

# Why Learn Other Languages?

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## The World Has Changed



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Today many Americans work abroad, competing with global graduates proficient in three to four languages and ever-stronger emerging market talent pools. Companies want globally competent employees – including multi-language competency. Few starting out today could succeed as I did speaking only English. Some could squeak by, but why set ourselves up for even partial failure? Research shows early language learning works best, and aids cognitive development beyond language arts. Why miss that window?

Language also matters for appreciating cultures, connecting and building relationships around the world. (Even a knowing a few polite phrases in many languages can change the tenor in a room.) Monolinguals conversing only with the English-fluent, or via machines, lose the important human touch and can't learn or work as effectively as those chatting easily with native speakers, reading local papers, interpreting the subtleties.

## Language Is More Than Speaking



*Anthony Jackson is vice president for education at the Asia Society and leads the society's Partnership for Global Learning, a national membership network of practitioners and policymakers dedicated to integrating knowledge about Asia and the world as a mainstay of American education.*

Language is much more than a tool for accessing information. It is the palette from which we draw all the colors of our life, and people who speak multiple languages have a larger palette and richer set of colors to draw from than those who are monolingual.

Students who grow up with English as their native language should not be denied the opportunity to see issues from different perspectives, hear arguments with a different timbre and articulate ideas using different strategies of communication. Multilingualism is a smart investment in developing students with the cognitive and academic skills to be ready for the world. Learning another language nurtures cognitive skills that are critical for students' academic success. Research shows that learning languages correlates positively with academic achievement and offers students a range of cognitive advantages, including the ability to shift between different symbol systems. Language is also a major mechanism for teaching students how to communicate across cultures – something U.S. students will need when working with their peers around the world, even if they are speaking English.

And even if one believes that language is merely a tool for accessing information, it is clear that more and more information is being generated in languages other than English.

Online translation tools are fantastic for translating simple directions, but there is a long way to go before they will be able to reproduce the experience of reading Proust in French, the Mahabharata in Sanskrit or Li Bai in Chinese.

## Advice for Native English Speakers



*Michael Erard is the author of "Babel No More: The Search for the World's Most Extraordinary Language Learners."*

At any given time, the vast majority of English used on the planet is spoken and written by people who aren't native speakers and who may have learned it as adults. It may be their second or third language. Their interactions will tend to be with other non-native speakers. They'll say things in ways that you don't say them in your version of English.

So if you're a native speaker of English and that's your only language, accommodating your ear and your speech to those users of the global lingua franca is a cultural and linguistic skill. It requires practice; you don't automatically get it by virtue of being a native speaker. You have to learn how to hear around accents, word choices and grammatical patterns. You have to learn to suspend your judgments of what may seem like deviations and errors, because in a particular variety of English, those things may be perfectly acceptable. You also have to understand how other people's mother tongues, educational systems and community histories influence the English they speak. You should also learn how to say the culturally appropriate thing about their native languages and the fact that you don't yourself speak them. Once you've gone that far, you might decide to go ahead and study another language, as well. It's always a worthwhile investment, in both economic and cognitive terms, even if the value isn't immediately calculable.

## The Rise of the Polyglots



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People often talk about the practical upsides to learning a second (a third, a fourth) language, like employability in this global economy. But learning a new tongue is important beyond that. A foreign language helps with the understanding of one's native language. The process of learning to communicate in a foreign language often forces us to learn how to listen. Language provides insight into another way of thinking, another mind-set.

This is not to say that everyone must be fluent in multiple languages, just as not everyone is "fluent" in statistics. There is a difference between functionality and fluency; it may be enough to be proficient.

And although English is common around the world, it is far from universal. A little while ago I asked a friend of mine from mainland China — an affluent person who moved to Hong Kong a year ago — if she would be interested in helping me with my Chinese, and in return I would teach her English. She said she would help me, but replied that she had no interest in learning English. If someone wanted to speak with her, she said, they could learn Chinese.

## What Would Aristotle Think



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America's preoccupation with whether our students are keeping up with their peers in Hong Kong, Shanghai and South Korea overlooks other fundamental purposes of education, confounding "doing well" economically with being fully and productively engaged with the world.

Learning a foreign language is about a way of being in the world, not about getting the next deal done. It telecasts respect for one's interlocutor and cognitive curiosity even as it nourishes the brain's jewel in the crown, its executive function. Indeed, neuroscience is beginning to show that the brains of bilinguals may have advantages in what will matter most in the global era: managing complexity, rational planning and meta-cognition.

## 'Getting By' Isn't Enough



**Clayton Lewis** is the headmaster at Washington International School, a pre-K to Grade 12 co-educational day school.

The assertion that English has become the global language may be true, but the notion that native English speakers will get by relying either on their Chinese, Brazilian or German counterparts' ability to speak English or on machine translators is shortsighted.

Setting aside any of the numerous studies showing the benefits of bilingualism, knowing a language is key to understanding culture -- a skill that is often underestimated. The American who has a nuanced ability with languages will hold a distinct advantage in negotiations or social exchange, and will thereby attain a deeper, richer experience. Years of learning a language, as well as the history and society of places where that language is spoken, develops a student with a truly multicultural outlook. Our global society is increasingly in need of individuals who look at issues with a broad perspective.

Learning a second or third language does require a significant investment of time, but the payoff is undeniable, both in terms of how it enriches the learner and in the example it offers. Let's recognize what the Chinese, Brazilians and Germans have learned: that knowing two or more languages is an advantage, not a burden.