

Foreign Languages: A World of Possibilities

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Abstract

While English is often thought of as the global language or global lingua franca, the world is multilingual. English is not the most frequently spoken mother tongue in the world, and is not spoken by 75% of the world population. However, many English-speakers are reluctant to learn another language because of their belief that English is enough, resulting in a foreign language deficit in the US and the Anglophone world. In addition, languages can have local, regional, national, international, and global significance, and the influence of a particular language or languages can change and has varied over time. The ability and willingness to speak another language opens up a whole new world of possibilities—careers, global citizenship, and personal and cultural growth. Foreign language educators, advocates, and other stakeholders can and should work together to increase awareness, provide access to continued instruction to proficiency, and create career pathways.

Keywords: foreign languages, multilingualism, immersion

While it may be easy to think that English is the global *lingua franca*, and that if one speaks English, it is not necessary to even think about learning another language, nothing could be farther from the truth. There are 7,099 languages in the world (Ethnologue, 2017), and 75% of the world population does not speak English (British Council, 2013). In fact, the challenge of getting the word out to non-English-speaking communities in the US was highlighted during the 2017 hurricane season (Bell, 2017).

Knowledge and use of more than one language is known to bring cognitive, personal, and career benefits, staving off the onset of dementia (Bialystok, 2011) and possibly even allowing us to live longer, linked to better problem-solving skills and creativity, and associated with increased earnings. In addition, knowledge of other languages and cultures allows for the development of a global mindset and global citizenship values. Furthermore, access to information, education, and employment in a globalized world and workplace is more readily available to those who know more than one language.

However, in this globalized world and workplace, the monolingual majority of Americans may be at a disadvantage. While it is estimated that more than half of the world's population is bilingual (Grosjean, 2012), or uses more than one language, most Americans speak only English, and most Americans do not study foreign languages.

Americans lag behind not only in foreign language skills, but also in foreign language learning. Only one in four Americans is able to hold a conversation in a language other than English (McComb, 2001), fewer than 20% of K-12 public school students studying another language (Commission, 2017), and only 8.1% of college and university students enrolled in a course in a language other than English (MLA, 2013).

In a globalized world and workplace, greater numbers of Americans should be learning other languages. Initial interest in beginning foreign language study and the motivation to continue study to proficiency and fluency are challenges that need to be addressed through advocacy and partnerships with business, government, and other foreign language stakeholders. Foreign language learning at all levels should be framed by and grounded in the goal of "translingual and transcultural competency" (MLA, 2007), and provide effective pathways to fluency. Multilingual education, bilingual education, and heritage language and immersion programs, as well as initiatives like the Seal of Biliteracy, are positive steps. Technology, providing both access to authentic speakers and materials, and individualized learning opportunities, is another area with potential for expanded use.

Language enterprise partnerships, bringing together all the language stakeholder groups, are essential to create and sustain continued growth. Higher education institutions need to develop "multiple pathways to the major" (MLA, 2007), experiential learning, and career pathways for foreign language students.

The Many Languages One World Essay Contest and Global Youth Forum (MLOW) provides not only a high-profile example of the significance of multilingualism in the development of global citizenship mindset and values, but an example of excellence in foreign language learning that can provide insights for foreign language and international education.

Our Multilingual World

With thousands of languages in the world, and English, often mentioned as a global lingua franca spoken by a mere 25% of the world population, languages are continually in contact in a multilingual world, with local, regional, national, and global/international languages often in close contact. Yet the US suffers from a foreign language deficit that impacts national and economic security, as well as the ability of Americans to effectively participate in the global conversation and to effectively navigate our multicultural society.

Europe is often referred to as "language-rich," multilingualism is a core value of the European Union, and plurilingualism, sometimes known as "mother tongue + 2," is a pragmatic educational strategy to realize that goal. In the United States, on the other hand, there is actually no official language, no language policy, and foreign language requirements for high school and college graduation remain at about 50% of the states and of higher education institutions.

Within the EU, over 50% of adults report the ability to converse in another language, while in the US, that figure hovers at 25%. Even within the EU, there is wide variation, with low percentages of fluent foreign language speakers in the UK and Ireland reflecting a global Anglophone foreign language deficit (Nardelli, 2014).

In the US itself, 60.6 million people (21 percent of the population) speak a language other than English at home. Spanish is the most frequently spoken language, with 37.6 million speakers, followed by Chinese and French/French Creole (Ryan, 2013).

Nearly 10% (4.6M) of US public school students are actually English language learners (ELLs) (NCES, 2017), and "far from being a problem, bilingualism is an asset both to individuals and to society," and "bilingual education (a means) can help us take advantage of this asset by promoting bilingualism (a goal) *both* for English speakers and for students who come from non-English backgrounds". In addition, "apart from the obvious intellectual and cultural advantages of speaking two or more languages, bilingualism has been linked to a number of other positive outcomes" (Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015). Bilingual education includes one-way immersion, heritage language programs, and two-way, or dual immersion programs

The U.S. foreign language deficit is the result of a US language paradox in that a nation built on immigration lacks foreign language skills and that relatively few students study a foreign language, even when these languages are sought by employers (Heitner, 2011; Rivers, 2015).

The Benefits of Foreign Languages

Foreign language skills have long been associated with cognitive, career, cultural, and personal benefits. According to a Babbel survey (O'Hare, 2017), a majority of Americans and British believe that speaking a language makes you more attractive, one in eight have exaggerated their language skills on their resume to impress potential employers, a quarter believe that lack of foreign language skills has held them back professionally. It goes on to state that "being multilingual can make you more appealing, more successful and more compassionate. And it's also good for your health." (Vince, 2017) re-confirms that at least half of the world population speaks more than one language, and not only highlights the cognitive and social advantages of bilingualism, but describes what monolingual English-speakers are missing out on.

Even exposure to other languages offers benefits. (Kinzler, 2016) has determined that while cognitive and executive function advantages of bilingualism are observable only in bilingual children, social and communicative advantages are also observable in monolingual children exposed to other languages. (Weiler, 2015) writes that "a second language can play an important unconscious role in framing perception." Reports (Science20, 2008; ABC, 2005) have also stated that use of one or more additional languages is linked to longer life through delaying the onset of dementia.

The World Economic Forum (2017) has also described the impact of multilingualism on tolerance through the cultural competence, practical intelligence, cultural understanding, tolerance of ambiguity generally enhanced through foreign language learning, and which may lead to increased entrepreneurial skill and higher salary. Bilinguals also enjoy "better job prospects, a cognitive boost and even protection against dementia, "the ability to "view the world in different ways depending on the specific language they are operating in." In addition, "going back and forth between languages appears to be a kind of brain training, pushing your brain to be flexible" (Athanosopoulos, 2015).

Languages in the Workplace and in International Business

Careers may require, or be enhanced by, foreign language skills. Although the UN and the EU are among the largest employers of language services professionals, there are many other opportunities available for language services professionals. In addition, many other careers include foreign language skills and cultural knowledge.

As highlighted by the quote attributed to Willy Brandt, *If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen!*, international trade is a sector in which foreign language plays a significant role. The top trading partners for the US are China, Canada, Mexico, Japan, and Germany, making knowledge of Chinese, French, Spanish, Japanese, and German an advantage for importers and exporters of goods and services (Census, 2017). Approximately 10.7 million US jobs were supported by exports in 2016, and these jobs tended to be 18% higher paying than jobs overall. (ITA, 2017).

The number of interpreters and translators is projected to grow 29% from 2014-2024, "much faster than average," with increasing globalization and an increasingly diverse US society driving growth. Professional certification is an advantage for those seeking employment (OOH, 2017). The global language services sector is estimated at 43.8B USD in 2017, with an increase of 6.97% over 2016, and predicted to reach \$45B by 2020. (De Palma, 2017). Three of the top 5, but only 4 of the top 10 language services providers in 2016 were US companies, Lionbridge, TransPerfect, LanguageLine Solutions, and Welocalize (CommonSense, 2017).

Foreign language skills and cultural knowledge also form part of a broader skill set often referred to as global talent. A recent survey found that 55% of the employers surveyed track employee FL skills, 35% give advantage to multilingual candidates, and 11% actively seek recruits for jobs requiring FL skills (Rivers, 2015).

It is interesting to note that the Central Intelligence launched a "Signature School" program in 2016, which expanded to the City University of New York Baruch College in 2017 (CIA, 2016, 2017).

Business reflects the globalized world, and is accordingly multilingual. The 2017-2018 Global Competitiveness Index ranks Switzerland, the United States, Singapore, Netherlands, Germany, Hong Kong SAR, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Finland as the top 10. In addition to having diverse national languages, both Switzerland and Singapore are officially multilingual (WEF, 2017).

As for English being the global language, of the top 10 of Fortune's Global 500, only 4 are headquartered in the English-speaking world -- Walmart, Berkshire Hathaway, Apple, and Exxon Mobil (all in the US), with China, the Netherlands, and Germany completing the list (Fortune, 2017). In addition, of the 20 most sustainable companies, only 5 are in English-speaking areas of the world -- 3 in the US, 1 in the UK, and 1 in Australia (Kauflin, 2017).

According to the World Economic Forum, English, Mandarin, and French are the most powerful languages in the world (Chan, 2016), echoing the findings of a 2011 Bloomberg study that found English, Mandarin Chinese, and French to be the most useful languages for international business.

In the EU, over 50% of adults in the workforce report the ability to speak an additional language, and almost all respondents in Luxembourg, Latvia, the Netherlands, Malta, Slovenia, Lithuania, and Sweden say that they can speak at least one additional language (European Commission, 2012).

In addition, (Neeley and Kaplan, 2014) have determined that organizations need to have a language strategy in order to optimize problem-solving and teamwork.

Languages around the World

While it would be tempting to think that English is the most widely spoken mother tongue in the world, English is actually the third, with 372M native speakers, following Chinese and Spanish, with 1.3B and 437M respectively (Ethnologue, 2017).

The World Economic Forum (Chan, 2016) has found English to be the world's most powerful language, followed by Mandarin Chinese, and French, echoing the Bloomberg (2011) ranking of the most useful languages for international business. It is interesting to note that the top 6 in both are the 6 official languages of the UN. (Ronen et al, 2014) describe the global influence of language through global language networks (GLNs), with connectivity and co-spoken languages driving influence, global visibility, and global popularity of cultural content and find English, German, and French to be top three in terms of Wikipedia and book translations. "The structure of these three global language networks (GLNs) is centered on English as a global hub and around a handful of intermediate hub languages, which include Spanish, German, French, Russian, Portuguese, and Chinese." In the US, Spanish, Chinese, and French/French Creole are the most widely spoken languages after English (Ryan, 2013). However, after English and Spanish, German is the most widely spoken language in 16 states, and French in 11 states, with French Creole making 12 (Blatt, 2014). In addition, "French is Europe's second most widely spoken mother tongue with over 77 million speakers, after Germany (around 100 million) but ahead of English (around 61 million). Demographers forecast that France's birth rate will make French the most widely spoken mother tongue in Europe, ousting German, by 2025" (France Diplomatie, 2017).

In the U.S., fewer than 20% of K-12 public school students study a foreign language (Commission, 2017), and only 8.1% study a language other than English at the college and university level (MLA, 2013). In addition, 18 states have no foreign language requirement whatsoever, while many combine foreign languages with other subject areas including technology, the arts, and other areas (ECS, 2017).

In fact, "while the U.S. does not have a national requirement for students to learn a foreign language in school, the typical European pupil must study multiple languages in the classroom before becoming a teen." Moreover, "studying a *second* foreign language for at least one year is compulsory in more than 20 European countries" (Pew, 2015). In Europe, most students begin foreign language learning between the ages of 6 and 8. In 2014, 83.8 of all primary grade students studied at least one foreign language, and 59.7 of all students in the lower secondary grades were studying at least 2 foreign languages. Overall, English, French, and German are the most frequently studied languages (EC, 2017).

English and French are the most commonly studied languages in the world, English with over 1B English language learners around the world, predicted to reach 1.9B by 2020 (Graddol, 2000), and French, with 120 million students, and "an estimated 2 million school pupils in some 50 countries enrolled in bilingual programs." In addition, French is an official language of 29 countries, second only to English (France Diplomatie, 2017). However, "whether or not a language is influential is less about that language itself, and more about how it connects to others," with English the most connected language in the world, followed by French and other languages that have had historical and colonial influence (Armbrecht, 2016).

International organizations approach their language policy differently, depending on their membership, mission, and geographic location. The United Nations, with 192 members, has six official languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. The International Olympic Committee uses English and French as its official languages, plus the local language of the current location of the Games. On the other hand, the European Union, in alignment with its core value of multilingualism, embraces the official languages of its member states as official languages, but uses two or three as its working languages.

Access to Education -- From Multilingual Education to Study Abroad

Language and languages play an important role in access to education at all levels, from earliest childhood to the most advanced levels. Although 9 of the 10 top universities in the world are located in the US and the UK (11 out of the top 12, considering that there are ties for third and tenth) (Bothwell, 2017), the rankings can change based on political and economic conditions, and on funding for higher education. In addition, over 5M students in the world are studying abroad, with changing destinations, and more than half (53%) from Asia, with the largest number from China and India (ICEF, 2015).

However, it is interesting to note that, although over 1.3M international students are studying in OECD countries, with over a quarter (26% in the U.S. and 15% in the UK), it leaves English-language regions accounting for less than half, even if bilingual Canada, with 3%, is included (ICEF, 2016). In terms of US higher education, over 1M international students are studying in the US, with the top countries of origin China, India, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Canada, making knowledge of English essential for these students.

On the other hand, over 300,000 U.S. students are studying abroad, with the UK, Italy, Spain, France, and China the top destinations, making Italian, Spanish, French, and Chinese a key element in US student study abroad success (IIE, 2017). In terms of early childhood, instruction in the mother tongue has been shown to lead to better academic skills, with bilingual and multilingual education more effective than initiating classroom instruction solely in a second language not mastered by the young learner.

In addition to postsecondary/tertiary study abroad, multilingual education -- utilizing the mother tongue initially, transitioning to one or more additional languages, -- offers pedagogical, linguistic, cognitive, social, and cultural benefits (ELAN, 2014). The *ELAN-Afrique* initiative, now in 12 African nations, teaches basic skills initially in the mother tongue before adding a second language. In the US, numerous heritage language and immersion programs provide opportunities for heritage language speakers to both maintain the language of their culture and to develop the linguistic skills necessary to maximize their bilingual advantage in the workplace, and immersion programs offer, in addition, the opportunity for English-speaking students to develop skills in a second language.

Access to Information

In addition to being the hallmark of a free and transparent society, access to information impacts our personal and professional lives, and multilingualism, or knowledge of other languages, is essential in being able to access print, media, and online information from a variety of sources and perspectives – even more critically important in an era characterized either by fake news or by restricted access to information. The world of information – print, media, and online – is multilingual.

The largest newspaper markets are the US, Japan, Germany, China, the UK, India, and Brazil, with only two English-language publications (one U.S., and one India) among the top 10 paid-for dailies in the world (WPT, 2016). The top publishers worldwide by revenue in 2016 included 2 US publishers, 1 UK publisher, 1 Canadian, and 1 UK/Netherlands/US, with the rest of the top 10 including Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Spain (Milliot, 2017). In terms of media, 8 of the top ten media companies are in the US, and the other 2 are in the UK (Forbes, 2017). The top 10 biggest media owners in the world include Bertelsman and Baidu (O'Reilly, 2016).

While the English language may dominate media, English accounts for only 25% of the internet, with Chinese close behind. English and Mandarin Chinese are the most common languages on the internet, with English accounting for only 25.5% of the internet, with Chinese close behind at 20.4%. The top 10 languages account for 77.5% of internet users around the world. China, with 731M online, and India, with 462M, are the countries with the most internet users. (Statista, 2017).

The importance of access to information in our personal and professional lives is reflected in the influence of languages that provide access to the most and best information, driving learning of foreign languages around the world.

Many Languages One World (MLOW)

Many Languages One World (MLOW), sponsored by the UN Academic Impact and ELS Educational Services, is an essay contest and global youth forum culminating with student presentations in the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations. While many students visit the UN, MLOW is unique in that its goal is to highlight the significance of multilingualism in the development of a global citizenship mindset and values and to encourage the continued study of the six official languages of the UN. To that end, student essays – on the topic of the importance of multilingualism in global citizenship – are written in a learned second language, the finalists are interviewed in the language of their essay, and the winners work together – in the language of the winning essay – to develop action plans to implement the principles of the UN Academic Impact in 2014, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their local context in 2015, 2016, and 2017. Multilingualism is a tool to empower teamwork and collaboration in effectively addressing complex global issues.

Noteworthy MLOW inspirations include the camaraderie and teamwork among students from around the world, as well as ongoing friendship demonstrated through social media and local mini reunions. It is interesting to reflect on the multifaceted MLOW skills set that includes writing and public speaking in a learned second language, as well as a thorough grasp of complex global issues accompanied by a global citizenship mindset and values -- and how this could be replicated on local and regional levels, in addition to the high-profile global MLOW event.

Foreign Language Education in a Global World

While MLOW is a wonderful example of the significance of multilingualism in the development of a global citizenship mindset and skills, and as a tool to effectively address complex global issues, it is important to bear in mind that English and French are the most widely studied foreign languages in the world, with over 1B learning English and 120M learning French.

In addition to local educational institutions and programs, foreign language learning is also promoted by governments through a variety of organizations, the best known of which are the Alliance Française and the British Council. In addition, the Goethe-Institut, the Società Dante Alighieri, the Instituto Cervantes, and the Instituto Camões actively promote German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese respectively. More recently, the Confucius Institutes have promoted Chinese language learning. External government support for language learning reflects the importance of language in global influence and soft power.

Foreign Language Learning in a Global World -- Immersion and Heritage Language Programs

Foreign languages may be learned in a classroom, on a campus, in the workplace, among family and friends, or online. They can be learned at any age, and for a wide variety of reasons. Motivation and immersion lead to the best foreign language learning outcomes, with bilingual and immersion programs the most likely pathways to fluency (American Councils, 2017). Important questions to consider include how and when to begin foreign language learning, as well as the role of technology. Motivation to learn another language has long been considered the best predictor of success (Ramage, 1990; Dornyei, 1994; Gardner & Lambert, 1972), and immersion (Fortune, 2012) has long been considered the best method to achieve fluency. Examples of immersion programs include the Middlebury College Language Schools and the Concordia Language Villages at the college and university levels, and noteworthy K-12 programs include the *révolution bilingue*, which in 2017 received increased support and a grant from the French government, which interestingly, pledged to "restore" bilingual education in France (Frenchly, 2017).

Our Multilingual Future -- "The Future of Education Is in Two Languages" (Jaumont, 2017)

In order to build the foreign language skills needed in the 21st century globalized world and workplace, ensuring access to foreign language education is essential -- despite a growing shortage of qualified foreign language teachers caused by the decline in foreign language majors over several decades.

It is interesting to note that on September 20, 2017, the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, as part of his visit to New York to address the UN General Assembly, announced the Dual Language Fund, to support dual language French and English immersion programs in public schools in New York City and across the United States (French Morning, 2017).

Multilingualism and creativity -- our ability to effectively address complex global issues -- are essential communicative, social, professional skills. Multilingual and bilingual education should be fostered and encouraged. Immersion and heritage language programs play an important role, as do teacher training programs and career pathways.

As (Jaumont, 2017) wrote, "the cognitive, emotional, and social advantages of being bilingual, biliterate, and multicultural should simply not be limited to private schools and those who can afford to attend them. Dual-language education is a universal good that ought to be developed everywhere, as it can positively transform a child, a family, a school, a community, and even a country."

Conclusions – A Global Language, or One Language “to Rule Them All?”

As has been demonstrated, there are many influential languages. It is entirely possible that there may not be any one global language, but rather different languages depending on where you are and what you are doing. In fact, as the European Commission President Juncker said in May 2017, "Slowly but surely, English is losing importance in Europe," / l'anglais était, "*lentement mais sûrement, en perte de vitesse en Europe*" (L'Express, 2017).

In our multilingual world, characterized by the diversity that drives innovation, there may not be -- or may never be -- one language "to rule them all" (Tolkien, 1954), because as we all know, "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Acton). While English may seem at times to be the global language, it is necessary to remember that global languages may change depending on political and economic circumstances, and have done so throughout history.

As for the future, French is predicted to be the most widely spoken language in the world, with 750 million speakers by 2050 -- the language of the future (Gobry, 2014), English, Mandarin, and French are the most powerful languages in the world (Chan, 2016), and English, Mandarin, and French are the most useful languages in international business (Bloomberg, 2011). Here in the US alone, the French population has increased by more than 11% from 2015 to 2016 (Buisson, 2017)

In addition, according to the World Economic Forum, in terms of global soft power, "the ability to encourage collaboration and build networks and relationships," France ranks number one (Gray, 2017). France is the most visited country in the world (UNWTO, 2017), with nearly 85M international arrivals in 2016, and Montreal and Paris are the best student cities in 2017 (QS, 2017).

As language, power, and influence often go hand in hand, the stakes are high – for the language of Shakespeare, *la langue de Molière*, and their competitors.

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