

and those still to be born, that will indicate to them the values authoritative institutions of our nations, such as our governments, national, state, and local, and our halls of learning, regard as of transcendent importance? These are the questions that I believe are really at issue when we consider the place of the humanities on the national scene. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Charles Frankel, “Why the Humanities?” in *The Humanist as Citizen*, eds. John Agresto and Peter Riesenber (Chapel Hill: National Humanities Center, 1981), pp. 4-5.

## Chapter 23

# FOREIGN LANGUAGES FOR EXCELLENCE?: READING BETWEEN THE LINES IN THE LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS

*Ofelia Garcia*

*Ofelia Garcia's argument can best be appreciated in the light of a report from the House/Senate International Education Study Group. Arguing that as a result of the language gap we lose untold business in the world, chairman Leon Panetta points to the Chevrolet gaff—calling a car it was marketing in Latin America “Nova,” which translates as “It doesn't go.” And he asks, “Is it any wonder that our annual international trade deficit stands at \$130 billion?” What is also a wonder is that with our large Spanish-speaking population there was not one Hispanic on the staff of Chevrolet to set them straight.*

*With this in mind, it might be well to ask why everyone is calling for second languages—but still putting bilingual kids on the slow track.*

The reports calling for excellence in education claim that the nation is at risk and that one of the reasons for the situation is that there aren't

enough citizens who can speak foreign languages. The call for more foreign languages is only a very small part of the reports, but is one that serves well to illustrate how the reports, one, do not recognize the existence of language minority students; and two, how they show complete lack of understanding of how language learning must be related to a sociofunctional need.

Children from ethnolinguistic minorities—Hispanics, Haitians, Greeks, Asians, and others—speak languages other than English. This is, in fact, their strength. And yet, the reports make no attempt to recognize the existence of those ethnolinguistic resources, to halt their waste and to build upon them so that majority children could successfully learn those languages. In fact, the reports foolishly propose that ethnic languages be obliterated in the schools, only to introduce them later when they have become foreign and are no longer applicable to students' lives.<sup>1</sup>

If indeed the reports were serious about developing languages other than English for the benefit of the nation, they would call for schools to develop these language skills whether they were held by majority or minority students. The foreign language requirement is an obvious example of how the recommendations for academic excellence in the reports is only the facade of a call for socioeducational changes that will exclude ethnolinguistic minorities from equal educational opportunities.

The foreign language requirement proposed in the reports does worse than ignore the assets and strengths of millions of minority language students. The proposal is, in addition, pedagogically unsound for majority students. Monolingual children who speak only English will not be motivated to learn foreign languages just because they are told that in the future they might become businessmen or ambassadors in foreign countries. The foreign countries where these languages are spoken and the future time when these languages will be needed are too distant from the children's immediate reality in the schools.

What monolingual children see in the present, in their schools, is that their classmates who speak languages other than English are penalized for speaking them and are sent to special remedial classes. They know that these special remedial classes are known as bilingual classes. They also know that children leave these remedial "bilingual" classes only after they stop speaking the language other than English in public. Bilingual in their schools means deficient, and that message, consonant

<sup>1</sup> For example, the report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force recommends that languages other than English stop being used for instruction and that language minority children be immersed in English. At the same time, it recommends that every student be given an opportunity to acquire proficiency in a second language.

with the practices that they observe in their schools, is clearly understood by the children. Why, then, would monolingual children want to be bilingual?

If the reports were serious about effectively teaching foreign languages to monolingual students in the schools, they would recognize the existence of languages other than English in the ethnic communities of the United States. This would legitimize the social context of these language communities so that the English speaking students would see the value of learning and using those languages *here and now*. Only by acknowledging the social reality of the non-English languages in the United States will we be able to successfully teach them to all students.

To my mind, one very small part of the reports, the foreign language requirement, serves to illustrate their two main flaws; one, the complete disregard for whole groups of children who have differences sometimes due to needs and other times to strengths; and two, the mere substitution in the reports of stiff requirements for sound pedagogical principles and meaningful teaching.