

# Foreign Language Readiness for National Interests: Bridging Academic Training and Strategic Workforce Needs

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## Abstract

The United States has strong overall English proficiency, but it continues to face a shortage of professionals with advanced skills in foreign languages, particularly French and Spanish, which are important for national security, diplomacy, and global economic engagement. The challenge is not the number of learners, but the limited number who achieve Advanced-to-Superior (ILR 2+/3+) proficiency required for complex professional tasks. This review looks at the factors contributing to the shortfall: university programs that emphasize general language skills over profession-specific training, language policies that are poorly aligned and subject to frequent change, underused pathways for heritage speakers, and limited adoption of teaching approaches like Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Together, these challenges underscore the importance of joint action across education, policy, and workforce systems to develop and sustain high-level language skills in strategically important languages.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language Readiness; Workforce Proficiency; Language Policy; French and Spanish; Strategic Competence

## 1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, a nation's strength depends not just on its military power or economic capacity, but also on its ability to communicate and operate effectively across languages and cultures. Foreign language expertise has become a strategic asset, supporting national security, diplomacy, and economic competitiveness (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017). Tasks such as intelligence gathering, alliance building, treaty negotiation, and international market engagement all require professionals who can function fluently in the languages of key regions and partners.

In the United States, English proficiency is nearly universal, yet the demand for advanced foreign language skills, especially in French and Spanish, has consistently outpaced institutional capacity. Government reports and scholarly studies point to this imbalance as a long-standing weakness in human capital, sometimes referred to as a quiet crisis, since many graduates enter the workforce without the professional-level skills required for strategic positions in diplomacy, intelligence, and international business (Ruther, 2005; Brecht & Rivers, 2000). Periodic geopolitical events, such as the Sputnik era and the September 11 attacks, have prompted temporary boosts in language education and training (Higgins, 2008; Liddicoat, 2018). However, these efforts have often been reactive, failing to establish lasting systems that produce sustained, high-level proficiency aligned with long-term national needs.

After 9/11, U.S. language policy shifted toward critical or strategic languages like Arabic, Mandarin, and Farsi, reflecting immediate military and counterterrorism priorities (Kubota, 2007). While this approach addressed short-term gaps, it drew attention away from languages assumed to be readily available domestically, particularly French and Spanish. This assumption masks a significant strategic risk. Spanish continues to play a central role in hemispheric diplomacy, trade, law enforcement, and public health, while French remains essential for multilateral diplomacy, international organizations, and key regions in Africa and Europe (Domínguez & Darhower, 2025; Waldvogel & Peart, 2017). Despite their prevalence, both languages face ongoing shortages of professionals with advanced functional proficiency, as reflected in chronic staffing gaps in federal agencies and unmet demand in the private sector (Westin, 2002; Simonsen, 2022).

Existing research has examined foreign language gaps in national security (Liddicoat, 2018; Roule, 2023), economic competitiveness (Fry & Lowell, 2003; New American Economy, 2017), and formal education (ACTFL, 2012; Murphy et al., 2020). Yet much of this work focuses on less commonly taught languages or treats French and Spanish as secondary to broader strategic language planning. As a result, the ways in which education policy, curriculum design, and workforce planning intersect to limit readiness in these two languages remain underexplored.

This thematic literature review addresses that gap by examining how structural features of U.S. language education and policy shape the alignment between academic training and workforce needs in French and Spanish. It pursues five interrelated objectives: (1) to analyze how these languages are positioned in policy and economic discourse; (2) to assess evidence of advanced-level proficiency gaps in the workforce; (3) to evaluate the limitations of current academic training models; (4) to examine how U.S. language policy fragments language development efforts; and (5) to identify gaps in research and practice. By weaving these strands together, the review clarifies patterns of foreign language readiness and points to areas for future inquiry and policy action.

## 2. Methodology

This literature review used a narrative thematic approach to examine U.S. foreign language readiness, focusing specifically on French and Spanish. While other languages appear in the literature, these two were chosen because of their strategic roles in hemispheric relations, multilateral diplomacy, and global trade. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, which spans education, workforce development, and national security, this approach was selected to synthesize insights across multiple areas rather than simply catalog individual studies.

Sources were identified through searches of academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and institutional repositories. Keywords included terms such as “foreign language readiness,” “workforce language proficiency,” “FLSP,” “French,” “Spanish,” “higher education language programs,” and “language policy.” Both U.S.-based and relevant international studies were considered, with international examples included only when they provided direct insight into the U.S. context.

Studies were included if they:

1. Addressed foreign language proficiency in relation to workforce readiness or professional competence.
2. Examined academic training programs, curricula, or FLSP initiatives, with a focus on French and Spanish as representative strategic languages.
3. Were published from 2010 onward, while retaining seminal earlier works for context.
4. Appeared in peer-reviewed journals or official framework documents, such as ACTFL or CEFR.

Studies were excluded if they focused solely on English language acquisition in the U.S. or lacked relevance to workforce readiness, higher education, or language policy.

For each selected source, key information was extracted and coded, including research aims, central arguments, language focus, workforce implications, curricular and policy recommendations, documented gaps, and limitations. A thematic analysis was then conducted to identify recurring patterns across literature. These patterns were organized into five broad categories:

1. Strategic importance of foreign languages
2. Workforce readiness gaps
3. Academic training and curriculum limitations
4. Language policy and planning
5. Gaps in foreign language readiness

This approach allowed for a cohesive narrative synthesis, highlighting systemic trends and ongoing misalignments between academic training and workforce needs, while keeping the analysis focused on French and Spanish as critical examples of U.S. strategic language priorities.

### 3. Thematic Analysis

#### 3.1 Strategic Importance of Foreign Languages

Foreign languages matter to the United States in ways that go beyond classrooms. They shape how the country interacts with the world and protects its interests. French and Spanish, in particular, play roles that shift depending on context. In national security, for example, knowing these languages is not just an academic skill. It helps with intelligence work, counterinsurgency, and supporting partner nations as they build their own capacities (Waldvogel & Peart, 2017; Hagan, 2020). After 9/11, policy attention focused mainly on languages tied to immediate threats, and as a result, French and Spanish often received less priority, even in regions like South America and Africa, where they are still highly relevant (Liddicoat, 2018; Roule, 2023). Domestically, Spanish continues to be essential for law enforcement, legal services, and public safety work (Dominguez & Darhower, 2025), while French remains a key tool in diplomacy and engagement with French-speaking African countries, which are strategically important for U.S. influence (Higgins, 2008; Kyrda-Omelian et al., 2022).

The economic dimension reinforces this importance. Employers across the U.S. increasingly look for Spanish-speaking professionals, especially in fast-growing sectors like healthcare, finance, and law (New American Economy, 2017; Simonsen, 2022). French, while less common in everyday business, opens doors to high-level roles in international trade, business management, and development projects (Karapetyan & Kharatyan, 2024; Bouche & Reisinger, 2021). In this sense, language skills are more than cultural knowledge. They are practical tools that can shape careers and give the U.S. a competitive edge globally (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017; Rahimi & Shahisavandi, 2021).

Yet there is a tension. Many Spanish-speaking communities in the U.S. encounter schools and social systems that favor English, making it harder for students to maintain and develop their native language skills in ways that could later support professional opportunities (Gándara & Escamilla, 2017). It creates a puzzling situation. The country relies on language skills to succeed internationally, but at home, those same skills are often under-supported. For heritage speakers, bilingualism is both a potential advantage and a challenge, and this gap between aspiration and practice can weaken overall readiness in key languages.

### 3.2 Workforce Readiness Gap

Although French and Spanish are widely acknowledged as important, education and training programs continue to produce skills that do not fully meet the demands of national-priority roles. Federal agencies provide a clear picture of the problem. In the early 2000s, nearly 30 percent of language-designated positions at the State Department went unfilled as staff were not fully proficient, and the gap continued over time. (Westin, 2002; Ruther, 2005). The Intelligence Community faces similar challenges. Thousands of hours of critical audio material go untranslated simply because there are not enough qualified linguists, and this gap affects counterterrorism and counterintelligence operations (Westin, 2002; Roule, 2023). Even the military struggles, with only a small portion of deployed personnel possessing functional-level skills in French or Spanish during major operations (Higgins, 2008). These examples point to a systemic problem, reflecting long-term weaknesses in workforce preparation rather than temporary staffing shortages.

The private sector encounters similar challenges, showing that this is not only a government issue. Companies frequently encounter missed opportunities and reduced participation in international markets when bilingual staff is in short supply, especially in healthcare, finance, and business (New American Economy, 2017; Simonsen, 2022). The challenge is not only the number of speakers but also the level of their proficiency. Many professional roles demand Advanced to Superior skills, including negotiation, technical analysis, and persuasive communication (ACTFL, 2012; 2024). Yet surveys suggest that the pipeline for these skills is fragile. About one in four Americans speaks a language other than English, but only 10 percent say they speak it very well. School programs produce high-level proficiency in just 17 percent of students, compared with 67 percent of home learners (Robinson et al., 2006). This shows that exposure alone is not enough to create workforce-ready skills. Early learning often fails to translate into professional competence, leaving the country vulnerable in critical roles.

These gaps have tangible consequences. Every untranslated report, missed diplomatic engagement, or lost business opportunity represents more than a strategic weakness. They directly affect the people responsible for these tasks, from diplomats and intelligence officers to healthcare providers, as well as the communities they serve. The ongoing gaps highlight an underlying issue: academic and professional training programs are limited in their ability to prepare learners with the advanced language skills needed for immediate deployment.

### 3.3 Academic Training and Curriculum Limitations

Higher education remains the main pathway for developing the advanced language skills needed in key national roles (Simonsen, 2022). Yet research shows that program design, teaching methods, and institutional support often fall short of preparing students for real-world demands (Spišiaková & Kittová, 2020).

A central challenge is the limited integration of Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes (FLSP) in U.S. higher education. Employers increasingly require language skills linked to particular fields. For example, Spanish in healthcare can improve patient care (Lopez Vera et al., 2025), while French and Spanish are often needed in legal and business contexts (Domínguez & Darhower, 2025; Bouche & Reisinger, 2021). Despite this growing demand, most university programs continue to focus on literature and culture, emphasizing general language knowledge rather than the professional communication skills graduates need. As a result, students often leave unprepared for the practical tasks they will face in their careers (Soboļeva & Madžule, 2018; Kyrda-Omelian et al., 2022).

Teaching methods also contribute to the gap. Many programs still rely on grammar-translation or audio-lingual approaches, which stress memorization and accuracy over meaningful communication (Krutikova, 2017; Zablotska, 2022). Approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which teach language through real-world content, are rarely used (Waldvogel & Peart, 2017). More recent strategies, like translanguaging, which leverage learners' full linguistic repertoire, show promise for developing flexible communication skills (Xiong, 2025; Canagarajah, 2011). However, their adoption is limited by long-standing monolingual teaching habits and gaps in teacher training (Lee & Handsfield, 2018; Balcioglu & Kocaman, 2013).

Structural and continuity issues make the challenge even harder. Many students experience a gap in language instruction between high school and university, which leads to skill loss before they can reach advanced levels (Čepon, 2012). Inconsistent placement procedures and limited options for advanced courses discourage learners and make it difficult to connect classroom performance with real-world proficiency (ACTFL, 2012, 2024).

Institutional factors further weaken the pathway. Language departments face declining enrollment, program closures, and budget constraints, limiting their ability to develop strong FLSP programs, hire expert faculty, or modernize teaching approaches (New American Economy, 2017; Montee et al., 2025; Murphy et al., 2020).

These patterns highlight three main barriers in higher education for strategic languages: curricula that do not reflect professional needs, teaching methods that fail to build practical skills, and weak institutional support. Without changes that align programs with workforce requirements, adopt proven teaching strategies, and secure stable resources, higher education will continue to produce graduates who are not ready to meet the demands of national and professional language roles.

### **3.4 Language Policy and Planning (LPP)**

U.S. language policy operates through a decentralized and unintegrated framework, characterized by episodic funding and the absence of a sustained national strategy linking education, workforce planning, and security needs. (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017). Unlike proactive systems such as the European Union's multilingual framework, the U.S. approach is highly decentralized, with significant differences in language education requirements between states (Montee et al., 2025; EBSCO Information Services, 2024).

Historically, federal language policy has followed a boom-and-bust pattern. Funding and attention surge after security crises but decline when the threat is seen as lower, making it difficult to build long-term capacity (Brecht & Rivers, 2000; Liddicoat, 2018; Ruther, 2005). More recently, Executive Order No. 14,224 designated English as the official language for federal government operations and rescinded prior executive guidance that expanded language access for individuals with limited English proficiency (The Attorney General, 2025). Critical scholarship suggests that, although the order is formally limited in scope, this policy shift may weaken institutional support for multilingual services and contribute to a broader deprioritization of language diversity within federal and related institutional contexts (Khan, 2012; Gándara & Escamilla, 2017).

Coordination between federal agencies, including the Departments of Defense, State, and Education, remains weak. As a result, planning and development of the language workforce are poorly aligned (Westin, 2002; Ruther, 2005). In addition, there is no central system to track or use existing language skills across the federal workforce, leaving many language abilities invisible and underused (Hagan, 2020; Roule, 2023).

Programs such as the National Security Education Program (NSEP) and Title VI support advanced language study, but they mainly focus on less commonly taught languages (Brecht & Rivers, 2000; Coalition for International Education, 2017). As a result, widely used strategic languages like French and Spanish remain dependent on traditional humanities budgets and do not receive dedicated funding for national security or workforce development.

Economic incentives for learning these languages also remain limited. Labor market studies show little wage benefit for bilingualism in the general U.S. workforce (Fry & Lowell, 2003; Churkina et al., 2023). Employer demand often values basic language skills rather than the advanced proficiency needed for professional or national interest roles (López, 2023).

In sum, U.S. language policy is marked by disconnected structures, short-term funding, and weak coordination between agencies. This environment makes it hard to build and maintain high-level skills in important languages like French and Spanish, which contributes to workforce gaps and weak national readiness (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017; Roule, 2023).

### **3.5 Gaps in Foreign Language Readiness**

The literature shows that there are major gaps in how foreign language skills are developed and used for national strategic purposes. These gaps go beyond teaching or policy issues and point to deeper weaknesses in research, planning, and investment.

One key gap is the underuse of heritage speakers, especially those fluent in Spanish, who already have valuable language skills. Despite this potential, there are few structured ways to assess, certify, and integrate their abilities into public service or national security roles (Martin, 2010; Coalition for International Education, 2017). Political and social debates around bilingualism further limit the effective use of this talent pool (Kubota, 2007; Gándara & Escamilla, 2017).

In education, evidence-based teaching methods are not widely implemented. Approaches like Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes (FLSP) show promise but are mostly confined to pilot programs rather than being part of standard K-16 curricula (Zablotska, 2022; Murphy et al., 2020). Similarly, the strategic use of digital tools and virtual exchanges to maintain skills across school transitions is limited, leaving learners at risk of losing proficiency (Haouchi & Idri, 2025).

Policy and research gaps also contribute to these problems. The U.S. lacks a long-term national strategy that consistently links education with workforce needs (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017; Ruther, 2005). Long-term studies that follow learners from school to career are rare, making it hard to identify where learners drop off or what factors lead to success (ACTFL, 2012, 2024). Cost-benefit studies of language education and comparisons with successful international programs are also limited, which reduces evidence-based guidance for U.S. policy (Zablotska, 2022).

Technology is another area with untapped potential. Digital tools could improve language learning and assessment, but their effectiveness for preparing a large-scale workforce has not been fully studied, and their impact on traditional classroom teaching is still unclear (Roule, 2023; Murphy et al., 2020).

These gaps are not only systematic. They affect real people: heritage speakers miss career opportunities, students lose skills due to gaps in education, and professionals are unprepared for the demands of strategic roles. Tackling these challenges is essential for turning existing linguistic talent into reliable national capacity and for aligning individual learning with national needs, especially in key languages like French and Spanish.

#### 4. Discussion

This review shows a clear and ongoing mismatch between U.S. academic language training and the advanced proficiency needed for strategic workforce roles in French and Spanish. Structural, pedagogical, and policy-related challenges continue to prevent the development of professionals with Advanced-to-Superior proficiency. Although the strategic importance of these languages is widely recognized, the education system struggles to turn this awareness into practical skills. Spanish is essential for hemispheric diplomacy, domestic public services, and international business (Spišiaková & Kittová, 2020; Simonsen, 2022), while French supports multilateral diplomacy and global economic engagement (Karapetyan & Kharatyan, 2024; Haouchi & Idri, 2025). Chronic shortages across federal agencies, the military, and the private sector indicate that this is a systemic problem, reflecting long-standing weaknesses in workforce preparation (Westin, 2002; Ruther, 2005; Roule, 2023).

Higher education contributes to the gap by prioritizing general language knowledge over profession-specific skills (Bozhanova, 2020; Carvalho et al., 2020). Curricula often emphasize literature and culture while overlooking the communication abilities graduates need in professional contexts (Čepon, 2012; Simonsen, 2022). Applied teaching methods, such as Content and Language Integrated Learning, Task-Based Language Teaching, and translanguaging, remain rare (Zablotska, 2022; Krutikova, 2017; Soboļeva & Madžule, 2018). These challenges are reinforced by gaps between K–12 and higher education, declining enrollment, and limited institutional support (Čepon, 2012; Montee et al., 2025; EBSCO, 2024), making it difficult for students to reach the advanced proficiency required for national and professional roles (ACTFL, 2012; ACTFL, 2024).

Policy issues further complicate readiness. Federal programs often focus on less commonly taught languages, leaving French and Spanish dependent on traditional humanities funding (Brecht & Rivers, 2000; Ruther, 2005). Coordination across agencies is weak, and heritage speakers, particularly those fluent in Spanish, are underused due to certification barriers and sociopolitical factors (Gándara & Escamilla, 2017; Robinson et al., 2006; Kubota, 2007). Research and labor market conditions reinforce these challenges. Longitudinal studies are scarce (Murphy et al., 2020), digital learning tools remain underused (Haouchi & Idri, 2025), and incentives for achieving high-level proficiency are limited (Fry & Lowell, 2003; López, 2023). Exposure alone is insufficient to produce workforce-ready skills (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).

These findings indicate that improving foreign language readiness requires more than increasing enrollment or implementing isolated reforms. Success depends on aligning educational programs, teaching methods, and policy to prepare learners for real-world applications (Domínguez & Darhower, 2025; Haouchi & Idri, 2025). Persistent gaps leave the nation vulnerable in diplomacy, national security, economic competitiveness, and public service (Waldvogel & Peart, 2017; American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017; New American Economy, 2017). Heritage speakers represent an untapped resource, and leveraging their skills could help partially address workforce shortages (Gándara & Escamilla, 2017). Foreign language proficiency should be treated as strategic infrastructure, and without sustained, coordinated investment across education, government, and industry, shortages of qualified professionals will continue to limit the country's ability to operate effectively in a multilingual world (Brecht & Rivers, 2000; Liddicoat, 2018; Roule, 2023).

#### 5. Recommendations

Addressing the foreign language readiness gap will require cross-sector efforts across research, pedagogy,

and policy.

In Research, Long-term studies should follow learners from secondary school through higher education and into the workforce to identify where language skills are lost and which interventions are most effective. Cost-benefit studies of language education would help policymakers better understand the return on investment in advanced language training. Focused research on heritage speakers is also needed to develop clear pathways for assessing, certifying, and using existing language skills in public service and national security roles. In addition, international and comparative studies can help identify effective models from other countries and ensure that U.S. programs in French and Spanish align with global proficiency standards.

In Pedagogy, Higher education institutions should expand and formalize Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes programs in French and Spanish, working closely with professional schools, federal agencies, and international partners. Curricula should be designed around real professional tasks in areas such as healthcare, law, business, and diplomacy. Teacher preparation and professional development should emphasize applied approaches, including Content and Language Integrated Learning, Task-Based Language Teaching, and flexible use of students’ full language skills. At the state and district levels, clear K to 16 language pathways should be established, with early language exposure and deliberate efforts to prevent skill loss during transitions between school levels.

In Policy, A coherent national language strategy is needed to align federal agencies such as Education, Defense, State, and Commerce around shared proficiency targets for French and Spanish. Federal human resources systems should improve the visibility of language skills by identifying employees with language expertise and rewarding continued development. Existing programs such as the National Security Education Program and Title VI should be strengthened to support advanced French and Spanish proficiency in professional settings, not only less commonly taught languages. At the state level, world language study should be required for graduation, and programs like the Seal of Biliteracy should be promoted as meaningful indicators of workforce readiness.

These actions together would support the development of a stable pipeline of advanced French and Spanish language skills. This would better prepare individuals for strategic roles while strengthening national security, diplomacy, and economic competitiveness.

**Table 1 summarizes the key structural factors, evidence, and recommended interventions shaping French and Spanish language readiness in the United States.**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Evidence from the Literature</b>	<b>Identified Gap/Problem</b>	<b>Strategic Intervention</b>
Limited Advanced Proficiency	Federal workforce reports; ACTFL proficiency frameworks; State Department staffing data (Westin, 2002; Ruther, 2005; ACTFL, 2012, 2024)	Insufficient number of professionals reaching ILR 2+/3+ levels required for complex tasks	Expand advanced-level instruction tied to ILR benchmarks; integrate proficiency-based assessment across education and training
University Program Focus	Curriculum analyses and program reviews in higher education (Bouche &	Overemphasis on general language study (literature/culture) with	Institutionalize Foreign Languages for Specific

Factor	Evidence from the Literature	Identified Gap/Problem	Strategic Intervention
	Reisinger, 2021; Kyrda-Omelian et al., 2022; Simonsen, 2022)	limited professional application	Purposes (FLSP) programs in French and Spanish
Fragmented Language Policy	Policy reviews and national reports (Brecht & Rivers, 2000; American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017; Ruther, 2005)	Lack of coordinated national strategy linking education, workforce, and security needs	Develop a coherent national language framework aligning K–16 education, higher education, and workforce planning
Underutilized Heritage Speaker Pathways	Research on heritage learners and proficiency assessment (Martin, 2010; Gándara & Escamilla, 2017; Coalition for International Education, 2017)	Heritage speakers’ existing skills remain uncertified, invisible, or socially discouraged	Establish accelerated pathways, certification mechanisms, and targeted recruitment into public service and strategic roles
Limited Applied Pedagogy	Language teaching and acquisition studies (Balcioglu & Kocaman, 2013; Lee & Handsfield, 2018; Xiong, 2025)	Minimal use of task-based, content-integrated, and translanguaging approaches	Expand CLIL, Task-Based Language Teaching, and applied communicative pedagogy in teacher training and curricula
Workforce Alignment Gap	Employer surveys and labor market analyses (New American Economy, 2017; Churkina et al., 2023; Simonsen, 2022)	Mismatch between educational outcomes and workplace language demands	Strengthen partnerships among universities, federal agencies, and private-sector employers
Weak Incentives for Advanced Proficiency	Economic and labor market studies (Fry & Lowell, 2003; Churkina et al., 2023)	Limited wage or career rewards for advanced bilingual proficiency	Introduce incentives such as salary differentials, promotion credit, and credential recognition
Limited Use of Technology	Education and policy research on digital learning (Murphy et al., 2020; Roule, 2023)	Underuse of digital tools to maintain proficiency and support transitions	Integrate digital platforms, virtual exchanges, and online assessments to sustain language skills over time

## 6. Conclusion

This review shows that foreign language readiness in French and Spanish remains a persistent and complex challenge for the United States, with clear effects on national security, diplomacy, and economic competitiveness. The issue does not stem from awareness but from uncoordinated systems. Weak foundations in K–12 education, university programs that are poorly aligned with workforce needs, short-

term federal policies, and labor markets that do not reward advanced proficiency all prevent individual language learning from becoming reliable national capacity.

Addressing this challenge requires a fundamental shift in how language skills are understood and supported. Language proficiency should be treated as essential national infrastructure, just as important as technology or energy security. Meeting this goal requires sustained coordination across education, government, and industry, long-term investment in people, and clear pathways that turn existing language ability into professional readiness. Without these changes, short-term fixes will continue, the number of qualified professionals will decline, and the nation's ability to operate effectively in a multilingual world will weaken.

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