

**SUPPLY  
& DEMAND**

# Building a Fluent Workforce

## Being proficient in a foreign language is becoming increasingly important to the global workforce in today's 'flat' world.

BY JANET HULSTRAND

**C**HANCES ARE, MORE THAN HALF THE PRODUCTS used in the course of a day were produced somewhere other than the United States. Imports and exports are part of an intercontinental global marketplace where products cross borders and employees cross cultures while making transactions. Even within each nation, more than one language is commonly spoken. In the United States, many different languages are spoken in places of business, hospitals, schools, and on the streets, especially in large metropolitan areas.

Dealing with linguistic challenges and barriers on an everyday basis already affects employees at every level of business, in a wide variety of jobs and positions, in practically every corner of the globe. Sometimes the result of inadequate language skills is simply an embarrassing moment that can be laughed off and learned from; at other times it can be a real stumbling block to the advancement of a career or can compromise the smooth conduct of business, or impede its success, in major ways. Foreign language proficiency is crucial for younger generations of workers to succeed today but it has not become a priority for most in the United States—yet.

In 2006 the European Commission reported that 56 percent of EU citizens speak a language other than their mother tongue (28 percent speak at least two foreign languages and 11 percent speak at least three). In the United States, just 9 percent of citizens speak a foreign language, according to a U.S. Senate Resolution that designated 2005 as the Year of Languages. Obviously, when it comes to foreign language proficiency, U.S. workers lag far behind their European counterparts. Yet even in the EU insufficient foreign language proficiency is seen as an impediment to greater business success. In 2007 *Business Week* reported that 11 percent of small- and medium-size companies in the EU were losing export contracts and missing out on other sources of revenue because of poor foreign language skills among their employees.

### Lofty Goals, Moderate Progress

Despite growing recognition that proficiency in at least one other language is advantageous in today's world, efforts to make widespread foreign language proficiency an achievable goal lag behind acknowledgement of its necessity and importance.

The National Security Language Initiative announced by President Bush in 2006 and several major reports have drawn new attention and a renewed sense of urgency to an old problem. In March 2007, the National Research Council of the National Academies of Science reported that while some progress has been made by the 14 U.S. Department of Education programs designed to strengthen education in foreign languages, and in international and area studies—known collectively as Title VI and Fulbright-Hayes—these programs “lack the resources necessary to keep pace with their mission.” Two months later a Modern Language Association (MLA) report noted that “in the context of globalization and in the post-September 11 environment, the usefulness of studying languages other than English is no longer contested. The goals and means of language study, however, continue to be hotly debated.” The report added a statement that is nothing if not comprehensive. “In their individual scholarly pursuits and in their pedagogical practices, foreign language faculty members have been working in creative ways to cross disciplinary boundaries, incorporate the study

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of all kinds of material in addition to the strictly literary, and promote wide cultural understanding through research and teaching. It is time for all language programs in all institutions to reflect this transformation.”

The demand is there: in November of last year the MLA reported impressive increases in enrollment in foreign languages from 2002 to 2006. (It also noted that even with steady increases in the foreign language enrollment figures since 1998, the levels are still only about half of what they were in the 1960s). Not surprisingly, the greatest leap was in the number of students taking Arabic, which grew 126.5 percent during those four years. (The second greatest increase was in Chinese, which grew by 50 percent.)

Since 2001 the need for greater numbers of U.S. citizens who can speak languages critical to U.S. security interests has been an unavoidable reality. And while young adults have responded to this need in record numbers, bringing them to an advanced level of proficiency in these languages is a problem that cannot be easily or quickly solved. “Learning a noncognate language like Arabic or Chinese takes native speakers of English longer than languages like French, Spanish, or German,” says Kirk Belnap, director of the National Middle Eastern Language Resource Center, a Title VI Program. “To reach advanced levels of proficiency in Arabic, a student must devote more time to it.” This can be accomplished through quality intensive study programs, Belnap says. “However, such opportunities are in short supply in the U.S. and abroad. Providers are struggling to keep up with demand.”

### Defining Proficiency

**E**VEN IF people have some foreign language proficiency, say enough to understand sentences and minimally communicate, that is not enough to make use of a foreign language in a professional environment. So perhaps the first important thing to understand, especially for U.S. students, many of whom have had little exposure to foreign languages or experience in using them in their daily lives, is what exactly is meant by “proficiency” in a foreign language, and particularly, what level of proficiency is needed to function effectively in a professional context.

The Language Flagship, a Department of Defense program instituted in 2002, is one major recent effort to build a cohort of U.S. citizens fluent in languages of critical importance to national security. “Our goal is to produce speakers of foreign language at the professional proficiency level...the level that

allows people to actually negotiate in the language,” says Michael Nugent, director of the program. “We have found in talking with business leaders, not only in the big corporations, but also in medium-sized companies, that if you go overseas and try to sell or establish yourself in English, you’re at a super disadvantage. They’re looking for people who are trained in a discipline, engineering, or business, or whatever ... who can actually negotiate and talk through a contract, people who can see the nuances of issues.” Asked for an example of one practical linguistic goal, Nugent says, “Students who graduate from our programs should be able to be interviewed on TV. You don’t want them to be in a situation where they don’t understand the questions, or they cannot adequately represent the business, or whatever interest they have.”

Fortunately, for more than 20 years educators have been working at developing curricula that are more effective in developing speakers of foreign language who can advance more quickly toward greater levels of proficiency. They have also devised reliable ways to measure foreign language proficiency, building on standards of measurement first developed by the federal government in the 1950s. One of the goals of The Language Flagship is to build on that knowledge base, and the pedagogical practices that have been developed within higher education in recent years. “We’re looking to those people who have been doing top-level work in language pedagogy for the past 20 years,” Nugent says, adding, “We’re trying to build a community of innovators.”

While most educators applaud government investment in foreign language education, and there have been clear benefits as a result of past efforts based in concerns about national security, some are uncomfortable with the idea of these efforts being housed in the Department of Defense. But the government’s efforts in this area are not limited to The Language Flagship program. “The U.S. Department of Education is doing a great job of stressing foreign language study in their research competitions,” says Tomas Hult, director of the International Business Center of the Eli Broad School of Management at Michigan State University. “Virtually all of their grant programs have a strong component of foreign language requirements in them...to obtain a grant you need to outline how your school will enhance the study of foreign languages, with a particular emphasis on less commonly taught languages.” Hult notes that while current attention to the problem is helping institutions of higher education provide U.S. students with better and more opportunities for learning foreign language, there is still a long way to go. “Business students typically study business, perhaps with two years of language training. Language students study languages, per-



Gabriel Mandujano with women from Pobladores, AC (Asociacion Civil)—Vicki, Aurora, Fabiola, and Itzamara (clockwise from left). Based in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, Pobladores gives small loans to female-headed households to build affordable housing across the state of Veracruz.

haps with some business training. ... For those select few who study both business and a language enough to become proficient in both, there are not enough great programs in the country," he says.

### Making Language a Priority in Business Education

ONE SCHOOL THAT HAS BEEN AHEAD of the curve is the University of Pennsylvania, whose undergraduate Huntsman Program, and graduate Lauder Institute have both placed a high priority on the development of foreign language proficiency among their business school graduates since the early 1990s. The Lauder Institute, founded in 1983 with funds contributed by Ronald and Leonard Lauder, both graduates of the Wharton School of Business, led the way. "They felt that they had not been well prepared for international business and wanted to do something that would better prepare current students," says Janice Bellace, Wharton faculty director for the Huntsman Program and Samuel Blank Professor of Legal Studies.

Both Huntsman and Lauder are dual-degree programs offered in collaboration between the University's School of Arts and Sciences and the Wharton School of Business. And both have set the bar very high for both incoming students and graduates of their programs. Entry and exit requirements for quantifiable levels of foreign language proficiency are determined by individually administered oral proficiency tests, based on the ACTFL scale. Applicants to the Huntsman program must show proficiency at the intermediate level to enter the program, and must have achieved at least the advanced high level before leaving. Graduates of the Lauder Institute are required to demonstrate superior level proficiency.

Training faculty who can administer such testing requires a sig-

nificant commitment of institutional resources, a commitment that must be consistently sustained, as Roger Allen, professor of Arabic language and literature, language acquisition expert, co-chair of the committee that set up the foreign language curriculum for the Huntsman Program, and adviser to the Lauder Institute, can attest. "We have a large number of proficiency-based language teachers on campus and we have had for a very long time," Allen says. "But we continually have to run workshops so that we can keep the new generation of teachers up to speed." But the Huntsman and Lauder programs' steadfast commitment to proficiency-based teaching has resulted in a stellar reputation for producing graduates who are able to meet the linguistic challenges of today's business world. Inge Herman, executive director of the Huntsman program, gives just one recent example: "I had a group of executives here last week from a very prestigious investment bank, and they just marveled at the fact that we have 40 students currently in our program with Chinese as their language, and none of them are from China."

High standards for foreign language proficiency have attracted students to the program. Gabriel Mandujano, a 2005 Huntsman graduate, agrees. "The foreign language requirement at the Huntsman program was actually one of its biggest selling points for me," he says. "Finding the motivation to [achieve] fluency was difficult when it was just up to me. Huntsman gave me a really good framework to make that jump."

### An Emphasis on Immersion

THE MOORE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS at the University of South Carolina is another institution where foreign language study has been an integral part of the curriculum for some time. According to Martin Roth, executive director of Moore's international M.B.A.

program, “We’ve been integrating foreign language studies into our curriculum for a long time, but recently we have shifted to a model where almost all of the language instruction is being done in-country... a full immersion kind of language instruction and delivery model.... The gains that the students realize in terms of really understanding the culture, getting to know people, getting to see how organizations operate, really learning the language, the gains they make through that continual, full immersion experience are significantly greater than spending a semester, or multiple semesters, in the classroom here.”

Bellace agrees that in-country immersion in a language is a highly effective way to advance proficiency in a foreign language, and points out that even shorter periods of time can be very effective in achieving that goal. “Students seem to make incredible progress if they go to a country for four to six weeks and all they do is [learn] the language. They almost leap ahead. Often there’s almost no funding for that, and it’s a shame...students who come in at the lower level could zoom ahead if there were more support.” She adds, “In many universities language study is confined to the regular semester. It would be wonderful if there was more government support for summer programs, intensive language programs taking place outside the U.S.”

Riley Curran, a business student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, spent the spring semester in Spain, at the University of Sevilla, where he studied marketing, operational management, and managing cultural diversity. Although his classes were all conducted in Spanish, his level of proficiency was not high enough to be enrolled in classes along with native speakers of Spanish. Looking back, he wishes he had had the chance to focus solely on improving his Spanish language proficiency during his semester abroad. “It’s easy to fall back on just socializing with your American classmates, especially when your proficiency in the language is limited,” Curran says. “If I had it to do again, I’d rather just focus on the language.”

For students learning languages like Arabic, the need for intensive linguistic study abroad is even more acute. According to Belnap, “There is simply no substitution for extensive in-country study—and for most students even a semester is too little.” He adds, “Funding for such opportunities has increased, but demand far exceeds supply. And many qualified students simply do not have the means to pay their own way.”

### Language Proficiency Opens Doors to Careers

“LANGUAGE gives you the capability to understand people and understand culture to much deeper levels than simply studying the culture,” says Roth. “What are their belief systems, what are their expectations, what do they see as the rules of the game? You’re not going to understand those things as well if you haven’t really studied that culture, been immersed in it, know the language. It really boils down to depth of understanding. And studying a language gives you a depth of understanding that you can’t really get any other way.”

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Joe Brockington, associate provost for international programs at Kalamazoo College, adds, “Foreign language proficiency is one of the mainstays of intercultural competence, especially if we include in our definition ... an ability to see things from multiple perspectives. Having access to another language grants access to another peoples’ world view.” In addition, Brockington says, “Being able to converse with others on their terms demonstrates a certain humility, and a bit of risk-taking—I will put myself at risk of errors (generally grammatical), because I want to make the effort to communicate with you on your terms.”

Allen points to another equally important benefit, but one not mentioned as often. “Globalization is not unidirectional,” he says. “It’s not just us taking American know-how and plunking it down somewhere. This is a two-way process: we’ve got to bring something back, and you can’t bring something back if it’s all in English. ... Something has to come back from the cultures with which we interact.” He adds, “One thing that globalization is doing, it’s proving, as if we needed to know, that the world is very diverse and that we are supposed to rejoice in the diversity of humanity and human society. And that we’ve got to deal with that diversity rather than try to make everything look the same and sound the same.”

Mandujano, who studied abroad in Cuba as a Huntsman student, and later received a grant to work at a microfinance organization in Mexico, says, “I never would have been able to contribute anything of value [in that job] if I hadn’t been able to understand where the clients were coming from, and the theory and culture behind the management’s programs to serve those clients. Nobody really spoke English, so speaking Spanish was the only way.” When you know the language of the clients you are serving, Mandujano adds, “You get to talk to people in the language that *they* are most comfortable in. And people open up a lot more when they are comfortable.”

Shefaly Yogendra, who studied at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, can attest to the importance of foreign language proficiency in providing career opportunities. In 1995, as a recent M.B.A. graduate, Yogendra was assigned to the senior management trainee track of her IT services company. While many of her young colleagues were spending much of their free time socializing, Yogendra chose to spend her time studying German at the local Goethe Institute in Delhi. Her boss, COO of the company, knew about Yogendra’s “oddball interest.” When the company was

opening an office in Switzerland, he recommended her for a key position in the new operation, and she got it. “Others had advantages over me, such as having had much more sales experience, many years of living and working outside India, and being male, which is very important in Switzerland, or at least it was then,” Yogendra says. “But I had one advantage which would help me get started with the business of doing business right away—my fluent German. I believe that this linguistic ability clinched it in my favor. Since we were not sure of where we would locate the office, my ability to speak the language was important. I could liaise and negotiate with the various investment officers in Switzerland. I could also converse with and negotiate for possible office premises, apply for my own work permit, and go about the business of life more easily. All of this made me more productive more swiftly than others who did not speak the language, or might only have learned it recently.” Now a citizen of the United Kingdom, Yogendra, who also speaks French and several Indian languages, works as an adviser and mentor to technology investors, entrepreneurs and start-up firms, managers in medium to large businesses, and British and European regulators.

### **Intensive Language Programs Abroad Play a Role in Attaining Proficiency**

“**I**N MY OPINION, any study abroad program taking place in a non-English speaking country should have a foreign language component of some kind,” says Inge Steiglitz, assistant director of study abroad at Michigan State University. In addition, she says, “All programs should have ‘linguistic awareness’ as one of their learning outcomes.” Regarding the usefulness of foreign language proficiency in the workplace, Steiglitz says, “While it is of course beneficial for someone to speak the language of the country in which they are doing business, I think that any foreign language ability is helpful in creating effective future employees, due to the conceptual/cultural awareness and expansion that comes with foreign language learning.” She adds, “I believe that this awareness transfers to contexts in which the particular foreign language one has learned is not spoken.”

At the University of Minnesota intensive language programs in French and Spanish consistently maintain healthy enrollment figures, interest in East Asian languages is growing, and there is talk about adding an Arabic studies program. However, enrollment in some other languages, such as Russian, has actually declined in recent years. Jodi Malmgren, associate director of the university’s Learning Abroad Center says, “One important thing that study abroad professionals can do to help a student put their study abroad experience

into a larger context is to ask questions about students’ goals for the future and point out the value of language proficiency. Without this discussion, the tendency may be for students to consider language study only in the context of meeting their language requirements for graduation, rather than how it will serve them after college. What are their goals for the duration of the study abroad experience? If they will study language, what are their hopes for proficiency improvements by the end of the term abroad? Have they considered a longer study abroad program to allow greater growth in proficiency? What career goals do they have? Sectors such as K–12 education or healthcare, where second language proficiency hasn’t traditionally been stressed, are seeing growth in the demand for trained teachers and healthcare providers who can meet the needs of ESL students or patients.”

At Kalamazoo College, where 80–85 percent of the students study abroad, there are foreign language requirements both for study abroad and for graduation. Students who are applying to a program in a country whose language is taught on campus must have taken at least one year of that language before studying there. “If we don’t teach the language, then the students learn it while they are there,” Brockington says, adding, “At least for our on-campus languages, study abroad is an opportunity to add to students’ already existing language skills. For these programs, we always begin with an intensive language program as a refresher and linguistic tune-up, after which the students are ready to tackle their university coursework.”

### **Hiring Managers Look for Language Proficiency in New Hires**

**E**LENA GORYUNOVA is vice president of human resources for Luxoft, a Russian application outsourcing services company that has worked on large-scale IT projects for clients such as Deutsche Bank, Dell, IBM, and Boeing. According to Goryunova, “Language proficiency is definitely important in the hiring process, especially for global service providers ... at this point, foreign language proficiency has grown to be among the top five service provider’s criteria. It is crucial for offshore service providers to literally ‘speak the same language’ as their clients, in order to understand specific requirements, and to clearly articulate progress and/or any issues that may arise in the course of collaboration.” When asked in which kinds of positions proficiency in a foreign language is important, Goryunova says, “Foreign language is important for all client-facing positions including sales, marketing, and account management. On the technical level these are project managers, senior business systems analysts, and architects.” She explains that in her industry, “Service providers are no longer

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required to follow step-by-step written instructions provided by the client. Instead they are encouraged to offer a free flow of new ideas and approaches to software development and encouraged to speak up when necessary. This requires both written and verbal foreign language fluency.”

Although from Goryunova’s perspective, the foreign language most frequently required is English, certainly the same values and business needs are important to hiring managers around the world.

According to Tim Scerba, CEO, Mexico and COO, Latin America for Edelman Public Relations Worldwide, “Proficiency in any language beyond one’s native language could make a candidate more attractive in today’s competitive marketplace.” He adds, “The importance of being able to communicate in a second or even third language has definitely increased over the past decade ... the Internet and business globalization have reduced the size of our world and made interaction with other languages and cultures an almost daily occurrence. ... In this environment, being able to understand and express oneself in other languages is quickly becoming a necessity rather a convenience.”

It’s not just exposure to another language that is called for: often the ability to operate at an advanced level of proficiency is required. Scerba explains, “Edelman team members working in languages other than their native language do the same types of work they would do in the native language ... this runs the full range of tasks, including development of plans and materials, working with and counseling clients, interacting with colleagues in other parts of the world, managing projects and outside vendors and managing the day-to-day activities of their accounts.” He adds, “The ability to speak multiple languages will continue to become increasingly important and this ability will continue to provide an edge in today’s competitive markets... Knowing how to speak a language of another country as well as adapt to its business culture—in other words, being multilingual and multicultural—is a powerful combination.”

And while there is increasing awareness in the business world, and especially in international business, of the need for employees who are able to function in more than one language, foreign language proficiency is also needed in many other parts of the workforce, and often on the domestic front as well. According to Malmgren, “A second (or third) language continues to be an important skill for employees in a

globalizing marketplace ... in addition to the demands of the international business community, employees in other sectors, such as healthcare or government service, will be well served by a high level of second language proficiency.”

### **Pushing for Greater Foreign Language Proficiency**

**T**HERE IS A GROWING CONSENSUS among leaders of business, government, and higher education that coordinating their efforts to increase the numbers of U.S. citizens proficient in foreign languages is of critical importance, and that the time is now. New York University’s Mary Louise Pratt, chair of the committee that drafted last year’s MLA report says, “There has been a lot of interest in the report; people feel it raises issues that need raising.... On a broad level, I think the most important recommendation is that higher education take up the challenge of developing a full-fledged higher education agenda in foreign language education in the U.S. If higher education doesn’t take this on, it will be taken on by other sectors whose investment is narrowly instrumental or commercial.” This is a concern echoed by Belnap. “Some have advocated abandoning the higher education system as a primary locus for the serious training of young people in critical foreign languages,” he says. “This would be a mistake. For all its shortcomings, American higher education is without parallel for its potential to cast a broad net and channel highly motivated and talented language learners toward productive learning opportunities.” According to Pratt, “The question that has been most frequently asked is where the leadership will come from to make this happen, to pull together the range of organizations that would have to collaborate.”

One recent effort to pull together such leadership has been spearheaded by Heidi Byrnes, George M. Roth distinguished professor of German at Georgetown University and editor of the “Perspectives” column in the *Modern Language Journal*. An invitation-only conference Byrnes organized in April of this year brought together 40 representatives of higher education and various governmental agencies to discuss ways to address the need for greater linguistic competency among U.S. citizens in order to meet its economic, diplomatic, and national security goals. One of the topics of discussion at the conference was the development of a national policy, or framework, for language education. An action group of key players from within that group is currently exploring ways to support cooperative efforts from within business, government, and academia to improve

# Further Reading

## **Education for Global Leadership:**

*The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U. S. Economic and National Security*  
Council for Economic Development  
[www.ced.org/docs/report/report\\_foreignlanguages.pdf](http://www.ced.org/docs/report/report_foreignlanguages.pdf)

## **Europeans and Their Languages**

European Commission, 2006  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/pdf/doc631\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/pdf/doc631_en.pdf)

## **Foreign Languages and Higher Education:**

*New Structures for a Changed World*  
Modern Language Association, 2007  
[www.mla.org/flreport](http://www.mla.org/flreport)

## **International Education and Foreign**

**Languages: Keys to Securing America's Future**  
National Academies of Sciences, 2007

the state of foreign language instruction in the United States: one hope is that the issue may be given a roundtable discussion at the National Academies of Sciences. "There seems to be an increasing consensus of the kinds of things that simply must happen, and one of those things is clearly the articulation between the K–12 environment and higher education," says Byrnes

According to Belnap, the situation is urgent. "Immediate intervention is necessary if we are to realize our potential to assist many more such learners in realizing their goals of high levels of cultural and linguistic proficiency. ... The United States is simply not making the most of the few well-trained professionals now in service, and it is largely failing to attract and train the new talent necessary to help thousands of students realize their potential and their desire to make a difference in the world." He adds, "Accomplishing this will require much more than wishful thinking."

Of course, while planning and coordination among leaders of government, academia, and business is of critical importance, much of the impetus for real change will have to come from a heightened awareness among ordinary citizens—students, teachers, and parents—that the achievement of high levels of proficiency in foreign languages is of fundamental importance, and that it is worth the time and effort needed to achieve it. This will require to some degree a shift in traditional cultural assumptions. When asked what is standing in the way of U.S. citizens closing the foreign language proficiency gap, Nugent says, "We don't have a tradition of language learning: that's probably the most important thing we need to overcome." However, it may be that among many citizens, much of that the shift has already taken place, and now it's up to institutions to catch up. According to Nugent, "[Today's] parents really want their kids to have foreign language instruction at a younger age ... they see

the need. We need as a society to recognize the demand. Increasingly we see a demand for these kinds of skills in the business sector; in government there's a huge need. There's also recognition that you can pursue an engineering degree, or whatever, and study languages too. It's not either/or." As for college students, Stacia Falat, program officer at The Language Flagship says, "The students we talk to think The Language Flagship is the greatest thing ... they see a benefit in terms of going abroad, but they also see that it's useful for their careers. That's all the incentive they need."

And while most of the current focus is on getting students abroad in greater numbers, finding ways to get faculty abroad can be another way to increase international awareness and inspire students to pursue international study, according to Roth. "We do a lot of things through our federally funded CIBER center to get as many of our faculty abroad as possible so that faculty who might not have had an international orientation in their previous academic experience ... will have the experience of going abroad. That type of geographic awareness and cultural awareness enriches their teaching, and their research, so they will encourage their students to take advantage of those kinds of opportunities as well."

The intensive and sustained effort needed to achieve and maintain proficiency in foreign languages, and the expense of training and maintaining a cadre of language teachers sufficient to meet the demand for a much greater number of U.S. students who are proficient in foreign languages are factors that need to be addressed by all concerned. "Often when I speak with colleagues, so many of them say that the Huntsman program is marvelous, but they don't think a program like that would go over well at their schools," says Herman. She finds this attitude unnecessarily pessimistic. "I think that programs that have real cultural competence at their root can be created, and can function. ... I think raising the bar has worked here and it can work in other places."

The challenges are vast, but the potential benefits are enormous, and the cost of not meeting those challenges is even more daunting. Mandujano is now executive director of the Enterprise Center Community Development Corporation, a nonprofit in West Philadelphia. Though he is working domestically, he says that his foreign language proficiency still comes in handy: "Being bilingual sends a message that interacting with people on their own terms is important to you. Most foreigners I've encountered expect [U.S. citizens] to be monolingual. So speaking another language is a big statement. I think it makes a really good impression." **IE**

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