



March 10, 2021

Dear Colleagues,

I had the opportunity to serve on the General Education Design Committee in 2020. During my service on that committee, I worked with colleagues from across the university to develop the citizenship aspect of the proposal, including the foreign language requirement. As a language educator, I am passionate about language learning and its importance in an increasingly globalized society.

The study of languages is central to the mission of BYU and to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as its members are commanded to “become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people” (D&C 90:15). President Spencer W. Kimball in his second century address declared that “BYU should become the acknowledged language capitol of the world¹.” The entrance to BYU bears the words, “the world is our campus.” To make that declaration a reality, our students must speak the languages of the world.

Because English has become a lingua franca, many do not understand why native speakers of English should learn other languages. If fifty years ago anglophones had a real advantage in all international business dealings, the situation today is much more complicated. In the corporate world, good English has become a basic requirement, not a personal selling point. In today’s era of transnational flows of labor, talent, and ideas, as well as increasing multilingualism, one language is not enough. Monolingual English speakers working with international colleagues, even if those colleagues speak English, will be subject to misunderstandings unless they possess the kind of intercultural knowledge and sensitivity best acquired through the study of languages and cultures.

But the goals of the foreign language requirement go beyond fluency and ability to communicate in another language. Studying a foreign language involves the study of another culture, and thereby learning a new way of thinking. As our colleague Julie Allen from Comparative Arts and Letters wrote in a Humanities Center blog post, when you learn a foreign language you “gradually learn to think differently, to conceptualize things that your native language isn’t capable of, and to stretch your mind around new ways of seeing the world, other people, and yourself².” Knowledge of the language is important to understand not just the products of culture (food, art, literature, festivals, customs, etc.), but also the values, beliefs, and attitudes held by speakers of a particular language in a particular region.

¹ Spencer W. Kimball. “The Second Century of Brigham Young University.” (speech, Provo, UT, October 10, 1975). <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball/second-century-brigham-young-university/>

² Julie Allen. “Mean Parents, Doing Hard Things, and Learning Foreign Languages as a Life Skill.” *BYU Humanities Center* (blog). September 23, 2019. <https://humanitiescenter.byu.edu/mean-parents-doing-hard-things-and-learning-foreign-languages-as-a-life-skill/>

Courses that will be approved to meet the new foreign language requirement must involve intellectual engagement with issues of cultural and linguistic difference. BYU's language courses are taught by or under the direction of professional language teachers using pedagogies based on cutting edge research in second language acquisition. These courses integrate language, literature, and cultural study at every level of curriculum.

The new foreign language requirement is also flexible, allowing BYU to leverage both the considerable language skills of our returned missionaries, while not disadvantaging those who have not served foreign-speaking missions. The 6-credit language requirement also frees students from having to take a certain number of classes, while instead allowing them to pick and choose among content classes taught in their foreign language (some of which might be used to fulfill GE requirements), or newer Culture and Language Across the Curriculum courses—one-credit hour classes appended to content courses in which students can discuss the content in their foreign language. Some existing courses that could meet this new requirement include Spanish Medical Translation, German for STEM majors, and Russian Film.

I believe that the foreign language requirement in the new GE program plays an essential role in the mission of the university and of the Church as a whole. As our students engage with other cultures and interact with members of those cultures in a meaningful way, the world will truly become our campus.

Respectfully,



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