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**We Teach Languages Episode 118: Language Teacher Recruitment and Retention with Pete Swanson**

**Stacey Johnson**:  [00:00] This is "We Teach Languages," a podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of teachers.

[00:08] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [00:11] I'm Stacey Johnson. Today on Episode 118, Shannon Mason interviews Peter Swanson about the language teacher shortage. Shannon is Australian and lives in Japan. Pete Swanson lives here in the United States. They've collaborated in the past on research related to language teacher recruitment and retention.

[00:39] It's really interesting to me that there's so much demand all over the world for language teachers. It's also heartening to know that there are committed scholars working on the issue. There are also a lot of resources out there related to advocacy and promoting language teaching as a profession. I've tried to link to some of those in the show notes.

[01:02] If you are interested, there are links for you to click on to get more information about all sorts of issues related to language teacher recruitment and retention, including a moment on Twitter, with some recent tweets you can click through as well.

[01:18] [music]

**Shannon Mason**:  [01:22] This is Shannon Mason from Nagasaki University in Japan, educational researcher and former language teacher in Australia.

[01:31] In my own research into language teacher attrition and retention, I've been very much influenced and informed by the work of Professor Peter Swanson who is the leader in the field. I'm very happy that he's here today to help walk us through this very important topic. Thanks, Pete, for joining me today.

**Peter Swanson**:  [01:50] You're welcome. Pleasure to be here today.

**Shannon**:  [01:52] I'll just introduce some of your credentials. Professor Peter Swanson, former professor of foreign language education at Georgia State University, who recently took a position at the United States Air Force Academy where he teaches Spanish and continues his research on language teacher effectiveness, as well as teacher recruitment and retention.

[02:15] He served on many local, regional, and national boards for language teaching and learning. Most notably, he has been the president of the ACT, FL. I'd like to just jump right in, if that's OK and ask you to set the scene for us.

[02:33] What is the situation in terms of the supply and demand for language teachers in the United States and in other Anglophone countries, because our research is not about learning English. That's a whole other kettle of fish.

**Peter**:  [02:48] Indeed. The research right out shows that for decade, the supply of qualified language teachers, for language teachers, has not kept up with demand. When I first began investigating the shortage of language teachers in the United States, it was about 40 states that reported shortages. Now, every state reports a shortage of language teachers.

[03:11] To make things worse, for the first time in decades, there's a shortage of people in the pipeline to become language teachers even is Spanish, for enrollments in higher education in Spanish classes that typically held strong without any decrease in enrollment. A recent survey by the Modern Language Association now shows the decrease in enrollment in Spanish courses.

[03:31] Of course, outside the United States, the shortage is pervasive on just about every comment. For example, in Australia, retirement and attrition of teachers are causing concern, especially in rural areas of the country because of the availability of better employment options.

**Shannon**:  [03:46] That's right.

**Peter**:  [03:47] In Africa, such as Burkina Faso and in the Central African Republic continue to report shortages. There's other countries like Canada, and in England they've had similar issues.

**Shannon**:  [03:56] Why is it important that we have a healthy supply?

**Peter**:  [04:01] We talked about this in the past. Language is inherently a human endeavor. We use language to communicate not only ideas, but also cultural ideas, cultural norms. Learning a second language has a lot of benefits.

[04:16] If you were take a look at the research, bilingualism is starting to correlate with increased cognitive development. It's also correlated with the opposite of age‑related cognitive losses. There's a correlation between bilingualism and attentional control, and cognitive tasks, and intelligence, and metalinguistic skills, memory skills, problem‑solving skills, improved verbal spatial ability.

[04:42] There's even evidence that's empirical showing that being bilingual helps on standardized tests like the SAT. There's so much information out there, in fact that if you go to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages website, they've got a great list of what the research is showing right now.

**Shannon**:  [05:02] To bring about those benefits, it's necessary that we have the healthy supply of teachers.

**Peter**:  [05:08] Very much, so, very much. We need to thwart the shortage immediately.

**Shannon**:  [05:14] To build the supply, I guess, we need to have the people who have or can develop multilingual capacity. We need to bring them into faculties of education for their pre‑service training. We need to develop the skills and knowledge to become effective teachers. We need to get them into schools, and then we need to keep them in schools. Is that fair to say?

**Peter**:  [05:36] There's no doubt about it. I believe you're talking about recruitment and development of the teacher, and then of course, retention, which all could be critical issues.

[05:47] First, language teachers need to be recruiters, I believe. When we see a student who loves the language and loves culture, we need to actively recruit this individual into our profession. Once they're in the pipeline, we need to help mentor these individuals so that they'll stay in the profession.

[06:04] We have to work with our local colleges and universities to help preserve and build and even maintain teacher preparation programs. Retention is key to this. It's horrible when you see individuals come into the profession and a couple years later, they leave. They leave because they are lacking this mentorship.

**Shannon**:  [06:23] Where do you think the greatest attention needs to be placed? Is it with recruitment and development, or retention, or all of the above?

**Peter**:  [06:34] I would say that we need to focus on all of the above. What we really need to do is we need to focus on recruitment to get more into the pipeline. Then, we need to work with those ones that are in the pipeline. Then have programs out there that will help keep these people in the profession.

[06:51] I believe they should have love of the language, and everything. We need to be able to work with them to keep them in the classroom.

**Shannon**:  [07:01] As you know, in my research in Australia, I'm focused on the attrition of language teachers. There is not the solid data that there is in the United States. What we see is a lot of language teachers move.

[07:16] They're not a part of the statistics on attrition because they don't move out of education. They move out of language education. They move into the homeroom teaching. In elementary school, they move to teaching mathematics or the humanities.

[07:33] What do you see there? Is there inherent difficulties of being a language teacher? Who's responsible for helping retain teachers in fairly challenging situations?

**Peter**:  [07:46] We have the same problem here that they come into the profession. It's termed as the revolving door. They come in, they spend two years, and then they leave. Our attrition rate is so much higher than other professions.

[08:05] For example, pharmacists leave at about 14 percent on an annual basis. Nurses leave at 19 percent. Teachers are leaving at 30 percent or so every year. Novice teachers are leaving in even about 50 percent. It's troubling.

[08:26] There's so many reasons that we need to support language programs, and support the language teachers themselves. If you take a look at the research, art, music and foreign language are three of the biggest contributors to a person's intellect, a person's intelligence, I'd say that.

[08:46] Of course, when budgets become a topic, what are the first things cut? Language and art. You can't find a study that says those three actually do promote cognitive ability.

[09:02] When you take a look at the research and you see that taking a second language in school helps with the standardized test scores, help with the development of cognitive ability with reading, a verbal skill, to me it makes all the sense in the world that we should be promoting this even stronger.

**Shannon**:  [09:19] That's right. One of the things that language teachers who I've spoken with talk about is that lack of value in that always having to justify their position in the curriculum, when, as you say, there's so much research to back up the important role that they play, especially in this internationalized global world.

**Peter**:  [09:39] Very much so. Very much so.

**Shannon**:  [09:41] What do you think is the best possible place we might be in in, say, 10 years? How do you think we can get there?

**Peter**:  [09:52] In the next 10 years it's critical because of the number of language programs in higher ed being cut that we need to, first and foremost, get people to understand that these foreign language programs need to be maintained. We need to work on this from a multi‑pronged perspective here.

[10:16] The first thing we got to do is we got to get a world of language teachers that are out in schools, promoting the profession itself, and identifying the most capable students, providing those students with information about how to become a language teacher, mentoring them, giving them opportunities that are saying what the effect is like, and serving as a mentor, to give them support.

[10:39] Advocating themselves for better working the program conditions that will help teaching will also play a role in that as well. We need them to systematically developed ways to increase like teacher salaries in the [inaudible] areas such as world languages. [inaudible] programs and a course subject by giving the total resources and space to facilitate effective teaching and learning.

[10:51] We are equally as important as the STEM subjects. Then you have the parents and the community members. They have a role to play, such as advocating for sustained increases in salary, and improve resources and funding for the language teacher.

[11:21] I've seen school [inaudible] about the details of world programs and holding them accountable, and creating an advocacy group of like‑minded parents, that we can melt all those together. Teacher education providers, these language programs, have their role in the school thing as well.

[11:21] Language teacher associations, like Apple and FIPLV have a role play by moving the whole conversation forward to the policymakers and getting them to understand that we're as important as any other subject out there, and that we need to be funded. We need to be supported for the reasons that we've been discussing.

[12:05] It's clear that more attention needs to be taken to really promote language teaching, because of all the benefits associated with it. Plus, it's at the heart of the human experience. This is how we get along. This is how we come to understandings and come to cultural understanding. It's critical.

**Shannon**:  [12:22] I know that you've been integral in helping to build the supply of language teachers in Georgia. Is that right?

**Peter**:  [12:30] Yes, yes. I've been trying to do that down here in Colorado, as well by working with local universities to give them ideas, help secure funding by going and visiting with their administrators, and trying to get certain projects in line so that they can start recruiting these individuals into the program being connected with colleges of education.

[12:55] Then teachers right in the field, right there, right in schools to help them start building the program as well. It's a collective task that we all need to undertake.

**Shannon**:  [13:02] Yes, you're right. There's a lot of moving parts and a lot of people that need to step up. Thank you very much for all of your efforts and your research. That's had a real impact on this issue.

**Peter**:  [13:17] Thank you for your [inaudible] into the field indeed. Your contributions are well‑published throughout the world.

**Shannon**:  [13:23] Thank you. [laughs]

**Peter**:  [13:24] You've made quite a name for yourself.

**Shannon**:  [13:27] We'll cut that.

[13:28] [laughter]

**Shannon**:  [13:28] Thank you very much for your time, Pete.

[13:31] [background music]

**Peter**:  [13:31] Thank you. I appreciate your time.

**Stacey**:  [13:34] If you have questions or comments related to today's episode, we would love to hear from you. You can reach out to us multiple ways. All of them are available at our website, weteachlang.com/contact. You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter @weteachlang.

[14:05] We would like to say a very special thank you to the Pearl Foreign Language Resource Center for partnering with us to provide transcripts and other professional development resources related to the episodes. You can learn more about Pearl by going to pearl, P‑E‑A‑R‑L‑L, dot, N‑F‑L‑C, dot, U‑M‑D, dot, E‑D‑U.

[14:33] Thanks so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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