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LANGUAGE

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STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE:
CENTER FOR LANGUAGE STUDIES



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The word "language" (clockwise from top) in Arabic,
Kmer, Simplified Chinese, Hebrew, and Hindi

"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."

—NELSON MANDELA

Language learning has always been an integral part of BYU—even during its humble beginnings as Brigham Young Academy, the school offered classes in German, Spanish, French, Latin, and Greek. In recent years, BYU has risen to the top as a frontrunner in language teaching and acquisition,¹ expanding its reach far past its classrooms to influence students, citizens of other countries, and even governmental institutions worldwide. As the university continues to grow its influence, the Center for Language Studies (CLS) plays a key supporting role in helping BYU achieve Spencer W. Kimball's prophetic instruction to "become the acknowledged language capital of the world." In other words: When you

think of language instruction, you think of BYU, *the* language university.

A HUB FOR ALL THINGS LANGUAGE

When the CLS was founded in 1999, it initially offered classes in six different languages: Bulgarian, Dutch, Tagalog, Cebuano, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese. These days, it oversees 61 of the 84 languages taught in the College of Humanities and offers several minors, 2 master's programs, and 23 nationally recognized language certification exams. Further, the CLS initiates many of the College's cross-departmental language activities as well as overseeing the Language Immersion Student Residence (LISR) program and



BEACONS OF LIGHT



This video features the personal impact of BYU Humanities language instruction. (bit.ly/languageuniversity)



Watch to learn how the College of Humanities is The Language University. (bit.ly/languagelovebyu)

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the new Language Sciences Laboratory. CLS Director Ray Clifford (Criterion-Referenced Language Assessment), who has worked with the CLS almost since its beginning, says that its growth has been “miracle upon miracle upon miracle.”

CERTIFYING STUDENTS . . .

The CLS supports BYU’s language mission in one critical way through the BYU Language Certificate Program, a program that grew out of the center’s efforts to give returned missionaries formal recognition for the language skills they developed on their missions. The program provides students with a formal language certificate, which students receive after first completing a structured sequence of three upper-division language courses and then passing an officially recognized external proficiency exam. The certificate is increasingly valued in both professional and academic circles and is currently the only university language certification allowed to appear on college transcripts.

These certificates have a significant impact for students on an individual level, giving them an advantage when applying for employment or further schooling after graduation. Recent grad Fiona Bates (French, Spanish ’24) became certified in three languages during her time at BYU: French, Spanish, and Mandarin. “I earned a certificate in each of these languages because I saw a lot of potential to use them in my community and a future profession,” she says, explaining that she currently works as a Spanish and French medical interpreter at a children’s hospital. “I get to use these language skills and cultural competencies I’ve developed to help families in what can be really difficult situations.”

. . . AND TRAINING GOVERNMENTS

Beyond student impact, the center’s influence also reaches the global level. BYU’s in-house reading and listening proficiency

tests, developed for the university’s own assessment purposes, have attracted attention from a variety of high-profile organizations. “There are all these international governmental agencies that are looking to us to provide testing for them in major languages,” Assistant Professor Matthew Wilcox (Associate Director of Measurement and Evaluation) says. The list includes organizations like the US Air Force Academy, the Defense Language Institute, the Canadian and Australian militaries, and most recently the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), all of which have approached the CLS seeking to both harness and learn from their expertise.

A HOME FOR THE SMALLEST LANGUAGES

When the CLS first started, leaders set a goal to teach advanced language classes for every language spoken by returned missionaries at BYU. “We have an open-door policy for all the lost languages so that they have a home, and they can be loved,” says Professor Troy Cox (Language Learning and Assessment). As the CLS has pursued that goal, it has turned teaching languages into an art. Thanks to a standardized pedagogical framework, faculty and staff can get new classes in new languages up and running with very little up-front cost. “What does it take for us to offer a course?” Clifford asks. “A qualified teacher, interested students, and money to pay the teacher. If we have that, we’ll do it.”

The impact of this language teaching framework is twofold. First, the CLS takes pressure off departments when it comes to lower-enrollment languages. Before the CLS was created, professors in fields like German or Russian often had to recruit and supervise instructors for less commonly taught languages—languages that were sometimes outside their own areas of expertise. Additionally, these instructors were not always trained in pedagogy, which made oversight particularly challenging. “We’ve actually increased scholarly productivity across the College,” Cox says. “By specializing in language pedagogy, the CLS streamlines onboarding and instruction, which allows professors to devote more time to their research.”



Alum Fiona Bates earned three language certificates.

The broader impact, however, is best illustrated through the center’s recent addition of Azerbaijani to their curriculum offerings. In 2023, BYU became the first university in the US to offer an Azerbaijani 101 course to its students.² The relationship between BYU and Azerbaijan continues to grow, leading to both the addition of more advanced Azerbaijani classes at BYU as well as playing a role in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gaining official recognition in the predominantly Muslim country.

LIGHTING THE FUTURE

As the CLS continues to grow and support BYU’s language mission, its faculty and staff hope to continue their impact in helping build the Church across the world. “A lot of our teachers who teach the less commonly taught languages were pioneers in their own countries,” Cox says, explaining that these teachers had been involved with Book of Mormon translations or language adaptations for the audio in the temple ceremonies. “It’s always 1820 somewhere around the world, and our fingers are on the pulse of where people are coming to Christ throughout the world.”

For his part, Wilcox feels the center’s mission echoes his favorite quote by Joseph Smith: “O may God give me learning, even language, and endow me with qualifications to magnify His name while I live.”³ Wilcox adds, “I think that’s the purpose of all the center’s work. All of it is toward this effort of the mission of BYU to take whatever good we have and send it out into the world and make it a better place.” ■

1. Todd Hollingshead, “BYU One of Nation’s Highest Producers of Foreign-Language Degrees,” *BYU News*, January 30, 2019.

2. “BYU Becomes First US University to Offer Azerbaijani 101,” *BYU News*, January 18, 2023.

3. Joseph Smith, diary dated December 22, 1835, *The Joseph Smith Papers*.