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REPORT

Second-Language Skills for All?

Analyzing a Proposed Language Requirement for U.S. Air Force Officers

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Summary

Many official Department of Defense (DoD) and Air Force sources describe language skills as a key warfighting competency.¹ Given the need to develop the language capabilities of Air Force officers, it has been proposed that all Air Force officers be required to demonstrate a high level of proficiency in a foreign language at the time they are commissioned. The Foreign Policy Advisor to the Air Force Chief of Staff asked Project AIR FORCE to evaluate how best to achieve this goal.

In response, we reviewed relevant background information and research on adult language learning and designed and fielded a survey of Air Force officers to address the following:

1. Is a minimum score of 2/2 (limited working proficiency) or 3/3 (general working proficiency) on a language exam a feasible and achievable goal?²
2. What potential consequences would implementing a language proficiency requirement for officers have?

Survey of Air Force Officers

Our survey of Air Force officers yielded important insights into the current status of language skills of recent college graduates, the likely outcomes of various types of college language experiences, and the effects of proposed policies on key Air Force outcomes—all important considerations in establishing a language commissioning policy.

Specifically, we designed survey items that addressed each of the following:

- What language skills do current Air Force officers possess?
- Which types of language learning experiences are associated with the highest levels of language skills?
- Are there positive relationships between language skills and various desirable outcomes?
- How would language learning and mandatory language proficiency policies be perceived by officers?
- What do officers perceive as incentives and disincentives for learning a language?

¹ See, for instance, DoD, 2005; U.S. Air Force, 2009; and DoD, 2010.

² The proficiency levels here are those described in the federal Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Proficiency Guidelines, which rate language proficiency on a scale from 0 to 5; detailed descriptions of these skill levels are available on the website (ILR, 2011c). DoD Instruction 5160.70, 2007, and DoD Directive 5160.41E, 2010, also refer to these guidelines as DoD's official measure for foreign-language proficiency.

The survey sample was designed to be representative of the entire officer population.³ Our survey invitation reached approximately 11,500 current Air Force officers and yielded 3,519 completed responses. Below, we summarize the key survey findings. We then offer our conclusions, which answer the two overall research questions, and provide five recommendations to inform future Air Force language policies.

The Language Skills of Current Air Force Officers

We examined current officers' language skills: their levels of language skill and in which languages. We found that overall, officers have second-language skills that permit only limited interactions in the language. Most would not meet a 2/2 requirement and would require additional training to do so. Although more than 150 languages were represented, the top three were Spanish, German, and French. Unfortunately, these three languages, while commonly taught in the United States, do not address critical national security language needs. Thus, the skills of the officers who did know a second language were not necessarily aligned with Air Force needs.

The Language-Learning Experiences Associated with Greater Proficiency

We explored whether the following types of experiences were associated with greater proficiency:

- majoring or minoring in foreign studies rather than engineering or any other subject
- learning through formal immersion or at home rather than in a classroom
- learning voluntarily or because of mandatory college requirements
- having completed more versus fewer college language courses.

Those who majored or minored in a language or foreign studies reported substantially greater second-language skills than did those with other majors. However, fewer than 50 percent of them reported skills at 2+ or higher. These findings suggest that, if such individuals did not consistently reach a level 2, it is unrealistic to expect those not majoring or minoring in the language to do so.

Those with immersion experiences tended to have higher proficiencies than those without immersion experiences. However, we could not determine whether the immersion itself led to the higher proficiency or the more proficient sought out immersion experiences. Those who had learned a second language at home were much more proficient than those who had not. These findings suggest that immersion may be an important component of language training for this population. They also confirm that those who learned a second language in the home are more likely to have acquired higher levels of second-language proficiency prior to commissioning.

We found that those who had been required to take language courses reported lower proficiencies than those who had taken the courses voluntarily. This suggests that simply requiring officers to learn a language might not yield proficiencies as high as one that motivates individuals to do so voluntarily.

³ We used a complex stratified random sampling plan with oversampling of key groups to select our survey sample. Responses were statistically weighted to represent the officer population.

We also examined the relationship between the number of semesters of college language courses and self-reported proficiency. Those who had taken five courses or more were much more likely to report proficiencies of 1+ or higher. Therefore, to get officers to a 1+ or higher, the minimum number of recommended college-level language courses would be five.

Relationships Between Language Skills and Other Desirable Outcomes

In proposing an officer-corps-wide language requirement, Air Force policymakers have considered other beneficial outcomes, such as an increased desire to learn and capability of learning new languages and increased interest in and tolerance of other cultures.

In our survey, those with higher language proficiency expressed greater interest in and tolerance for other cultures. This could mean that learning a language changes one's attitudes toward other cultures, but it could mean that those more tolerant of and interested in other cultures are more likely to learn a language and be successful at it.

Similarly, those with higher second-language proficiencies were more likely to be interested in learning another language in the near future. In contrast, those with no second-language experience tended not to express such an interest.

These findings suggest that a language requirement could help bring about some of the other outcomes Air Force policymakers have associated with the language requirement.

Views of Officers on a Mandatory Second-Language Proficiency Policy

While an overwhelming majority of officers agreed that language proficiency is important for mission success, far fewer viewed it as relevant to individual career success. This finding suggests a lack of alignment between organizational priorities and individual career priorities. Any mandatory language policy would need to address this important issue. The responses were about evenly divided on the question of whether all officers should be required to know a second language.

Conclusions

Is It Feasible for All Officers to Have Working Proficiency in a Second Language?

The short answer for the near term is *no*. Fewer officer applicants would be eligible for commissioning if a mandatory officer-wide language requirement were in place. Very few officer applicants would meet a 2/2 or 3/3 proficiency level simply by taking a few college language courses or even through heritage language learning or study abroad.⁴ It would take a minimum of five semesters of language study in college to reach the 2/2 level in an easy (category I) language, such as Spanish, French, or Italian.

⁴ For this report, *heritage speakers* refers to those who acquired their second language through exposure to family and/or ties to ethnic communities, whether in the United States or not. This includes immigrants, those with immediate family members who had immigrated, and those whose family immigrated in previous generations but continued to use the heritage language. The research literature has no single definition of this term (Kagan and Dillon, 2008; Montrul, 2009), but ours is consistent with Valdes (2000), whose widely cited definition is an "individual raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language."

Training officers who do not already meet the requirement would be resource-intensive and burdensome, requiring at least 26 weeks of intensive study to reach 2/2 in a category I (easy) language (such as Spanish, French, and Italian) and 64 weeks for a category IV (difficult) language (such as Modern Standard Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, Korean, and Pashto), which includes languages of strategic importance. And because of differences among learners, even this intensive language training could not guarantee a 2/2 outcome.

What Are the Potential Consequences of a Language Commissioning Requirement for All Officers?

A policy like the one under discussion could change characteristics of the officer force in many ways, some positive and some negative. The requirement would raise the language skills of officers. However, the types of languages spoken, the extent to which they are maintained, and the extent to which the Air Force utilizes the resulting skills are all major factors in determining how beneficial this would be on a practical level.

The pool of individuals eligible for commissioning would certainly be smaller, and this could affect several other aspects of the officer force. For example, the personality, technical background, and demographic makeup of commissioned officers could change.⁵

The policy would risk dissatisfaction among candidates and current officers, which could reduce organizational commitment and increase turnover. Tying language proficiency to other career milestones could motivate those who already possess language skills and could deter some from joining the Air Force who do not possess the skills and would be forced to acquire them.

Finally, the tendency for language proficiency to diminish without maintenance means the Air Force would need to devote resources to maintaining the skills of those who do not regularly use their language skills in their jobs or social networks.

Recommendations

From the literature review and the conclusions we drew from our survey, we developed key recommendations for Air Force language policy. The subsections below describe each and offer potential consequences.

Tailor Policies to Desired Outcomes, Including Different Policies for Different Outcomes

There are at least five distinctly different desired outcomes of Air Force language policies:

- development and maintenance of language professionals
- having a variety of officers in all types of jobs who can speak to and understand host nationals in their native languages
- having a variety of personnel in all types of jobs that can interact with host nationals in a culturally competent manner

⁵ Selecting only people who are proficient at a 2/2 or higher could yield a more homogeneous group of officers with respect to personality. Given that personality is related to other workplace outcomes, including unrelated aspects of job performance, the relationships between language proficiency and personality need to be better understood to forestall unintended detrimental effects on other important workplace outcomes. See Chapter Two for more information on language proficiency and personality.

- making all personnel more culturally sensitive and aware
- having a force of personnel able to learn other languages more easily and quickly than otherwise.

These outcomes differ from one another in the policies likely to be required for success. Teasing apart the various outcomes in this way will help clarify which ones are best addressed by language commissioning policies and which are better addressed in other ways. Also, any given outcome will most likely require multiple supporting policies. Tailoring each policy to the specific outcome also significantly increases the likelihood of success. Each objective will thus also require distinct lines of funding and oversight.

Make Language Requirements for Commissioning Flexible, and Include a Variety of Incentives and Opportunities

Officer candidates enter college with a wide variety of second-language skill levels and meet different types of language-learning opportunities. Moreover, languages and majors are not all alike. Some languages are easier to learn than others; some majors, such as engineering, have such full courseloads that they cannot readily accommodate language coursework within a four-year degree program.

Language commissioning policies should accommodate these differences by encouraging improvement at all levels and by rewarding those who attempt to study more-challenging languages. Implementing multiple policies that reward different types of language learning achieves this goal. The following are several examples of policies that, when combined, create a well-balanced and flexible set of language commissioning policies:

- offering scholarships for majoring or minoring in a language
- offering commissioning bonuses for varying levels of proficiency
- providing distance learning courses in strategic languages
- paying for some to spend an extra year in college to concentrate on language study
- requiring two college semesters of language for commissioning, then paying tuition for language courses beyond two semesters
- making more immersion programs available to Reserve Officer Training Corps students
- accommodating waivers and exceptions within the policy for certain groups.

This general approach has certain benefits. For example, a menu approach to college language-learning incentives would increase the depth and range of the language skills of new officers overall without undermining the Air Force's other commissioning goals (e.g., commissioning engineering majors).

The approach would, however, require significant oversight to manage and implement the multiple commissioning policies. Moreover, any of the policies would require dedicated funds and staff (e.g., providing scholarships, commissioning bonuses, and distance learning courses).

Implement Policies for Maintaining and Enhancing Language Skills

Language skills deteriorate quickly through lack of use. Any language policy aimed at officers having certain levels of proficiency at commissioning should be backed up by a plan for maintaining and developing that proficiency after commissioning.

Here, too, we recommend an approach that includes multiple types and levels of incentives for improvement and that includes making the time and opportunities for training available. The following are preliminary suggestions:

- Link skill development to career outcomes. Currently, if learning a second language takes time away from an individual's primary duties, it can hinder promotion outcomes.
- Offer increased pay for a variety of language proficiency levels. Add a series of lower-level bonuses for lower-level skills to those already in place for high-level skills.
- Offer a bonus for participation in a structured language-training program. Demonstrating incremental improvement at predetermined points in the training program would earn the bonuses.
- Provide language training during work hours or at times that can accommodate spouse participation.
- Offer temporary duty assignments that utilize language skills, and ensure that they count positively toward promotions.
- Improve records Air Force personnel data systems keep of current and past language proficiency, and use them to make job assignments.

The potential benefits of these policies would include promoting career-long development of language skills and, in turn, enhance the success of language commissioning policies. However, if precommissioning efforts are not linked with such development efforts, language commissioning policies may not yield long-lasting improvements in officer proficiency.

Commissioning policies and career-long development policies are overseen by different Air Force agencies; cooperation among these agencies is vital for the success of this recommendation.

Ensure Buy-In from Air Force Officers at All Levels

Individuals' beliefs about how important a skill is for their careers can affect whether they view developing that skill as worthwhile. While officers tend to view language capabilities as important to the warfighting mission, they believe such skills are less relevant to their own jobs and careers. To change this view, such skills should be tied directly to important career outcomes, including promotions.

Communicating the importance of language skills through words and actions will help institutionalize the role of language proficiency and stress just how important these skills are to the Air Force. Some possible strong signals include

- establishing clear rewards for success
- tying language proficiency to performance evaluations and career outcomes
- making language training programs widely available
- providing time to attend development courses
- making immersion programs available during the regular workday
- offering incentives and extra pay for continuous skill development (even at initially low levels).

A clear and consistent message will require coordination, cooperation, and buy-in from many levels of Air Force leadership. However, only minimal resources would be required beyond those discussed in earlier recommendations.

Evaluate the Success of Each New Program, and Adjust the Program Accordingly

More research is needed on the best ways to implement various language programs and whether they are successful. The most informative efforts will be those that (1) occur after concerted attempts are made to begin implementing new language programs and (2) involve a continuous and systematic process of evaluating programs and informing changes to them. Specifically, the research should involve

- clearly specifying program objectives
- developing and implementing new programs to meet the objectives
- evaluating how well the programs meet the objectives
- researching any other important aspects of the programs
- institutionalizing career-long assessments to identify new training and education needs
- modifying policies based on the new research.

This process is the cornerstone of any well-designed performance improvement intervention and should drive the development of all future Air Force language policies.

Such research efforts would serve to clarify the goals and quantify the success of each program. That information, in turn, would lead to modification or termination of unsuccessful programs. These efforts would also allow continuous assessment of training needs and gaps and could be used to drive policy changes.

These efforts could also help save resources by concentrating them on programs with proven track records, experimental programs aimed at improving success, and new programs intended to fill training gaps.

Execution

To execute these recommendations, we suggest the following:

- Produce a detailed policy statement clearly defining all the intended outcomes for language policies, taking care to distinguish between developing language professionals and developing a language-enabled officer force.
- Offer several precommissioning language opportunities. For each, produce an official statement specifying which specific goal(s) or outcome(s) (from those outlined in the policy statement) the opportunity is aimed at achieving.
- Offer postcommissioning programs aimed directly at continuing and improving language proficiency acquired in response to the precommissioning policies. For each, produce an official statement specifying which specific goal(s) or outcome(s) (from those outlined in the policy statement) the opportunity is aimed at achieving.
- Implement new policies that tie language proficiency to career success and institute a campaign directed toward all levels of the Air Force to gain their buy-in on the importance of language proficiency for every Air Force job.

- Examine the effectiveness of each new precommissioning and postcommissioning program at achieving its stated goals, and evaluate the success of efforts to gain buy-in. Adjust programs and policies using the results of that research.

Given the clear consensus that language skills are important, there is little argument that a language-proficient officer force is a worthwhile aim for the Air Force. Our research points to the most effective, efficient, and realistic means for achieving that vision and shows that there are important trade-offs that would occur in striving to meet it that must be considered.