to the ability to speak and do business in languages other than English.

Fifty years ago, Americans needed language skills to keep tabs on competitors. Today language skills are needed to keep pace with them. Opinion is growing that, academically, it's time for nothing short of a cultural language revolution.

Young Americans must be sensing it. U.S. student enrollment in Chinese language courses since 2000 has risen from 5,000 to 50,000, followed since 9/11 by Arabic in second place. Professionals fluent in English and either of those languages are rewarded by government and business alike with secure and often lucrative careers.

## Glastonbury's Russian academic heritage

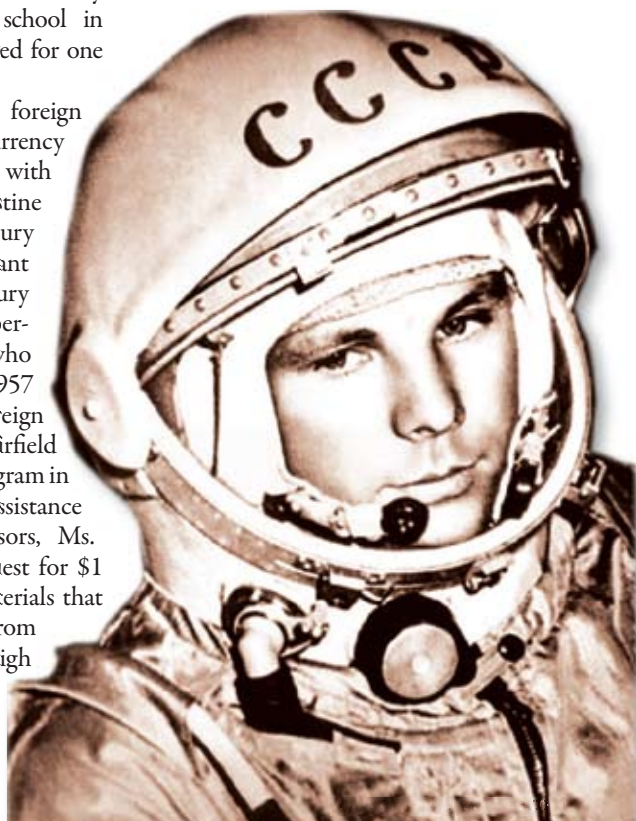
Glastonbury is an historic Connecticut River Valley town that dates back to the late 1600s. Today it is a suburb of Hartford, with one foot in agriculture and the other in industry and commerce. Glastonbury's public schools are considered national leaders in language learning. Spanish begins in the first grade; a second language can be added in seventh, and a third in high school. As a result, some seniors at Glastonbury High graduate with varying proficiency in three foreign languages, including Chinese and Russian. [Full disclosure: Both of my daughters attend elementary school in Glastonbury, where we have lived for one year.]

Glastonbury's view of foreign language as a necessary currency for future success originated with Sputnik. According to Christine Brown, the Glastonbury Board of Education's assistant superintendent, "Glastonbury had a forward-thinking superintendent, Larry Pauquin, who started conversations in 1957 with Mary Thompson, a foreign language teacher in nearby Fairfield who ran a foreign language program in an elementary school." With assistance from Yale University professors, Ms. Thompson wrote a grant request for \$1 million to create language materials that would be used progressively from third grade and through high school.

"Glastonbury collaborated with Yale to build the first

French and Spanish high school language libraries," said Brown. Those language materials were bought by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, who re-published and sold them around the world in the 1960s and '70s.

"This year we're celebrating 50 years of teaching Russian," explains Brown. "In 1958, the U.S. Department of Defense selected Glastonbury as one of three pilot programs, and Russian was added as a second language elective in the seventh grade." Seventy students signed up that first year, and many of them pursued



careers in the military. Those who were working in the business world were ready for the opening up of Russia's markets in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Despite budget cuts that began in the 1970s, Glastonbury's language curriculum has remained virtually intact. Ninety-five percent of their graduating seniors have received 12 years of foreign language instruction. They are sufficiently proficient to achieve fluency in college or university. The Glastonbury results far exceed the national average of just 40 percent, and Glastonbury High School enjoys language prestige that exceeds the most prestigious prep schools.

**What colleges and universities can do**

The National Defense Education Act of 1958 might have been a stimulant, but it is safe to say that foreign second-language skills have decreased precipitously in the U.S. When the learning time commitments to achieve true proficiency are weighed against expected use, many likely learners have opted out.

"The United States may be the only

nation in the world where it is possible to complete secondary and postsecondary education without any foreign language study whatsoever." That observation was made by Leon Panetta in a paper presented at Stanford University a few years ago. "The prevalent practice of offering and sometimes requiring one or two years of foreign language study for high school or college graduation is simply inadequate for giving students meaningful competence in foreign languages," Panetta continued.

As universities and colleges continue to appreciate and strive for diversity, and globalism, they may be taking a leadership role in language proficiency, even though it should begin before a student arrives on a college campus.

For example, Arizona State University provides Mandarin instruction within the Phoenix public school system. Learning studies show that language learning comes more easily to people whose brains are still developing. Arizona State is not relying on its professors to wait for college freshmen and simply "take over and teach."

Other possibilities in the what-if discussion stage include ...

- Reinstate foreign language proficiency as a graduation requirement.
- Shift the core foreign language curricula from literature to culture, enhancing the opportunities for practical application.
- Increase study-abroad opportunities
- Expand Mandarin, Arabic and Russian curricula

Meanwhile, research has shown that multilingualism improves the command of one's native language, enables greater mastery of tests in math and reading, and opens more neuropathways for cognitive expansion. ■



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