

Google Translate Cannot Teach Cultural Appreciation



https://www.pandatree.com/reason_foreign_language

As I sat down in the cafeteria filled with noisy chatter of excited high school students, I plopped my paper box with a greasy slice of pizza onto the table. Exhausted from the 72-minute periods, I bit into the greasy deliciousness and join the conversation. Today, my friends were talking about Spanish class. “I just search every word in WordReference until I get a full sentence,” my friend said. Another friend added that she never actually learns a language in her class, but that it’s okay because Google Translate is here to stay. Instead of shovelling down my pizza, I sat there, silently worrying about a future without multilingualism.

Fewer and fewer higher education institutions require students to learn foreign languages. According to the [National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey from June 2017](#), only about 20 percent of school age children in the U.S. enroll in foreign language classes. [This drops even lower in college](#), where only 7.5 percent of students enroll. Maybe students like my friend skip out on language classes because there is seemingly no more need with new technology such as Google Translate. However, learning different languages involves more than just memorizing new vocabulary. It’s about expanding your cultural diversity, open-mindedness, and empathy for others. In our current polarized society, learning languages is more important than ever.

As much as I like to believe the U.S. is a melting pot, and Americans embrace other cultures, it’s undeniable that cultural barriers exist, and communication is what props them up. [There are over 7,000 languages in the world](#) and even more cultures. A great majority of nationalities and dialects are represented in the U.S.

Though everyone cannot learn every single language, even learning one other language can help a person understand that the world is multicultural. [This was reflected in a](#)

[study done of 193 residents of Israel](#), where those with “high level use of various languages” scored much higher on cultural empathy and open-mindedness. Though I don’t live in Israel, I see this study reflected in my day-to-day American life. Going to an international elementary school, I noticed that my classmates were much more open to my Korean culture than, say, my monolingual teammates in club soccer.

In addition, learning a language bonds an individual to the people who speak the language. It forms a connection of understanding that we often take for granted when we are with people who speak the same language as us. In my sophomore year of high school, I was a math tutor for a group of students who only spoke Spanish. Though I was not a fluent Spanish speaker, my three years practicing the language helped them relax. They also opened up to me about their specific struggles with math, which made it much easier for me to help them. Their comfort with me was entirely thanks to my knowledge of their language.

One might say that with the globalization of English and with the easy access of Google Translate, we can still understand each other without needing to learn different languages. This train of thought ignores the fact that learning a new language means immersing in the culture, and learning about the food and the people. Google Translate can’t teach a language learner that in Korea, they eat spicy fermented cabbage and rice. The English language, being an international language, almost has limited culture directly connected to it.

There is a simple solution to the decline in learning languages. Schools can mandate learning a second and even encourage learning a third language. They can better fund their language departments just as they would their science or math departments. [Professor Neil Kenny, a fellow of the British Academy](#) worries about foreign language learning in English-speaking countries. He says “Anglophone nations need to urgently develop and implement language policies that are explicit, coordinated and comprehensive, making access to the world’s languages a core feature and indispensable part of the education of every student, of every age, beginning with valuing the language(s) learned at home.” Even while discussing this topic with my friends, many of them added that despite the fact that they’ve taken a language for five or six years, they cannot hold a simple conversation. Early exposure in grade school is essential, because according to a [study done by researchers from three Boston based universities](#), there is a steep decline in the ability to learn a new language grammatically after 18. Budgets in language departments need to equal those in science, math because arguably, the benefit of learning a new language outweighs that of learning extensive science and math.

As a multicultural 16-year old, I believe we all have to become global citizens in order to have a better future. We have to help one another in our complicated world. But to do so, we have to understand each other. Learning a new language is the first step.