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Improving the ‘Art’ of Diplomacy with Foreign Languages ^[1]

“*Treknie gadi* (the fat years) – *tas jums tieš?m ir j?zina* (that one you really have to know),” said the Latvian teacher, and, for the next two hours, our language class dissected those two words. We read in Latvian about Prime Minister Aigars Kalv?tis and his famous 2005 speech to the nation promising a modern incarnation of Jacob’s biblical prophecy of seven ‘fat years’ of prosperity followed by seven years of hardship. We learned *p?rpalikums* (surplus) and *dižkibeļe* (global financial crisis). We discussed the crushing poverty faced by much of the society after the economy overheated, leading a new government to put in place strict austerity measures that pushed nearly a fifth of the population to seek work elsewhere in Europe. “*Treknie gadi* means government mismanagement, broken families, and extreme hardship. When Latvians say that today, it’s pregnant with meaning,” she concluded.

For five hours a day in small group classes, approximately 2,000 U.S. diplomats at the U.S. Department of State’s Foreign Service Institute do similar cultural analyses in 60+ languages from Chinese to Bangla and Kiswahili. This dedicated investment in foreign language acquisition, and the intense cultural understanding that comes with it, has for years set the State Department apart from other foreign ministries worldwide.

Diplomacy, like negotiation and card playing, is an old, traditional ‘art’. To succeed at all three, the player needs an edge over his or her opponents, an edge based on preparation,

confidence and cultural acuity. The more you know going in, the greater your chances of ultimate success. For that reason, the State Department runs one of the largest professional diplomatic training institutes in the world.

Since 1947, the Foreign Service Institute, which is housed at the George P. Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center, has trained U.S. diplomats, military attaches, development aid managers, information systems operators, and many others for U.S. government service abroad, now averaging over 100,000 enrollments annually. Today, the 72 acre government training oasis in Arlington, VA instructs over 2,000 students per day in foreign languages, regional studies, economics, leadership skills, and functional specialties.

“You cannot imagine how powerful it is in Georgia when an American diplomat speaks Georgian,” says Temuri Yakobashvili, former Georgian ambassador in Washington. “For nearly three hundred years, we were part of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, and no Russian diplomat learned Georgian. But you Americans began training your people in Georgian soon after your embassy opened in the ‘90s. Georgians know that and it means a lot for them. And for America.”

While the soft diplomacy value of showing respect for a host country’s native language is in many cases priceless, the value of participating in the society without any filters is even more valuable in today’s touch-and-go foreign policy world. American diplomats in Kyiv can be found meeting with civil society, government and opposition leaders, speaking directly to the main actors in the current political crisis in both Ukrainian and Russian. Consular officers interview hundreds of visa applicants in Hindi, Urdu and Spanish each day, letting in valid students and businesspeople while keeping out would-be illegal immigrants and terrorists. And through a new program started last year, Diplomatic Security agents can now navigate road blocks and address security threats in ‘street’ Arabic.

The security-focused Arabic program is one of several new initiatives underway since Ambassador Nancy McEldowney took the reins as FSI Director (an Assistant Secretary equivalent position) in 2013. She also is emphasizing media training for senior officers to give them intensive on-camera TV interview practice in foreign languages.

“I like to use the military term, ‘strategic enabler,’” says McEldowney. “We get some of [the] country’s most talented people, bring them to FSI, and train them in the skills they will need to advance U.S. interests abroad. But this is ideally not a one-time or one-assignment approach. Our goal is for officers to come back to us throughout their career to get new skills to progress to more senior levels. Our mission is not just to give our corps technical skills; it is to create the top foreign policy professionals in the world.”

With significant new training directives in mind and a strategic development plan being circulated among State Department leadership, McEldowney is taking the long-term approach to advancing U.S. foreign policy. Her plan intends to improve the variety and depth of State Department educational resources in order to meet the demands of a quickly shifting world. As the late African icon and liberation leader Nelson Mandela famously said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

Disclaimer: Ms. Hudson-Dean is a Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Department of State. The views expressed in this article are hers alone, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Government.
