

Language Advocacy – From the Mindset to the Skills Set

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Abstract—Language skills and cultural knowledge are essential in the globalized world, and more than half of Americans surveyed indicated that they regretted not having done more language study while in school, yet not every US student has the opportunity to learn an additional language. Languages face serious challenges in the US. Relatively few US students learn an additional language, and many students do not have the opportunity to learn a world or heritage language, despite the current and growing importance of language skills in the workplace and the job market. However, rather than dwelling on the challenges – serious though they may be – it is important to focus on how we can address these challenges, and even turn them into opportunities for educators, learners, and language stakeholders, supporters, and enthusiasts.

Index Terms—language advocacy, language learning, language use, language deficit

I. INTRODUCTION

Language skills and cultural knowledge are essential in the globalized world, and more than half of Americans surveyed indicated that they regretted not having done more language study while in school, yet not every US student has the opportunity to learn an additional language (LCF, 2025; AMACAD, 2017; AMACAD, 2020; AMACAD, n.d). In addition, language programs in the US are threatened with cutbacks, and even elimination – with West Virginia University among the most widely discussed examples (Pettit, 2023). Despite the global attention focused on Paris during the 2024 Olympics, French enrollment has declined in the US in recent years, and French programs are among language programs and many others considered for cutbacks and even elimination (MLA, 2023).

Languages face serious challenges in the US. Relatively few US students learn an additional language, and many students do not have the opportunity to learn a world or heritage language, despite the current and growing importance of language skills in the workplace and the job market (AMACAD, 2017; NAE, 2017; ACTFL, 2019). However, rather than dwelling on the challenges – serious though they may be – it is important to focus on how we can address these challenges, and even turn them into opportunities for educators, learners, and language stakeholders, supporters, and enthusiasts. Challenges include both the history of language loss in the US and a perceived reluctance among Americans to learn additional languages. Opportunities include both the globalized and interconnected world, and the increased need for global citizenship, along with the technologies that enhance access to authentic language for all. Language advocacy can play a role both in defending programs that may be in danger or at risk, and in supporting language learning and use in our schools and communities.

In response to these challenges, language advocacy is needed. In order to develop effective language advocacy initiatives, it is necessary not only to recognize the role and importance of advocacy in encouraging the learning and use of additional languages, in supporting both existing language programs and the development and implementation of new language programs at all levels, including immersion programs, but to also have the mindset and skills needed for effective advocacy.

In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to be aware of the importance of language advocacy, to understand its role and nature, to recognize that language advocacy comprises both a mindset and a skills set, and to include both in the conversation on advocacy and in training and mentoring of current and future language advocates.

II. THE ROLE AND NATURE OF LANGUAGE ADVOCACY

Facing the challenges of limited access and opportunity to learn a language, along with declines in enrollment and elimination of language programs, especially at the college and university level, advocacy is needed more than ever. (*this is being repeated*) The good news is that language educators and their professional associations work in their classrooms, institutions, and communities to encourage language learning and to defend programs that are at risk or in danger. In the US, organizations at the national, regional, and state levels have developed and implemented ongoing advocacy initiatives.

Advocacy has been defined as “persuading people who matter to care about your issue.” This a broad concept, including strategies and methods encompassing geographic areas of varying size, as well as collaborations along with individual efforts. It also includes online and in-person advocacy, as well as advocacy through research, writing, and professional engagement. Important aspects of advocacy include “getting listened to, being at the table, and being heard, as well as

speaking and writing in compelling ways.” As advocacy means “overcoming obstacles,” moving from the broad concept of persuasion to the action steps mentioned is a process requiring active engagement and commitment, and enhanced by a wide range of skills and mindsets (Daly, 2011). (So what do you propose, the stakeholders do beyond what is already in place??) Advocates need to work to ensure that the mindset and skills of advocacy are better known and that potential advocates realize that advocacy is for everyone.

A. “Everyday” and “Emergency” Advocacy

Within the framework of advocacy, it is important to bear in mind that there are two very different kinds of advocacy – both with the same goal (Peckham & Stein Smith, 2021). The ongoing work of language educators, advocates, and stakeholders to support and promote language use and language learning on an ongoing basis in classrooms and communities can be considered “everyday” advocacy. This is essential work in order to strengthen and support language programs in order to avoid potential and actual threats to languages and language programs.

On the other hand, when programs face existential challenges, language educators and advocates come to their support and defense through “emergency” advocacy in a variety of forms. While this is the form of advocacy that is most discussed and has the highest profile, it is not always the most successful, as a cutback or elimination of a program is already on the table and under active consideration. (What is the alternative?) The alternative is “everyday” advocacy – ongoing defense of all programs so that they do not face cutbacks and elimination.

B. The Role and Importance of Goals

Goals are an important element of both the advocacy mindset and skills set, and possibly the best-known public goals would be the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, one of which - Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals - implicitly addresses the need for communication (languages) (UN, n.d).

Effective language advocacy is also grounded in and framed by one or more goals, and access and affordability have long been two overarching goals of language advocacy. While the goals of language advocates and initiatives may vary, characteristics of effective goals include starting small, identifying strengths as well as challenges, remembering your overall mission and purpose, being flexible, celebrating small successes, and developing support and partnerships. Goals are also described as SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (U of Colorado, n.d.; U of California, 2016).

Interestingly, goals straddle both the mindset and the skills set of language advocacy as it is important to develop goals that are both values- and data-driven, to develop policies and action plans to move them forward and to achieve them, and also to monitor and evaluate, it is important to also focus on shorter-term and more specific goals or objectives to guide advocacy on a daily basis.

C. The Advocacy Mindset – Resilience, Leadership, Habit, Values, and Agency

While the importance of resilience among language learners and among language educators has often been discussed, the importance of resilience as a skill and mindset in language advocacy is also important to examine (Chu et al., 2024; Zhang, 2023; Hiver & Sanchez Solarte, 2021).

Resilience has been described as the “process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.” Key to the discussion of its role in language advocacy is that resilience can be learned (APA, 2025, p. 1).

When faced with an unexpected challenge, such as a cutback in a language program, it can be difficult to know how to effectively address the challenge. While each situation has its own particular set of circumstances, the core of an effective response rests in resilience and in a resilient mindset, and it is important to know both the elements of resilience and how we can develop our own resilience and that of our co-workers, stakeholders, and communities. Resilience implies the ability to handle challenges, to learn from them, and to grow from them. It is complex in that it can be thought of as both an attitude and a skill (Northrup, 2023). For language educators, it can be a challenge to acknowledge the very real threats to language learning while maintaining a positive and constructive attitude in developing effective responses. The balance lies in facing actual and potential threats to languages rather than staying in denial, while at the same time retaining a positive, engaged attitude and mindset rather than falling into inaction caused by a sense of being overwhelmed by the challenge (Gilbertson, 2014). Language advocacy can play a role in empowering language educators through honest and realistic information on threats to language education, while at the same time fostering and encouraging a positive proactive mindset through information and collaborations. Advocates can engage in active communication with a broad range of language educators and stakeholders, providing information on the issues and on the strategies and methods of advocacy. Advocates can encourage other language educators through highlighting the fact that advocacy is for all and that everyone can play a role, and by highlighting success stories and progress made.

(a). Leadership and Language Advocacy

Leadership has been defined as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2013). Leadership is a mindset and a skills set, including a wide range of characteristics and strategies among leaders. These actions and practices include change management, disruption, etc., while the mindset includes commitment, partnerships, flexibility, and teamwork. Effective leaders have also been described as multipliers, who

empower those around them to grow (Wiseman, 2017). Impact is an essential aspect of leadership, and impactful leaders are those who recognize the most important tasks, who step up to the challenge of leadership, who move leadership initiatives forward until they are successful, who adapt to change, and who effectively manage the leadership workload (Wiseman, 2021).

The concept of agile leadership, based on communication, commitment, and collaboration, highlights in the form of nine principles, the importance of developing, reflecting, and learning; inspiring, engaging, and unifying; and empowering, achieving, and innovating, respectively (Agile Business Consortium, 2024). Within an agile leadership framework, Scrum is often used to describe “a way to get work done as a team in small pieces at a time, with continuous experimentation and feedback loops along the way to learn and improve as you go,” focusing on value and collaboration, with the three pillars of transparency, inspection, and adaptation, and based on values of courage, focus, commitment, respect, and openness within a framework of trust (Scrum, n.d.).

In terms of language advocacy, leadership is both a skill and an opportunity. An aspect of leadership that can be especially applicable to language advocacy is agility. Agile leadership is especially relevant to turbulent times, and includes understanding of both community and institutional culture, along with rethinking both the why and the how of leadership as well as the utilization of ego, intuitive, and eco intelligences. Agile leadership also requires a journey on the part of the agile leader during the transition to agile leadership from more traditional leadership (Olivier et al., 2021).

Persuasion and influence are important elements in advocacy. Much of advocacy consists of persuading someone to change their opinion about the importance of languages and language learning, or about the school grade when language learning should start, or what method to use. Principles of persuasion include reciprocation, commitment and consistency, social proof, liking, authority, scarcity, and unity (Cialdini, 2021). In addition, influence can be considered a form of leadership in that changes people’s behaviors. As far as languages are concerned, like persuasion, influence can cause a learner or prospective learner, a parent, or a decision-maker to change their mind about languages. The role of influence in leading change is highlighted by the wide popular use of the term “influencer.” The linkage between leadership and influence, and between a leader and an influencer is interesting to examine in terms of advocacy as leadership has been described as “the capacity to influence others to change their behavior” (Grenny et al., 2013).

(b). The Habit of Advocacy

While becoming a language advocate may seem daunting, and even overwhelming, at first, to a busy educator, parent, or language supporter or stakeholder, it is important to consider the role and importance of habit in the advocacy mindset. Habit has been defined as “mode of mental functioning in which repeated processes are in consciousness” (APA, 2025). The development of a habit includes motivation, ability, and prompts, as well as an emotional and transformational element, and can be viewed at the individual, organizational, or societal level (Fogg, 2020; Duhigg, 2023). It is essential to remember that “small habits make a big difference” and “the value of making small improvements on a daily basis” (Clear, 2018, p. 15). This is important in advocacy where consistent effort and seizing every opportunity, however small, to advocate for languages is key to long-term success.

All of this has implications for how we envision language learning, use, and advocacy in the individual, in our educational institution or other organization, or in our society. We need to develop the habits of language learning and of the use of languages other than English, and language advocates need to develop the habit of advocacy. For advocates, this means being prepared with data and talking points to engage in both “everyday” and “emergency” advocacy whenever indicated (Peckham & Stein Smith, 2021, p. 79).

In terms of the habits that may often be found in effective advocacy, advocates need to be proactive, to begin any initiative with the end goal of strengthening language learning and use clearly in mind, prioritize objectives and the relevant action steps, have a positive win/win attitude and approach, understand and have empathy for the points of view of both supporters, opponents, and neutrals in terms of languages, engage in creative cooperation and collaborations in developing language advocacy partnerships, and engage in continuous and ongoing self-improvement and self-renewal (Covey, 2020).

(c). Values

Values drive advocacy, and the belief in the importance of languages and of multilingualism drives language learning, use, and advocacy. Viewed through the metaphor of a global values compass, these values may be viewed as change, continuity, connection, communal, and core values. Language advocates and stakeholders work to bring about change in expanding access to language learning and expanding opportunity in terms of the use of additional languages. In addition, continuity values drive families to strive to transmit heritage languages to the next and future generations. Connection values are both local and global, empowering us to connect within families and communities, as well as globally as multilingual global citizens. Lastly, these communal and core values frame our ability to engage as citizens both locally and globally (Rai, 2020). It is interesting to note that while speed is a positive value in our society, and often in emergency advocacy, paradoxically, more reflective thought often leads to more effective advocacy (Kahneman, 2011).

(d). Agency

Agency has been defined as “a mindset plus a set of learnable actions that help us attain what we want in life,” empowering us to “hold steady, decline, or grow” (Bateman, 2022, p. 1). Effective language advocacy is based on the

agentic mindset of language advocates and supports the continued growth of agency among language educators, advocates, stakeholders, and supporters.

D. Challenges and Myths

Challenges in foreign language learning vary in terms of each institution and location, but many chapters are widespread if not universal. Challenges include the teacher shortage, the development of advanced language skills, transition from middle school to high school, the lack of a language policy in the US, and many more. Responses to these challenges include project-based and experiential learning, effective use of AI, increased heritage language learning opportunities, use of various enjoyable activities in language learning (CLIL), innovative teacher training, and more. The most widespread myth about languages and language learning in the US is that Americans are reluctant language learners, while the truth is that American children do not have the opportunity to learn languages.

E. Conclusions -- From Mindset to Action

While having the complete advocacy mindset is essential, the step from becoming informed and learning about advocacy to effective advocacy action is a transition from learning about advocacy to developing the necessary partnerships and teamwork. This transition involves a balance between learning and performance (Briceno, 2023). In terms of language advocacy, the busy language advocate needs to take the time to engage in active learning about the relevant issues and methods of advocacy through active engagement in professional associations, formal learning, and research.

III. THE ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

Other tools for the language advocate include a knowledge of win-win negotiating, blue ocean strategy, change management, and disruptive innovation.

Win-win negotiation has been described as “working to get the best deal possible for yourself while also working to ensure that your counterpart is satisfied” (Harvard Law, 2025, p. 1). In concrete terms, it includes making a distinction between the problem and the people involved, a focus on the real issue rather than positions, working together with current and potential partners to find a variety of options for moving forward, and developing the ability to negotiate with various stakeholder groups (Fisher et al., 2011). This is a valuable principle for language advocacy in that it promises not only a successful outcome, but also a positive basis for future negotiations.

Blue ocean strategy has been described as “the simultaneous pursuit of differentiation and low cost to open up a new market space and create new demand” (Blue Ocean Strategy, 2025, p. 1). Blue ocean strategy also emphasizes the negative impact of the red ocean of competitiveness (Kim & Mauborgne, 2015). Both aspects of blue ocean strategy are especially relevant to language advocates in terms of developing additional curricular pathways in language programs across the disciplines, including professional language studies, along with online, hybrid, and asynchronous courses, the development of free and/or affordable online education resources (OERS) to address issues of affordability and access. In addition, community groups are potential partners in growing the local stakeholder base for language support and advocacy. On the other hand, the concept of the red ocean encourages language and language advocacy partnerships in both the institutional and community settings, especially when resources are limited.

Change management has been described as a process that “allows individuals and enterprises to maintain high levels of performance over time” (Leading Change, 2025). A core concept of change management is a “sense of urgency” – “creating a high enough sense of urgency among a large enough group of people” (Kotter, 2008, p. vii). This concept is at the heart of language advocacy.

As has already been mentioned, language learning can be expensive, with tuition per credit at the college and university level, and fees for summer language camps and weekend and afterschool programs. Disruptive innovation offers another perspective on the importance of increasing affordability and accessibility of language learning and has been described as “a process by which a product or service takes root in simple applications at the bottom of the market—typically by being less expensive and more accessible” (Christensen Institute, 2025, p. 1).

IV. ACTION STEPS

In order to strengthen and support existing language programs, to expand opportunities for language learning and use in our educational institutions, our communities, and our society, it is necessary to fully realize the need for language advocacy in a multilingual world. Action steps include development of a language advocacy mindset and skills among language educators and language stakeholders and supporters, and implementation of language advocacy initiatives in our schools and communities, locally, regionally, and nationally. It is important to remember that language advocacy is a broad umbrella, encompassing professional, organizational, and individual initiatives, ranging from national and international efforts to those of a small group or a single individual. Examples of individual initiatives include social media and OERs (online educational resources), talking points ready for stakeholder groups, and many more.

Language learning should be available for all interested learners, of all ages – in our schools and in our communities. Language programs need to be strengthened and expanded, and need the support of all of us. Beyond the classroom, the learning and use of languages – including heritage and additional languages – is essential. Partnerships and collaborations

among educators, communities, and community organizations are essential both in strengthening language programs in educational institutions at all levels (Jaumont, 2017). They also play a vital role in encouraging and supporting use of other languages in all areas of daily life – from the family to the workplace, and through media, the arts, information, and research.

Individuals, community groups, and professional organizations can encourage the use of one or more additional languages in their discussions, activities and events, publications, and social and online media. Employers can expand their potential markets and better serves existing markets and communities through seeking employees with knowledge of additional languages and cultures, already lacking in *many business organizations*.

The concept of Francoresponsabilite, which originated in Quebec, has been defined as “l’engagement à promouvoir la langue française et la culture francophone dans toute sa pluralité et sous toutes ses formes.” It has three action principles - to use the language as often as possible, on every way possible, and in all possible areas (Francoresponsabilite, 2019). This concept can certainly be applied to all languages (requires further clarification). The ability to apply the same principles and strategies to other language spoken in the US – to defend and to promote all our American languages – makes Francoresponsabilite a language responsibility we all share.

It is also important to remember that there is relatively little available in terms of training for current and potential language advocates. While professional associations of language educators offer leadership and advocacy through a variety of formats, additional training is needed, both as part of the curriculum in educational institutions and within community organizations (Udemy, 2025; NJEA, 2025). Leadership elements that can enhance and even drive advocacy include servant leadership, a multiplier mindset, and intentional listening (Pandolpho & Cubano, 2014).

V. CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Driven by our core value, our belief in the importance of multilingualism in a globalized world and in our increasingly multilingual society, language advocates are both values- and data-driven, supported by a wide range of data from across the disciplines on the role and importance of languages and multilingualism. In order to be effective, however, language advocates need to embrace a language advocacy mindset characterized by resilience, leadership, agency, and habit, accompanied by a skills set characterized by strategy and innovation, and knowledge of change management, blue ocean strategy, disruptive innovation, and negotiation. Most importantly, it is important to share that advocacy is for everyone, regardless of budget and available time.

Another area of interest to language advocates is the concept of languages for all - for all interested learners of all ages, embraced by the French government in its “le français pour tous” initiative (Villa Albertine, n.d.). In order support and increase language learning, it is essential to increase opportunities in our educational institutions at all levels in all formats – traditional, online, and hybrid, with opportunities at times and in formats accessible for all, including nontraditional, handicapped, and those who do not live in proximity to a school or campus. It is essential to support community initiatives, including summer camps for children, virtual language learning, and more. In addition, the internet offers opportunities for most to create a language bubble, including opportunities for language learning and use, as well as access to authentic language across the disciplines and in a variety of settings (Pariser, 2012). This is an essential concept for advocates in empowering all learners to learn and to use additional world or heritage languages.

VI. CONCLUSIONS – MULTILINGUALISM: AN AMERICAN TRADITION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

The future of multilingualism in the United States depends on both the learning and use of additional languages in our schools and in our society. Keeping in mind the multilingual and multicultural history of the US, languages are an American tradition, part of our cultural identity, and an asset to be cherished, encouraged, and protected (Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015). In addition, “in an increasingly global world, Americans should be adding, not slashing, opportunities for their children to learn another tongue” (De Montlaur, 2019, p. 23).

Accessibility and affordability are major factors in the challenges facing language learning in the US., and it is important to remember that language learning is for all interested learners of all ages. However, it is equally important to remember that language learning can be uncomfortable, as learners try to express complex thoughts and emotions with limited language skills (Grant, 2023).

The key is to effectively address language learning and to overcome the potential barrier to fluency created by the disconnect between our need to communicate and the learner’s typical lack of advanced language skills. It is essential to advocate both for existing language programs at all levels and for their expansion. In addition, it is essential to advocate for language use in the community. All too often, languages are considered only as school subjects rather than a medium of communication essential to our lives and to our ability to interact with others directly through conversation and through media, literature, and the arts. It our language responsibility to ensure that opportunities are offered both in the classroom and throughout the daily lives and experience of language learners and heritage language speakers (France-Amerique, 2019).

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