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Improvement Needed In Language Training And Assignments For U.S. Personnel Overseas

Department of State
United States Information Agency

The Department of State and the United States Information Agency are required by law to designate Foreign Service Officer positions which require knowledge of a foreign language and to fill them with personnel proficient in that language.

The Department and the Agency have made certain improvements in their language training programs and assignment procedures since GAO's report to Congress in January 1973 but opportunities exist for further improvement.

GAO is recommending that the Department and the Information Agency take steps to further improve of language-designated positions.

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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

INTERNATIONAL DIVISION

B-176049

To the Secretary of State and
the Director of the United States 58
Information Agency

2 We have reviewed the progress made by the Department 32
of State and the United States Information Agency in response to our January 22, 1973, report to the Congress, "Need to Improve Language Training Programs and Assignments for U.S. Government Personnel Overseas," B-176049. That report addressed the language requirements, training programs, and language-related staffing for several Federal departments and agencies and contained recommendations for improving them.

It has long been recognized that language proficiency is essential to the effective accomplishment of certain tasks overseas. This recognition is embodied in the Foreign Service Act of 1946, as amended, and is evident from the extensive foreign language training programs of the Department of State and the U.S. Information Agency.

Our 1973 review found that the Department of State and the U.S. Information Agency were not satisfactorily meeting their overseas language requirements because of several factors, including insufficient emphasis on language skills when making assignments and lack of criteria for identifying foreign language needs. Since then, some improvements have been made, but opportunities exist for further improvements. Our findings are summarized below.

The Department of State and the U.S. Information Agency are still not meeting their overseas language requirements satisfactorily. State increased its percentage of appropriately filled language-designated positions from 57 percent in 1972 to 75 percent in March 1974. Most of this improvement, however, resulted from lowering required proficiency levels rather than from increasing language skills. In State's review of language-designated positions completed in December 1975, the percentage of appropriately filled positions fell to 64 percent, primarily because of a significant number of new language-designated positions. About 26 percent of the language-designated positions in the December 1975 study

was at lower proficiency levels than those in 1972. The Information Agency's percentage of appropriately filled language-designated positions has decreased from 61 percent in 1972 to 58 percent in 1975. However, language-designated positions represent a larger percentage of the Information Agency's overseas staff than they did in 1972. The Information Agency has not decreased its proficiency-level requirements.

The impact of inappropriately staffed language-designated positions cannot be expressed in quantitative terms. However, incumbents in these positions who lacked required language skills told us that the lack of such skills impaired their efficiency and performance.

The primary causes of the inadequate language capabilities abroad were failure to follow language training policies and procedures and the assignment of officers to language-designated positions who had partial or no language training. In addition, the selection of language-designated positions was, in some cases, based on factors other than job requirements.

Inadequate language capabilities stem in part from the need to improve the effectiveness and management of overseas post language programs. We noted that incumbents were not always receiving the most effective training from post language schools. We also found a need for improved management oversight of post language programs to ensure uniform compliance with program regulations, appropriate justification for individual training, and adequate supervision of other Federal agency personnel participating in the program.

To improve language capabilities, we recommend that the Secretary of State and the Director of the U.S. Information Agency act to ensure that:

1. Assignment procedures allow adequate time for language training before officers assume a language-designated position and that strict criteria are developed for granting training waivers.

2. The system for determining language-designated positions is based on actual job requirements and the positions are periodically reviewed.

3. A system is developed to ensure that persons who have the greatest need for post language training are identified and given priority training.

The appendix contains further details and examples of our specific findings and recommendations.

We noted that steps had been taken to coordinate foreign language training and research Government-wide and that a number of actions were being initiated through an interagency roundtable forum. We believe such interagency cooperation is necessary, and we endorse the roundtable's continuing efforts.

Our work was done at State and Information Agency headquarters and at the Foreign Service Institute, primarily in the first 9 months of calendar year 1975, and at numerous overseas locations, including 11 posts, from March to May 1975. We have received comments from the State Department and Information Agency on the matters covered in this report and they were incorporated as appropriate.

Section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of a Federal agency to submit a written statement on actions he has taken on our recommendations to the House and Senate Committees on Government Operations not later than 60 days after the date of the report and the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report. We shall appreciate receiving copies of your statements to the Committees on actions taken.

We are sending copies of this report to the above named Committees; to the Chairmen of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and House Committee on International Relations; and to the Director, Office of Management and Budget. We appreciate the cooperation extended by Department of State and Information Agency personnel during this review and would be glad to discuss any matters in this letter at your convenience.

J. K. Fasick

J. K. Fasick
Director

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ABBREVIATIONS

LDP	Language-designated position
USIA	United States Information Agency

IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED IN LANGUAGE TRAINING AND ASSIGNMENTS FOR U.S. PERSONNEL OVERSEAS

INTRODUCTION

In 1960 the Congress amended the Foreign Service Act of 1946, by adding a new section 578, 22 U.S.C. 968 (1970), to require that the Department of State designate Foreign Service Officer positions which require knowledge of foreign languages and fill those positions with personnel proficient in those languages. The Congress intended these language-designated positions (LDPs) to be identified primarily by Chiefs of Missions, based on actual work needs. Subsequent legislation (Public Law 90-494, section 6(a), 22 U.S.C. 1226(a) (1970)) specifically extended the same provision to the United States Information Agency (USIA).

House and Senate reports on the 1960 legislation clearly showed that the Congress was dissatified with the foreign language capabilities of U.S. employees assigned to overseas Missions and was concerned about the possible detrimental effects of this situation. As stated in the Senate report, the intent of the legislation was to substantially raise the foreign language capabilities of U.S. employees assigned overseas.

In fiscal year 1975, about 4,100 State and USIA employees and their dependents participated in language training programs. These training programs were conducted almost entirely by State's Foreign Service Institute, but a small number of persons received training at commercial facilities. State and USIA officials estimated this training cost at $8 million, including tuition, student salaries, and related expenses. Instruction was given in about 60 languages and ranged in intensity from a full-time, 21-month course in Arabic to part-time (usually 1 hour a day) instruction at overseas Missions.

To facilitate proper matching of staff skills with language requirements, the various levels of language proficiencies have been designated as follows.

0 no practical proficiency

1 elementary proficiency

2 limited working proficiency

3 minimum professional proficiency

4 full professional proficiency

5 native or bilingual proficiency

State and USIA personnel are given foreign language instruction in speaking and reading; proficiency ratings are established through tests conducted by the Foreign Service Institute. A proficiency rating of S-3/R-3 means that a person can both speak (S) and read (R) a foreign language with minimum professional proficiency. A person with a level 3 rating is generally considered to be able to effectively communicate.

In a 1973 report to Congress,1/ we addressed the language requirements, training programs, and language-related staffing for several Federal departments and agencies and recommended improvements. At that time, we found that State and USIA were inadequately staffing many of their foreign language requirements at overseas posts, insufficiently emphasizing language skills when making assignments, and lacking in adequate criteria for identifying foreign language requirements. We recognize that State and USIA have taken certain actions to improve their foreign language training programs and assignments for their overseas personnel. The following sections of this appendix primarily set out areas where we believe they can make further improvements.

We made our review at the headquarters level in Washington, D.C., primarily during the first 9 months of calendar year 1975. Visits to overseas posts in France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Poland, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Thailand were made during March and May 1975.

MANY LANGUAGE-DESIGNATED POSITIONS NOT PROPERLY STAFFED

State and USIA still have a significant number of language-designated positions staffed with personnel lacking the required language skills. There were indications that

1/ "Need to Improve Language Training Programs and Assignments for U.S. Government Personnel Overseas," (B-176049, Jan. 22, 1973).

the selection of language-designated positions have been based partially on availability of language-trained personnel and other factors and not solely on actual work needs. To the extent this has occurred, the requirement for language-proficient personnel has been understated and the actual needs of the post have gone unrecognized.

Department of State

Although about one of every three Department of State LDPs are not properly filled, Department statistics indicate some improvement in assigning qualified personnel since July 1972. For example, State's percentage of occupied LDPs staffed with officers having the required proficiency increased from 57 percent in July 1972 to 75 percent in March 1974. However, most recent statistics show the percentage had fallen to 64 percent in December 1975, as shown below.

Date	Occupied LDPs	LDPs adequately filled	
		Number	Percent
July 1972	991	564	57
Mar. 1974	1,010	760	75
Dec. 1975	1,169	748	64

State officials explained that the percentage decrease from March 1974 to December 1975 resulted primarily from an increase in the number of language-designated positions.

Some of the increase in the percentage of LDPs adequately staffed, particularly in the March 1974 statistics, resulted from new procedures for designating language positions rather than from increased capabilities of assigned personnel. In 1972, all State Department LDPs required a S-3/R-3 proficiency, but in 1973, State changed its policy to permit designation of positions at less than the S-3/R-3 proficiency. In March 1974, about one-third of the position requirements were downgraded from level 3 skills to level 2. In December 1975, about one-quarter of State's LDPs were rated below the S-3/R-3 proficiency level.

Date	Skill levels required for LDPs			
	S-3/R-3	S-3/R-2 or S-2/R-3	S-2/R-2	Total LDPs
Jan. 1973	1,017	0	0	1,017
Mar. 1974	723	17	302	1,042
Dec. 1975	915	32	302	a/1,256

a/ Includes seven positions designated at the S-3/R-0 or S-2/R-0 level.

Had the uniform level 3 requirement been maintained, only 64 percent of the LDPs would have been properly staffed in 1974 instead of 75 percent. For example, in September 1974, only 54 percent of Poland's 13 LDPs were properly staffed. At that time, all but one LDP required an S-3/R-3 proficiency; the one exception was rated S-2/R-2. By May 1975, the number of LDPs in Poland had been increased to 16, of which 8 required only S-2/R-2 proficiencies. Based on the new designations, 87 percent of Poland's occupied LDPs were properly staffed. Had the positions not been downgraded, only 60 percent would have been properly filled. We believe the use of the less stringent requirement represents a reasonable approach for designating positions requiring a language capability so long as the language requirements are consistent with the needs of the job. (See p. 14 for further discussion of this matter.)

Even with the less stringent requirements, serious shortages of language-qualified officers continued to exist at certain locations. For example, based on information available at posts during our fieldwork, 6 of the 11 Embassies we visited had only about half of their LDPs properly staffed, as shown below.

Country	Occupied LDPs	LDPs adequately filled
Taiwan	8	4
Thailand	12	5
Saudi Arabia	6	3
Italy (Rome only)	16	7
Lebanon	9	4
Greece	13	7

United States Information Agency

USIA's percentage of appropriately filled LDPs has decreased since 1972 from 61 percent to 58 percent in January 1975. During the same period, USIA substantially reduced its total overseas staffing. The number of LDPs also decreased, but not in proportion to the overall staff reductions. The following chart indicates the changes which have occurred in LDPs since 1972.

Date	Total positions overseas (note a)	Number of LDPs	Percent of occupied LDPs adequately filled
Aug. 1972	828	434	61
Jan. 1974	811	393	64
Jan. 1975	619	349	58

a/ Excludes USIA personnel at radio relay stations and other media activities.

USIA, however, has not reduced the required S-3/R-3 proficiency levels for its LDPs. Prior to our review, USIA officials were unaware that State had designated LDPs at lower proficiency levels. In their opinion, "useful knowledge" of a foreign language, as stated in section 587 of the Foreign Service Act of 1946, as amended, means S-3/R-3 proficiency.

Effect of inadequate language skills

Insufficient language capabilities apparently limit the abilities of State and USIA to adequately perform some of their overseas functions. Even though the detrimental impact of inadequately filled LDPs is not readily quantifiable, the adverse effects could be significant--as demonstrated by the experiences of personnel serving overseas.

Many officials in post management positions generalized about the effectiveness and efficiency of incumbents who lack the required language proficiencies. Overall, they expressed the belief that language capabilities at their posts were adequate.

However, individual officers at Embassies and consulates were more specific in describing the consequences of the lack of language skills. Many officers spoke of inefficiencies, distortions, missed opportunities, underuse of personnel, and potential for visa fraud. Some LDP officers who lacked the required language skills explained that in previous assignments they had the required language proficiency. When comparing their current performances with their previous performances, they indicated they are less efficient in their current assignment. The following examples indicate the detrimental impacts which can occur because of insufficent language capabilities.

--A commercial officer avoids the non-English speaking local business community; he is "certain" that he is missing opportunities to develop valuable contacts.

--A consular officer said he is unable to provide adequate protection and welfare services to U.S. citizens abroad because he cannot adequately communicate with local police, hospital, and other foreign officials.

--An experienced political officer is unable to perform duties normally associated with his level. Not only is he frustrated but he also believes he is doing an ineffective job.

--A cultural affairs officer said he is cut off from the community he is supposed to be addressing, especially the youth.

--An information officer estimated that he can effectively reach only one-third of the people he should be contacting.

Department of State and USIA officials emphasized that LDP compliance statistics do not accurately reflect the total language capabilities at overseas Missions. They mentioned that many LDP incumbents who lack the required proficiency have proficiencies close to the required level. For example, in 1974, 60 percent of the State Department LDP incumbents who lacked the required language skills did have at least S-2/R-2 capabilities. State and USIA officials also pointed out that LDP incumbents who lacked the required capabilities increased their language skills once overseas but that many of these improvements do not show up in the statistics. Officers are not always retested while at posts, because only a few overseas locations have personnel authorized to administer Foreign Service Institute proficiency tests and Institute personnel make a limited number of testing trips each year. Furthermore, personnel proficient in the host country language are often assigned to non-language-designated positions, thereby increasing the overall capabilities of the Mission.

We recognize these factors and agree that, to some extent, they mitigate the impact of assigning personnel lacking required language skills to LDPs. However, we do not believe they appreciably reduce the need to fill LDPs with personnel having the necessary language skills. For example, there is a substantial difference between level 2 and level 3 language skills. In some languages, increasing proficiency from S-2/R-2 to S-3/R-3 may require several months of intensive training. Also, while personnel do increase their language proficiencies once assigned overseas, this improvement takes time. Thus, a portion of an officer's tour would be completed before the required proficiency could be attained.

We also found that self-appraised proficiencies and tested proficiencies often differ. Several officers told us their most recent proficiency tests indicated higher skills than they currently possessed. For example, one LDP incumbent had not been tested in the host country language since 1957, at which time he had achieved an S-4/R-4 rating. He estimated that, because of years of minimal use, his actual proficiency is now only S-2/R-1.

Concerning the assignment of language proficient personnel to non-LDPs, we do not believe this adequately compensates for the effects of inappropriately staffed LDPs. Personnel with adequate language capabilities are not always able or available to substitute for LDP incumbents with inadequate language skills. Congress recognized the distinction between total staffing abroad and staffing of specific language positions. In 1960, it amended the Foreign Service Act of 1946, stating that it was congressional policy that, to the maximum extent practicable, all Foreign Service Officers should speak the principal language or dialect of the countries in which they serve. In section 578 of that law, however, Congress stipulated that specific positions designated as language essential should be filled only by language proficient officers.

IMPROVED LDP ASSIGNMENT PROCEDURES NEEDED

We recognize that language capability is necessarily only one of several factors considered when making assignments to LDPs. As mentioned in the 1973 report, language capability is very often viewed as a secondary requirement, and primary job skills, such as expertise in political, economic, or consular functions are emphasized. Other factors also limit State and USIA assignment options, including grade level, availability of individuals for assignment, and career development policies.

Granting that these and probably other factors must be considered, we believe improvement is needed and can be made in assigning officers to LDPs.

Assignment of personnel

The Uniform State/USIA policy on LDP assignments is very clear. When officers assigned to LDPs do not have the required language skills, they are to receive language instruction before assuming duties at the post. If training is not provided or is terminated early, training waivers are required. The waivers, which explain the emergency conditions that necessitate bypassing adequate training, must be approved by the Deputy Director General of the Foreign Service and the Chief, USIA Personnel Division, for State Department and USIA employees, respectively. Waivers are not necessary, however, when an individual completes a full training program but does not achieve the required proficiency rating.

In February 1973, the Secretary of State reaffirmed these regulations, stating that in the future the Department would:

> "* * * fill LDPs only with officers having at a minimum the proficiency level required for the position even though this may in some cases result in delays in staffing * * * or may narrow the choice of officers."

To meet this goal, assignments to State LDPs are usually planned 9 to 18 months in advance of need, depending on the length of language training necessary. USIA plans LDP assignments from 6 to 12 months in advance, but even this does not allow adequate time for complete training in such languages as Arabic, Japanese, or Chinese.

Despite these regulations and procedures, the Department and USIA continue to assign many officers to LDPs who do not have proper language qualifications. In the 11 countries we visited, about 28 percent of the State Department officers assigned to LDPs from January 1974 to July 1975 and about 55 percent of the USIA officers assigned during calendar year 1974 lacked the required language skills. We also noted that some of these personnel had received full language training but failed to reach the required proficiency level. According to Foreign Service Institute officials, this happens frequently; one Institute official estimated that only half the graduates achieve S-3/R-3 proficiency at the completion of courses. In fact, for most languages, the Institute expects only students with superior language aptitude to attain a level 3 proficiency during the instruction period.

The majority of LDP officers who lacked the required language skills either had not attended intensive language training program or had only partially completed them, usually because of insufficient time. For example, slightly more than half the State LDP officers in our sample who lacked the required skills were sent overseas without having any tested proficiency in the required language. For USIA, 20 percent of the officers who lacked appropriate language capabilities had no training before assignment and others had received only partial training.

Officials said the major reasons for not scheduling training or for abbreviated training usually involved unforeseen events, such as unexpected departures of officers due to retirement and health reasons; pressures

from posts for immediate replacements; and requests by post officials, usually Ambassadors, for specific individuals. Also, we noted that officers who lacked the required skills were sent to posts because their proficiencies were close to required levels and it was assumed that they could acquire the necessary additional skills through the post language program. USIA officals told us that a shortage of junior grade officers and reduced training budgets over the last few years resulted in some inappropriate assignments.

Adequacy of language training waivers

Waiver procedures were not always followed. USIA had not prepared the waivers as required because the officials believed written justifications were unnecessary and because the officer who approved training and assignment decisions was also responsible for approving training waivers. We believe, however, that records of waivers would give management valuable information on LDP staffing problems.

State did not prepare waivers in some cases which required them. For example, at several overseas posts we identified 12 assignments made since July 1973 which required waivers but for which State had prepared only 4 waivers.

In our opinion, State and USIA need to define more precisely the situations which warrant assigning officers that do not have appropriate language skills to LDPs and to execute waivers accordingly. Some State training waivers did not demonstrate "emergency conditions" nor show why it was preferable to staff LDPs with officers lacking the required language skills rather than to delay the assignments to permit language training. For example, a LDP staffed with an officer who has no proficiency in the host country language will, in all probability, be unsatisfactorily filled for the duration of that officer's assignment--which is from 18 months to 5 years depending on his grade. The waivers did not routinely compare the long-term disadvantages of such a situation with the shorter term effects of assignment delays. We recognize that there will undoubtedly be instances when immediate assignment is advantageous but State and USIA have not established adequate criteria to identify those exceptional cases.

Recommendations

To improve LDP staffing, we recommend that the Secretary of State and the Director, USIA, (1) review their assignment procedures to ensure that, whenever feasible, assignments are made enough in advance to allow sufficient time for necessary language training, (2) establish and enforce strict criteria for granting training waivers, and (3) ensure that training waivers are prepared as required by regulations.

Agency comments and our evaluation

Department of State comments on the recommendations are summarized below.

The Department pointed out that it had made changes in assignment procedures, which promise to be useful in assuring that personnel assigned to LDPs receive adequate language training and stated that:

> "We are hopeful that our early publicizing of anticipated vacancies in LDP's will attract a larger pool of interested officers at a date early enough to provide necessary language training."

State informed us that its assignment panels attempts to weigh the long-term disadvantages of assignment of officers who do not have the required language skills against the short-term benefits of such an assignment, stated that:

> "In accordance with the GAO's recommendation, we have revised our standard operating procedures to insure that these factors are more systematically addressed."

For the need to ensure that training waivers are prepared as required by regulations, the Department said that:

> "We have tightened our procedures for reviewing and approving waivers to ensure that they are considering only upon the basis of a written justification and that exceptions do not occur inadvertently. * * * we now have a mechanism for insuring that assignments to LDP's requiring waivers are made in accordance with policy."

We believe these actions should improve LDP staffing. However, because the effectiveness of these changes is not readily apparent at this time, it is important that State monitor their impact and make adjustments as appropriate.

PROBLEMS IN DETERMINING LANGUAGE-DESIGNATED POSITIONS

Our 1973 report questioned State and USIA methods for determining language-designated positions, particularly the lack of criteria, limited involvement of post officials in the designation process, lack of documentation to support LDP decisions, and failure to periodically reassess language needs.

State and USIA have acted to correct some of these shortcomings. Both have increased post participation in the designation process, and since 1972, they have conducted reviews of LDPs in conjunction with post officials and provided criteria to overseas officials to assist them in evaluating language needs. We found, however, that they have not accurately identified total language requirements, primarily because factors other than job needs influence the designations.

State has reviewed its total LDPs on three occasions since our 1973 report; the most recent review was completed in December 1975, subsequent to our fieldwork. USIA has reviewed its total language requirements only once, but officials told us that LDPs are also individually reassessed when assignments are made and during overseas visits by headquarters staff. We found that State Department officials at overseas posts were generally familiar with designation criteria provided by State. A few Public Affairs officers, however, were not aware of USIA standards.

Neither State nor USIA has established formal procedures to require periodic reviews of LDPs nor have they included present LDP designation policies and criteria in the Uniform State/USIA regulations. We believe including these policies and procedures in the regulations would facilitate the continued monitoring of LDPs and would ensure that officials responsible for determining language needs are familiar with the established criteria.

The criteria provided to overseas officials describes specific job functions that State and USIA believe require language skills, including positions that entail:

--Conducting official business and developing significant contacts with host country officials, businessmen, and other leading citizens where lack of English competence or other considerations dictate that U.S. interests are best served by communication in the local language.

--Understanding significant public pronouncements (speeches, parliamentary debate, etc.) in the local language.

--Explaining U.S. policy and related matters in formal or informal public appearances (radio, television, speeches) in the local language.

--Acting as interpreter for the Ambassador or other top Mission personnel in confidential conversations.

--Monitoring accuracy and completeness of translations prepared by local personnel.

--Reading and, perhaps, translating documents in the local language whose nature makes it inadvisable to have them handled by local personnel.

--Having official consular or administrative dealings with host country officials, merchants, lessors, contractors, local employees and others for which communication in the local language is essential.

In addition, the USIA criteria includes positions, such as Information Center personnel, which require monitoring public opinion and dealing with the general public in the normal course of business.

Despite the uniform criteria, there were numerous differences in LDP designations from post to post. Similar positions were language-designated in one country and not in others. For example, in Paris all three General Service officer positions were language-designated; in Rome only one of the three positions was, and at some posts none of these positions were language-designated. These and other differences resulted partly from varying conditions in each country (for example, the extent to which English is known and used in the host nation) and from post officials'

judgments on the importance of language in performing certain tasks. As discussed below, the designations were also based on other considerations, such as availability of trained personnel, expectations regarding training results, and perceived impact of designations on prompt staffing of vacancies.

In submitting requests for language-designated positions, some posts explained their reasons for including or excluding positions, but many did not. Also, State and USIA altered some post requests, but these decisions were not always communicated and explained to post officials. In the absence of documentation, we relied primarily on the comments of incumbents and post officials in evaluating the adequacy of LDP designations.

Other factors influencing designations

Other factors are considered in designating some LDPs--primarily the availability of qualified personnel. We believe the desire to keep the designations "realistic" in terms of ability to staff the positions resulted in understating the number of positions that require language proficiency. As noted in our earlier report, such practices tend to prolong real shortages because the numbers of designated positions partially form the basis for training input.

For example, in January 1975, the Embassy in Korea requested that LDPs at the post be increased from 3 to 8. State agreed that this number more accurately reflected the real needs of the post, but asked the Embassy to reduce the request. State noted that eight positions would be difficult to fill because few officers were enrolling in Korean language-training courses. In response to the Rome Embassy's request for additional LDPs, State noted that Rome was asking for proportionately more LDPs than other posts had, and that this would place a heavy burden on limited Foreign Service Institute training resources. In neither case did State dispute the requests on the basis that the identified needs were not valid.

There were numerous inconsistencies in USIA posts' LDP designations. In some countries, almost all USIA positions were LDPs; in other places none were. For example, in Germany positions with few exceptions were language-designated, in Greece no positions were, and in Turkey, only one position was language-designated.

We could find no differences in Agency functions to explain why the Greek and Turkish posts had lesser language requirements than the German post.

Also, USIA's positions were sometimes redesignated to reflect the language proficiency of the incumbent. For example, the officer chosen to fill the Public Affairs LDP at one post did not have the required language proficiency, so the language designation was dropped for that position and switched to another position which was occupied by a language proficient officer. Practices such as this tend to circumvent the purpose of designating specific language-essential positions.

Headquarters and some post officials said it is difficult to explain why certain positions are LDPs and others are not. They stated that, oftentimes, there is no reason for designating one particular position instead of another; for example, a post may require a language competent officer in a section, but it does not matter which officer has the language capability. Some State and USIA officials have suggested that a total number of positions should be designated language-essential instead of specific positions--as required by the Foreign Service Act of 1946, as amended. They believe this would promote increased flexibility in staffing and, at the same time, result in the adequate accomplishment of language-essential tasks. In their view, the duties requiring language skills can be shifted among positions, depending on the capabilities of assigned officers.

We recognize that this view is reasonable in certain cases, but believe the number of positions to which such flexibility pertains is small in relation to total LDPs. The feasibility of functional realignments is limited by the incumbents' job skills, experience, grade levels, and availability. Based on these considerations, we believe the Act's requirement to designate specific positions as language-essential continues to be valid.

Designation of proficiency levels

The State Department and USIA do not designate positions as language-essential above the S-3/R-3 level. State has set this limit based on anticipated staffing problems and the difficulties involved in training personnel to fill S-4/R-4 requirements, but it does not necessarily reflect the actual language proficiency needs of a position.

The Foreign Service Institute's training programs are generally not designed to teach above the S-3/R-3 level. Usually, higher proficiencies can be acquired only through exposure to the language incountry. Also, State rates many junior officer positions at the S-2/R-2 level because officials reasoned that the Institute cannot guarantee that officers starting at the 0 level can reach the 3 level within the allowed training time.

Although the concerns are understandable, State and USIA would be more in line with congressional intent if they recognized all valid requirements regardless of staff availability and training difficulties. As it is, they appear to be underestimating actual language requirements. Officials at most of the overseas posts we visited identified some positions they believed required S-4/R-4 capabilities. They stated that some tasks could not be done effectively by personnel with lesser skills.

With more accurate identification of language needs, State and USIA would be better able to evaluate training priorities and program training resources. For example, State/USIA rules governing posts' language programs currently prohibit individual instruction for officers once they have reached the S-3/R-3 level. Were the level 4 language needs formally identified, State might want to reconsider the merits of this limit. We talked to several officers at overseas posts who, despite the regulation, had received advanced individual tutoring; they believed this type of instruction was helping them to improve their language skills beyond the S-3/R-3 level.

Officials at several posts told us that, in making LDP decisions, they considered the impact the designations would have on prompt and responsive staffing of vacancies. Some post officials said they agreed to a number of level 2 positions because they thought the positions would be easier to fill and would not result in assignment delays. Some incumbents in S-2/R-2 positions believed that S-3/R-3 skills were actually necessary and that their positions had been downgraded to ease recurring assignment difficulties.

Only about 3 percent of State LDPs and no USIA LDPs call for varying speaking and reading proficiencies (i.e. S-3/R-2 or S-2/R-3). Yet, some State and USIA officers said the reading requirements are often less than speaking requirements.

According to the Directors of Foreign Service Institute field schools in Japan and Taiwan, attainment of S-3/R-2 proficiency in Japanese and Chinese requires 16 to 18 months of intensive training. To reach the S-3/R-3 proficiency level, a student must train as much as 6 additional months at an estimated cost of $14,500.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Secretary of State and the Director of USIA, to improve their systems for designating LDPs, take steps to ensure that:

--Language designated positions and the proficiency levels required are based on actual language needs of the jobs without considering other factors.

--Language requirements are periodically reassessed and officials responsible for determining language needs are familiar with the criteria. In this regard, LDP designation policies and criteria should be incorporated into the Uniform State/USIA regulations.

We also recommend that State and USIA review LDPs to identify positions for which lower reading skills are acceptable so that training costs, especially for languages involving writing systems different from ours, could be reduced.

Agency comments and our evaluation

The Department of State made the following comments about our recommendations on problems relating to the designation of positions requiring language skills.

> "With regard to LDP designation criteria * * *, the Department is alrealy actively working on this issue. The Board of Professional Development, established by Secretary Kissinger on June 27, 1975, requested a study of the Department's language training policies and practices which is nearly completed. One recommendation requests approval of a Departmental study which would include identification of LDP's on the

basis of more uniform criteria. As suggested in the GAO Report, approved changes in language training and LDP designation will be incorporated promptly into the Foreign Affairs Manual."

We believe these planned actions should improve both the identification of LDPs and training requirements. We urge State to initiate the recommended study, which would emcompass the criteria for identifying LDPs as soon as possible. Accurate identification of language requirements is essential to the State's development of appropriate assignment and training policies and procedures relating to the staffing of LDPs.

POST LANGUAGE PROGRAMS COULD BE USED MORE EFFECTIVELY

The Foreign Service Institute gives part-time language instructions at about 185 Embassies and consulates in addition to the full-time training conducted in Washington and at three overseas locations. These post language programs give Foreign Service personnel and employees of other U.S. agencies abroad opportunities to study the host country languages. First priority in the post programs is to be given to LDP incumbents who lack required language skills; other authorized participants include personnel with job-related needs and adult dependents of eligible employees.

As discussed in our earlier report, the part-time post programs are not intended to be, nor are they effective as, substitutes for intensive language training before assignment. These programs are generally successful in teaching beginners elementary and courtesy level language skills, but are usually not adequate to develop proficiencies required for LDPs. The post language programs, however, can help to maintain, refresh, or improve proficiencies which have been previously attained.

The operation of the post language program is the responsibility of the post language officer, an Embassy officer designated by the Mission Chief to locally administer the program. Training is provided by using local personnel as tutors or by contracting with local institutions. There are two types of training--individual tutoring and group instruction. Most training is confined to group sessions.

During fiscal year 1975 post language program training cost more than $3 million, including estimated student salaries, and about 5,100 U.S. Government personnel and their dependents participated. State and USIA personnel and their dependents accounted for about 57 percent of the students enrolled.

As noted previously, State and USIA continue to assign personnel who lack the required language skills to LDPs. During our visits to posts, we observed that post language programs were not being used as effectively as they could be to upgrade the language skills of these officers. For instance, all LDP incumbents who lacked the required language skills were not enrolled in the post language programs, and certain LDP officers who lacked required language skills were not receiving the most effective training available. We also noted numerous deficiencies in the management of the post programs.

We believe the problems result from lack of emphasis on language training by post officials; insufficient information on staff proficiencies available at posts; limits imposed by regulations; and inadequate supervision and followup by agency headquarter staffs and the Foreign Service Institute.

Enrollment

As mentioned earlier, we noted that several personnel who did not have the necessary language skills were assigned to posts on the assumption that they would acquire additional skills through the post training program. At most of the posts visited, however, at least one LDP officer who lacked the necessary language skills was not enrolled in the post language program, and at more than half these posts, three or four officers who should have been in the program were not. Most of these officers were State Department personnel.

According to State/USIA regulations and supplementary instructions, post officials are supposed to ensure that LDP incumbents with less than the required language skills are enrolled in the program. Post officials told us they usually do not enforce training for these officers but rely on the individuals to request training. They attributed non-enrollment by some of these officers to heavy workloads and travel schedules and lack of interest or aptitude. A few officials said that the difficulty of

certain languages, such as Arabic, discourages enrollment by beginners because it is recognized that post instruction will not be sufficient to develop a professional-level proficiency.

We noted that officials at overseas posts often did not know the specific language skills of their employees and were generally unaware of training waivers which had been granted. We believe that such information would facilitate post efforts to identify and assist officers in need of additional training.

We also found that State and USIA do not routinely monitor the enrollments of LDP officers in the program, which would help to ensure that the programs were used to upgrade the language skills of these personnel.

Training

In the countries we visited, 28 LDP officers who lacked required language skills were not enrolled in the post language programs. A number of State Department personnel believed they were not receiving the most effective training available at the post. State/USIA regulations' lack of emphasis on post training priorities has limited the access of these officers to certain types of language training.

We spoke to 32 program enrollees, 15 of whom were LDP incumbents lacking the required language skills. Generally, the enrollees we spoke to were satisfied with the quality of the post training. However, about half of the LDP officers interviewed who did not have adequate language skills criticized the type of training, particularly the use of group sessions instead of individual instruction. They felt that group training was not meeting their needs because the instruction was geared to the slowest learner in the group and each participant received little individualized attention. Officers at many posts believed that individual tutoring was more effective than group training, especially if the goal is to acquire language skills as quickly as possible.

State/USIA regulations encourage the use of group training whenever possible. Individual instruction is allowed when work schedules or differences in language skill levels prevent grouping. The regulations do not specifically authorize use of individual tutoring to upgrade the skills of LDP officers who need further

language training. Also, with limited resources available for post language training, several post language officers prefer group training because it is less costly and permits training of more people.

--At one post, several officers with less than the required language skills were placed in group classes because funds were not available for individual instruction. Yet, at the same time, the program at this post was providing training to 38 other eligible, but lower priority, State Department personnel.

--Another post "paired" LDP officers who needed further language training with other Embassy personnel desiring language training. Whenever one of the pair was absent from post or unable to attend the instruction the class was cancelled. During our visit to this post, the partner of one of the LDP incumbents was out of town for 2 weeks, during which the other officer received no training. The post language supervisor told us the "pairing" was arranged because regulations required grouping whenever possible.

--At a third post, training was cut back because of a reduction in the program budget. One LDP officer whose training was shortened had no speaking or reading proficiency in the host-country language and his pre-departure training had been waived on the justification that he had "good language aptitude" and it was assumed he would acquire the necessary skills quickly once at the post. Because of the reduction in training, this officer was receiving only 3 hours of instruction a week, less than the minimum hours required by the post language program regulations and hardly enough to permit him to rapidly reach the required proficiency level.

--At another post, an LDP officer who lacked the required language skills chose not to attend the program because he could not

receive individual training. In his opinion, a group session would not meet his needs and would be too inflexible for his work schedule. The post language officer cited lack of funds as the reason for not providing individual training, even though most of that post's program money was being spent to train lower priority personnel.

Some officers who occupied non-LDP positions and some who had already attained the proficiency level required for their jobs were receiving individual instruction, while LDP personnel without required language skills were placed in groups. The officers receiving individual tutoring were usually high-ranking Mission personnel. We were told that their work schedules and specialized training needs prevented grouping.

In our opinion, State/USIA regulations for post language programs are not consistent with their established primary objective of assisting personnel to achieve job-level proficiencies. It seems reasonable that LDP personnel who have not achieved such levels should have priority access to the most effective training available at a post simply because they need it most.

We recognize that individual training may not be better training in all cases. We do believe, however, that the type of training given to LDP officers who need it should be based on the individual language needs and the most effective ways to meet these needs.

Management

Our review of post language programs concentrated on the use of these programs by LDP incumbents who lacked required language skills. In addition to the specific LDP-related problems cited in previous sections, we observed numerous deficiencies in the management and operation of the programs, including:

--State/USIA regulations were not always followed. For example, personnel with S-3/R-3 proficiencies continued to receive individual training, even though this is prohibited by regulations.

--Interpretations of regulations varied from post to post. For example, one post provided non-LDP employees with only 100 hours of instruction, while other posts provided as much training as desired.

--Justification for individual training was very general and did not give the Foreign Service Institute sufficient information, such as employee proficiency levels, to assess the validity of the training.

--Some posts' reports were not prepared accurately, understating training hours and costs.

--At one post, two user agencies were making direct transfers of funds to the post language program, instead of following reimbursement procedures at headquarters level.

--Poor class attendance was a problem at a few posts.

--Other U.S. Government agencies were not adhering to required program guidelines.

--Some training provided to other user agencies seemed questionable. For example, dependents attended the program for 400-plus hours, which is almost double the maximum allowed by State/USIA regulations, and individual instruction was given to personnel who did not need the language for their work.

These deficiencies indicate a need to increase supervision of the programs. Presently, there seems to be only minimal control to ensure that programs are operated in accordance with existing regulations. Foreign Service Institute officials told us they lacked the necessary staff to make detailed reviews of information submitted by the posts. Also, when their personnel visit overseas Missions, they spend most of their time administering language proficiency tests, with little or no time devoted to management evaluation.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Secretary of State and the Director, USIA:

--Require followup on LDP incumbents who need further language training to ensure that they are receiving effective post language training.

--Reemphasize the priorities of the post language programs, giving consideration to revising the regulations to clearly authorize individual training for LDP incumbents who lack required language skills whenever it is deemed to be the most effective training.

--Provide overseas posts with necessary data, including proficiency scores and waiver documents, to assist post officials in identifying and monitoring staff language-training needs.

Also, the Secretary of State should direct the Foreign Service Institute to devote more time to evaluating management of post programs, particularly during their visits to posts.

Agency comments and our evaluation

State's specific comments on the shortcomings we noted in the post language programs are quoted below.

"The Department has been increasingly aware of these shortcomings, all of them stemming from one basic problem: lack of adequate supervision to programs in the field. For the last eight years, starting with BALPA [Balance of Payments] reductions of personnel overseas, the Department has experimented with the supervision of PLPs [Post Language Programs] through visits by supervisory linguists from the FSI [Foreign Service Institute] staff in Washington. It is now entirely clear that this method cannot provide adequate professional assistance to posts. Such trips have created conflicts between the responsibilities the linguists have for training in Washington and their responsibilities for training programs at posts. Their

trips on the one hand have interfered with the Washington instructional program, and on the other hand have had to be so brief as to preclude any in-depth supervision of PLPs.

"The Department recognizes the necessity of stationing Regional Language Supervisors [RLS] at strategic locations in the field to provide professional language training and testing assistance to posts. The Priorities Policy Group has allocated two new positions to FSI for fiscal year 1977 as a beginning toward reestablishing a RLS system similar to the one which FSI operated prior to 1968. FSI plans to use these positions to station in the field within the next few months one Regional Language Supervisor in South America and one in Europe. A third position, formerly located in Bangkok and presently vacant, will be used to station an RLS in South Asia.

"The development of these three persons will substantially contribute toward improving the quality of post language programs in areas of the world containing a large percentage of Foreign Service personnel and of LDPs, but will fall considerably short of providing adequate coverage worldwide. The Board of Professional Development is currently studying this problem."

* * * * *

"The Department agrees that providing overseas posts with proficiency scores of personnel proceeding to overseas assignments would greatly assist post officials in identifying language training needs. FSI will work out a system to notify posts of the final proficiency ratings of employees completing Washington training."

State did not agree that regulations governing the use of individual language instructions at the post need to be clarified and stated that:

"The stationing of RLS in the field will assist [post officials] by providing on-the-spot professional guidance in setting priorities on the use of PLP money."

The planned actions cited by State should improve the management and effectiveness of post language programs; but, in our opinion, greater control and review of post language programs is also necessary at the headquarters level to assist overseas personnel in managing the programs.

In our opinion, post language program regulations for individual instruction for LDP incumbents need further clarification. From our observations at overseas posts we believe that some LDP incumbents who lacked required language skills were not receiving the most effective training because of post officials' interpretations of the regulations. Additional emphasis is needed in the regulations to assure that such LDP incumbents receive the most effective training.

In commenting on this report, State pointed out that in fiscal year 1975 individual instruction at post language programs accounted for 18 percent of the students and 39 percent of the funds expended, suggesting State was already emphasizing individual instruction to LDP incumbents. Since the first priority of the post programs is to provide instruction to LDP incumbents, it seems to us such individuals should be accommodated first and a greater portion of available funds should be used for priority instruction.

APPENDIX II

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, D.C. 20520

April 22, 1976

Mr. J. K. Fasick
Director
International Division
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, D. C. 20548

Dear Mr. Fasick:

I am replying to your letter of April 1, which forwarded copies of the draft report: "Further Improvements Needed in Language Training Programs and Assignments for U.S. Foreign Service Personnel Overseas."

The enclosed comments were prepared by the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Personnel and the Deputy Director of the Foreign Service Institute.

We appreciate having had the opportunity to review and comment on the draft report. If I may be of further assistance, I trust you will let me know.

Sincerely,

Daniel L. Williamson
Deputy Assistant Secretary
for Budget and Finance

Enclosure: As stated.

USIA
UNITED STATES
INFORMATION AGENCY
WASHINGTON 20547

April 14, 1976

Mr. J. K. Fasick
Director, International Division
U. S. General Accounting Office

Dear Mr. Fasick:

We have received the draft copy of your report entitled "Further Improvements are Needed in Language Training Programs and Assignments for U. S. Foreign Service Personnel Overseas" and believe it to be a comprehensive, highly professional study of the extent to which USIA has met language requirements in staffing overseas positions.

The individuals conducting the study consulted with concerned Agency personnel at length, and we are gratified to see that their comments received fair consideration in the preparation of the draft.

The Agency is appreciative of the opportunity to review the report prior to its official issuance.

Sincerely,

William A. Robey
Chief, Finance and Data
Management Division