



## Language Matters Conversation with Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith & Host Dr. Debbie Barnard

### Transcript

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[Dr. Debbie Barnard] Hello and welcome to a special edition of the Tennessee World Affairs Council's Global Dialogue series.

I'm Doctor Debbie Barnard, a member of the World Affairs Council's Advisory Board and Associate Professor of French at Tennessee Tech University.

It is fitting that this series is called a Dialogue, as today we will be talking about foreign language education with Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith. She is a foremost champion for this important effort through her writings, conference presentations, public speaking and other activities to press the point that "language matters."

You can find Dr. Stein-Smith's bio in the program notes but let me share some of her professional highlights.

She is a recipient of the *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques*, the Order of Academic Palms, bestowed by the French Republic on distinguished academics and teachers and a Member, *Pi Delta Phi*, The National French Honor Society.

She is chair of the American Association of Teachers of French Commission on Advocacy and serves on numerous boards and groups actively promoting foreign language education.

Also, and most especially, she is the author of several books and publications on the importance of learning foreign language, most notably "Multi-lingualism as a Global Competency: Skills for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century World," which came out in January 2021. And "U.S. Foreign Language Deficit: Strategies for Maintaining a Competitive Edge in a Globalized World," which came out in 2016.

Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith, welcome and thank you for talking with us today.

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] Thank you so much for having me here today. It's such a great experience for me to be, albeit virtually, in Tennessee. You mentioned just a few moments ago the AATF Commission on Advocacy. It's a wonderful group – dedicated, expert, and absolutely helpful at all times. And two of our active members are Tennessee Bob Peckham and Karen Sorenson, from Tennessee.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] I know both of them.

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] I know. So, it's doubly fun for me to be here today, in Tennessee.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] Well, we're very glad to have you. And I wanted to ask you, what is the current state of foreign language competency in the United States?

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] You know, that's a great question. It's one of those funny questions. It depends on how you look at it. On the one hand there are about 70 million people, according to the latest Census figures, in the U.S. who speak a language other than English in the home. And most of whom also speak English.

So, there's actually a lot of foreign language, or should I say world language use, going on in the U.S. However, on the other hand, American students, U.S. students, are relatively unlikely to be studying or learning a language. According to the latest figures I've seen, it's just under 20 percent. So that's very concerning.

So, that would mean a lot of Americans remain mono-lingual. Speaking only English, understanding only English.

You know "America's language" education has declined in recent years. When I say declined that's in no way intending disrespect to foreign language educators. I have to say, you know, I travel. I speak at conferences. I'm active in organizations. They're dedicated, so professional, highly educated. And doing a great job. And also, busy advocating and supporting foreign language learning in youth.

However, enrollment has dropped. And it's tempting to refer to the lack of motivation. It was often considered that Americans were not motivated to learn another language. However, I think the real picture is a little bit below the surface and it is more, not so much a lack of interest or a lack of motivation. But it's lack of opportunity.

You know, according to the American Languages Report, foreign language programs have decreased in number significantly in our middle schools and most dramatically in our public schools. And these are U.S. public schools. So that means a smaller percentage of our youngsters, and especially those who may be economically or socio-

economically disadvantaged. They will most likely be served by public schools. They have a decreasing opportunity. The figures are really frightening.

And so, it may be for some cases, maybe a lack of interests. We're all human, we have different interests. I think more importantly it's that lack of opportunity. And then at the other end of the spectrum in our post-secondary institutions, the foreign language enrollment now stands at something like 7.5% of students, down by half since the MLA started keeping these figures around 1960. And French, which is my primary language, French was really the most dramatically impacted in the last enrollment survey. And programs, a significant number of programs overall, have been lost as defined by the MLA. And that is really of concern.

So, on the one hand, we have vibrant language communities. On the other hand, we really are not giving our children and our students opportunities to learn languages. And that sort of a negative synergy because where we have languages other than English are spoken, once these children reach school age and go to school, they don't have the opportunity to build on that early childhood experience and perhaps maintain their heritage language or even those who might have lost a heritage language who want to reacquire it don't have that opportunity either. So, it's very much a mixed picture in terms of foreign languages, in terms of languages in the U.S.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] So, there's a dearth of cultivation, especially for the children that learned a language at home, who are heritage speakers. They don't get to grow with the language, necessarily. They have what they learned at home but then they don't have the opportunity to continue studying that formally, once they go to school.

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] I agree wholeheartedly with what you said, that is sadly the case. And yet it seems apparent and it's certainly mentioned often that this would be a wonderful resource to nurture rather than to ignore.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] And so, how does this dearth of foreign language education programs, foreign language teaching, how does it affect American interests in the world?

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] That's a huge question. If you look at, for example, there's a recent report from ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, "Making Languages our Business." There was an earlier report from the "New American Economy," "Not Lost in Translation." Both of those reports, and there are many others. Those are just two that are top of mind.

Both of those reports highlight the fact that foreign languages are in demand. And interestingly, it's not any one particular language. It's not any one particular type of job or region in the U.S. So many languages are high in demand and across the country, and in all types of jobs. From entry level positions to the executive suite. The U.S. is

home to many international companies. There's a lot of foreign-direct investment in the United States.

I know I had seen since they just recently did a report on my home state of New Jersey there are over 100 French companies alone, doing business. International companies functioning in the United States employ more than half a million people. I think the last figure I had seen was 650,000 and while not every job in an international company operating in the United States requires another language, many of those jobs are enhanced by knowledge of the – I guess – the mother tongue of the parent company. And opportunities open up.

On the other hand, the U.S. does a lot of trade with countries all over the world. We have trading partners everywhere. And again, not every job in every firm requires knowledge of other languages. But imagine to what extent the ability to do business, to discuss, to make your point, to negotiate, would be enhanced if you could actually speak the language of your trading partner. Especially if you're the one who is trying to sell something, or conversely, to negotiate a deal that works to the advantage of both parties.

And sadly, many Americans assume that everyone speaks English. And while that is a tempting assumption, and many educated around the world do speak English, it's a tempting assumption, but not true. First of all.

There's a great report from the British Council. They actually found that one quarter, 25% of the global population speaks English to any useful extent. Now certainly again in the business world, in the world of scientific research and technology, many people in other countries will speak English.

Then there's that other thing – do they necessarily want to always speak English when either you or a visitor in their country, visiting their offices, or their laboratories or their facilities. Do they always want to speak the language of the visitor? Might they not feel more comfortable, might it not be more easy to develop that kind of team synergy, if we also could speak, to some extent, their language also?

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] And yet, there's this trend toward globalization across the United States in education, in primary schools, in secondary schools, in universities. So, is there a disconnect between this general trend toward globalization and the decline in teaching foreign languages? And if so, do what do you attribute it to? Why do we want globalization on one side but we don't want foreign languages on the other?

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] That is the best question ever.

And that is what drove me to do my Doctorate in mid-late career. And to actually continue that research and writing. The university, my university, was really... had a logo for some time that it was a leader in global education. We were one of the earliest

members, perhaps the first member, of the U.N. Academic Impact. And we were really, very ... and through that connection I was privileged to serve as the French language facilitator in the “Many Languages, One World,” program of the Global Youth Forum, that was sponsored by the Academic Impact.

So, I see totally this need for global learning and I see totally the need for multi-lingualism as part of global learning. And also, the development of global citizenship skills. How indeed are we going to work together as we are going to have to, to effectively address these complex global issues that are out there. Climate change is the one that I have top of mind but there are countless others.

And again, there's that idea of working harmoniously efficiently in a multi-lingual team. You know, the U.N. is into multi-lingualism, stresses the importance of accurate and timely communication in a variety of languages. And increasingly so, they moved beyond the six official languages, in the publication of many important documents.

So, in the face of all of this, why is foreign language learning declining?

It is tempting to say that we're reluctant because we think the whole world speaks English. But I don't think that's the whole case. I think that's like an easy answer and it kind of in a sense lets us off the hook. If that's the case then we don't have to do anything further.

I really think again, I know I mentioned this earlier, it's on my mind constantly, and more and more. It's really this lack of opportunity. You know, I look at this and I see that, for example, private institutions, private schools, a higher percentage, for example private elementary schools than public, offer language programs at the elementary level. I think a great exception to that is the really the bilingual revolution here in New York City, where it is New York City public schools that are offering these dual-language immersion programs. About a dozen languages at this point. That's wonderful and that's what we really have to be doing.

I've read about Delaware and Utah who have been very active in developing public school language programs for early aged students. Louisiana has a French language immersion program for example. And there are more. I'm not meaning to leave anybody out. These are just ones' top of mind. But I think, again, it's getting back to that lack of opportunity. And opportunity means that the programs exist. And also that they are affordable. So, they have to be in settings where funding is provided or where there are no fees – a.k.a. public schools.

But then I think further, what about the youngster who would, in a relatively remote area? What about the person who is mobility impaired? Or for a variety of reasons cannot travel a distance to a school or to a college or university that offers a foreign language program that they may want or the courses that they may want.

I think of all kinds of issues, the person who has caregiving responsibilities, the person who has some sort of a handicap that would prevent them from going. And I think online learning is a big part of a solution, that for those people. I think that there are two factors that could actually get more people involved in foreign language learning, assuming that the motivation is there. And part of our job is to talk about why it's "cool," why it's fun, why it's important, why it is very much future oriented to learn other languages. I think that's already there in our students, in our parents, in our communities. We can talk about that. But I think the real key here is access. And that's where, I know this veers off into the realm of the political – but that's where language policy comes into play.

You know, I was fortunate enough. I went to school in Quebec. And I'm dating myself but I was a student in Quebec during the years following the "Quiet Revolution," and the development of the statute for the official languages of Canada. So, language and linguistics and bi-lingualism, they were just in the air constantly. In an interdisciplinary way. Everybody was talking about it. Not just language educators or people who speak other languages. And I think that can be an inspiration for us.

Were there a language policy in the U.S. that would create a framework that really would enable funding for programs in public schools for online programs.

Then, of course, we can't forget our community organizations. We talked earlier about the families, the heritage speaker. What about these parents and grandparents who want the little ones to maintain their heritage languages? A lot of heritage language communities are very, very active. Top of mind, I was recently in a session, in my first in-person conference since the pandemic. And I was impressed hearing about, for example, the Franco-American Center in New Hampshire. And all the activities they offer in-person and on-line, and I believe free of charge, most of them.

And for people at all levels of linguistic ability, of all kinds of interest, all ages. And there are organizations like that in New York City. There's a French Institute Alliance Francaise (FIAPF), and then there's programs in French and in English, in-person, online, so therefore accessible by everyone.

There are lots and lots of community-based organizations around the country doing that. So, I think we also need to encourage those initiatives as well.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] Do you think, then, that language learning is something that should be mandated from the top down? For example, here in Tennessee there is a requirement for high school students that they must have two units of foreign language to graduate. And Tennessee has routinely led the nation in foreign direct investment. I don't think we're number one right now, but we have been recently.

But at the same time there's this paradox of waivers that students can request. It will waive their requirements for foreign language. So foreign language is a requirement but it is a soft requirement. It is fungible. It can be eliminated or waived if necessary.

So, do you think that a foreign language policy, a national policy, or a state policy is called for. How do we fix this?

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] That's a really interesting question, because on the one hand in the U.S. we're different from many other countries in the world. Education is primarily a local structure. You know, local school districts, local school boards, really exercise a great deal of influence. However, our Federal Government does exercise a great deal of influence. There have been hearings on Capitol Hill over the years. Hearings are going on right now. And, I think it is well known within the Federal Government that Federal jobs are going without takers. They're unable to be filled because people in various departments of the Federal Government, various agencies, do not have the language skills that are needed. And basically, these jobs are remaining unfilled. And, I think that a Federal policy on language learning ... we would not be the first country in the world that had a language policy. I mentioned the example of Canada. In essence not only do we not have a language policy, we don't even in the U.S. have an official language. We never have ... we have a defacto official language of English. But there's nowhere in the law that says that English is the official language of the U.S.

Now there are many, many alternatives that could be included in a language policy. Honestly, I'm not a lawmaker, but I would think there can be one or more official languages for this country. Some states in the U.S., about half of the states have an official language. But our country overall does not.

I think there can be an initiative to have educators come together to look at the curriculum being offered in our schools. You know we've had initiatives in the past. We certainly had "No Child Left Behind," which certainly looked at curriculum. And even though it was a Federal initiative it had a tremendous impact on education across the country. Any many will say it was tough on areas like foreign languages and areas in the humanities. Perhaps there was less time for them in the curriculum. Perhaps we could have a look at that.

We say top down. That works to a certain extent. But we are a democracy and education is still largely local. So, while I think a discussion at the highest level would be very, very beneficial. And I think possibly some discussion of a language policy or recommended requirements. And funding from the government. And funding often comes along with recommendations and requirements. That would be most helpful. And I know there are people, for example, like JNCL (Joint National Committee for Languages), who are busy working on Capitol Hill. I love their advocacy day that they do. I had the great opportunity to participate and to talk to staff members of my representatives in the Congress and the Senate. And I think that kind of grassroots political involvement is excellent. We are all citizens. They are there to hear us. And I think that's great. On the other hand, a lot of it is local. That's where people who truly believe in language learning and use can be very active. At the state level we have organizations like CODOFIL (Council for the Development of French Language in

Louisiana). They do great work. They've been doing it for 50 years in the schools. And also they've had things like the "Oui" initiative in businesses in Louisiana. In this case they had French speaking personnel offering products and services "en Francais." Those are just two examples. There are lots and lots more.

I know for example, my state of New Jersey, we're very tiny, but actually in that last enrollment survey, that was done by, I'd guess it was the American Councils, New Jersey actually had the highest percentage of students overall enrolled in a foreign language class. I wish it was 100 percent. I think we were a little over 50 percent. And the average is under 20 percent of students being enrolled. So, New Jersey was the top figure if memory serves. And I'm very proud of my state. And I don't see a lot of coercion for students to take other languages. I think a lot of it is that local communities recognize that this is good for the children. And we want our kids to have the best and we want our future generations to – I know this term sounds a little bit arcane, but the term "self-actualized." We want every child to have every opportunity to be that best person that they can and want to be. And I think that is so important, that activism at the local level. That's actually a great deal of what has created these bi-lingual programs in the New York City Public Schools. It's parents and communities who have really advocated and developed partnerships with schools and school administrators.

So, I don't think any one approach is the only answer. But I think that if people were working at the Federal level, at the local level, people talking to state legislators, I think all of that comes together.

And that's why everybody can play a part. You know I think language advocacy is the ideal grassroots kind of advocacy. We all don't have to be experts. We don't all have to be educators. We don't all have to be any particular, to have any particular skill set. The first thing you have to believe. You know, this is values driven. It has to be core values. Believe that multi-lingualism is a good thing. It's good for people. It makes their lives more interesting. It empowers them to have relationships, conversations, to experience travel in a different way. To maybe have a better job and earn more money, also. But that's not the be-all and end-all.

And everyone can be an advocate if you believe. You take the skills you have, the time you have, what funding you have available. Some people really take it to the next level and start petitions, and run for office, run for school boards. And others, like the rest of us, we do what we can with the talent we have and the skills we have and the time that we have.

For example, language educators are busy people. They're teaching all day. And through their wonderful teaching they're advocating for languages in their classrooms. You know anyone can start a social media account. Anyone can write a letter to the editor. Anyone can create a blog. Anyone can talk to or write to their representatives. Either at the local, state or national level.



So, advocacy – if you believe, and I think if everybody did believe in the importance of languages and language learning, took one little action. You know, five minutes a day, ten minutes a day -- whatever it might be – to support and to promote language learning I think that go a long, long way toward making languages part of our life.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] So, it's a multi-level approach that you're advocating for, that you're recommending, rather.

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] You said that so much better than I did. Thank you.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] No, no.

But I guess my final question. And this is maybe the hardest one as a foreign language educator myself, how do we convince the average, everyday American that learning a foreign language is important?

Because so many times ... for example, in my university we have students who come and they take a placement test. And they score pretty high on the placement test, but then they go and they're in a different department. They don't want to be a French or a Spanish major, or a German major. But they go to see their advisors and the advisor says well you don't need a foreign language for your major because, you know, you're going to be a biologist, or you're going to be a physicist, you're going to be a mathematician, or you're going to be a social worker. So how do we break that barrier to get people to understand, like you said, it doesn't matter about – the money is a fringe benefit, the status is a fringe benefit – but there are so many other advantages. How do we... what do you recommend?

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] There's an old-fashioned term, it's called the "elevator pitch." And I guess nowadays people refer to it as "talking points." And I think it's so important that all of us who care, who believe, whether we're language educators, or concerned citizens or parents or community members. We need to have our "talking points" ready at all times. And never, ever pass up an opportunity to talk to somebody. You know, be it a school principal who said, "I took French in high school and I don't remember anything," or "I could never speak it." You have an opportunity there rather than just running away and saying oh, no. You have an opportunity there to talk to that person.

Then you might have a parent who would come to you and say I want my child to have a good job. How is this going to help him or her? And you have, also, the person who is among the converted, among those who believe. But your talking point is going to be different whether you're talking to a prospective student, a parent, an institutional decision-maker, someone who maybe had a less than stellar experience with foreign languages. You can start off telling them that foreign language classes have radically changed. Just like everything else in the world, they're radically different than the foreign language that you may have taken, or your mom, or your grandma might have taken as a youngster. It's a whole new world in the foreign language classroom as well

out in the rest of the wide world. But your talking points are going to be different for each person. And that's the thing. You have to have your talking points ready and then you have to make that snap judgement really, in that moment, which talking points are going to work best. And you cannot pass up an opportunity. You really can't be shy. You can't be tongue-tied. That's hard though. But you can't be tongue-tied. You can't use the same talking points for everyone. And you have to always be ready even if you, yourself run into somebody in the supermarket and the conversation starts. You honestly have to probably put your urgency to get home to cook dinner on the back burner, literally, for the moment and take time to engage that person.

Any opportunity that you get – if we all do that. If we all take that opportunity and have our talking points ready. You know for some people it will be the statistics. For other people it will be in the local community. You know we need interpreters in our hospitals, in our courts, certainly – and you mentioned social workers a while ago – certainly if you're going to help people, it's a lot easier to build that rapport with them. You don't even have to be perfect in that other language. No one is going to expect you to have the skills of a mother-tongue speaker. But if you know a little bit, that goes such a long way.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] That's great advice. I'm going to start working on my elevator pitch right now.

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] I'm sure you have a wonderful one.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] Well, it's not as primed as you suggest. Those are fantastic suggestions to have a range of points and to tailor them to the situation. For example, I hear all the time, "Oh, I took French in high school but I don't remember any of it." And perhaps that could be countered with, "You know you have done something significant to stave off dementia in your later years."

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] You know there are wonderful, wonderful lists out there on many web sites. I know ACTFL has a great list of the benefits of foreign language learning. And, it includes things like, that the neuro-scientists understand. I do not understand them. I am not a neuro-scientist. But there are great, great benefits. Reasoning. Cognitive benefits of all sorts. Academic benefits. And that part about staving off dementia. You know if you use a language, not just that you took it in school. But actually use it on a regular basis. It's like going to the gym for your brain.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] And for people who are interesting in consulting these talking points and upping their advocacy game for foreign language, the actual web site that Dr. Stein-Smith referred to is "ACTFL.org."

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] There are great associations devoted to languages. You have ACTFL at the national level. You have JNCL lobbying for us in Washington. But then you also have national associations for all the different languages that are

commonly taught in the United States. AATF (American Association of Teachers of French) certainly. AATSP (American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese); AATG (American Association of Teachers of German); AATI (American Association of Teachers of Italian). And on and on. Then you have the state and regional associations. You can certainly reach out to any of those associations whether you're an educator or not. Check their web sites. They all have great resources out there on offer.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] Well, thank you so much, Dr. Stein-Smith.

We've been talking with Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith, a foremost advocate of foreign language training in America.

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] Thank you so much for inviting me here today. If anyone listening to this wants to discuss this, certainly feel free to email me. May I give my email address?

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] Yes, please do.

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] Okay, < kathysteinsmithATgmail.com >. You can email me and if it's specifically related to French language advocacy, certainly if you wish I can put you in touch with the AATF commission on advocacy.

But we are all in this together. Languages and language learning are all good. So, it doesn't need to be a question just on French. But if you do want to contact me I'd be happy to talk with you.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] Thank you so much again for joining us and for talking about this very important matter, because language does matter.

And thank you to all of our viewers for watching this program. It was made possible through the work of the Tennessee World Affairs Council.

You can support its global awareness programs through your membership and donations. Check the web site, T-N-W-A-C DOT ORG to join or make a gift.

And lastly, please join us in advocating for foreign language education in your community.

Au revoir

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] Thank you so much. And good luck with all the good work that you do.

[Dr. Debbie Barnard] Au revoir

[Dr. Kathleen Stein-Smith] À la prochaine