

AMERICA'S CHRONIC MONOLINGUALISM:

Why We Need to Learn a Second Language

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Hallo, wie geht es euch heute Morgen? ¿Cómo están todos ustedes esta mañana?

Comment allez-vous ce matin? Statistically speaking, I could ask my American audience “how you all are doing this morning” in any foreign language, and only 15% of you would be able to answer. If we were in Europe, however, that number would leap to 56%.¹ One might attribute this deficit to the close borders of European countries as compared to America’s relative geographic isolation. However, 21st century America itself does not consist of only English-speaking people born in America. In fact, 20.8% of Americans do not speak English at home.² Americans need to realize that we have people from many different countries and cultures who speak many different languages *within* our own country and respond accordingly. In order to do unto others as we would have done unto ourselves, we should first acquire a common manner of understanding our neighbors.³ Anaphora: So what if America applied neighbor ethics to language? What if we did unto others as we would have done unto ourselves? What if Americans could interact with, understand, and love people from different cultures who speak different languages? This is my goal: an America where a foreigner can feel welcome, and where more than 15% of us can respond to a simple question in a language other than English.

Unfortunately, though, this goal is not possible considering the current amount of daily foreign language education programs in U.S. public schools, and especially U.S. elementary schools. According to the Education Commission of the States, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin require absolutely no

¹ Eric Owens, “Census Data Shows Record High 61.8 MILLION People In USA Speak Foreign Language In Homes,” *Daily Caller*, October 6, 2014, <http://dailycaller.com/2014/10/06/record-61-8-million-people-in-usa-speak-foreign-language-in-homes/>

² Emily Badger, “Where 60 Million People in the U.S. Don’t Speak English at Home,” *CityLab*, August 6, 2013, <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2013/08/geography-americas-many-languages/6438/>

³ Luke 6:31

foreign language education, or even classes that could substitute a foreign language, in order to graduate high school. Of the remaining 32 states, 30 of them allow for fine arts, technology or computer sciences, career or agriculturally oriented, or speech classes to replace foreign language requirements.⁴ Equally shocking, less than 1 in 5 elementary schools have any foreign language programs.⁵ What better place to start foreign language education than elementary school? Childhood is the time that the brain grows the most, and therefore retains the most new information.

In order to properly understand the necessity of more foreign language education programs for English-speaking students in the United States, we must first become familiar with the history of foreign language education for English-speaking students in the United States. In the 1700s, students who attended private schools were able to choose the languages they wanted to learn alongside the languages their parents wanted them to learn. Language options ranged from Portuguese to Latin to Arabic. Sadly, because private schools were often run out of churches and charged tuition, they excluded students of lower income households.⁶ Ever since the institution of public schooling in the mid-1800s (Massachusetts was the first to require education in 1852 and Mississippi the last in 1917)⁷, the language of the most populous immigrant group has dictated the language studied by the most students.⁸ This means that in the 19th and early 20th century, German was the most studied language, twice as popular as French.

⁴ High School Graduation Requirements: Foreign Language, Education Commission of the States, accessed March 9, 2018, <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquest3NE?rep=HS11>

⁵ Michael Alison Chandler, "From Spanglish To Bilingual: Parents Seek Early Foreign Language Courses, But Most Schools Start Late." *The Washington Post*. October 31, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/parents-want-elementary-pupils-to-learn-foreign-languages---but-where/2014/10/30/2b2f0864-4d7e-11e4-aa5e-7153e466a02d_story.html?utm_term=.f7f824ea15b0

⁶ Reuters, Thomas, "Compulsory Education Laws: Background." Findlaw. <http://education.findlaw.com/education-options/compulsory-education-laws-background.html>.

⁷ Reuters, "Compulsory Education Laws: Background."

⁸ Nancy Vieira Sterniak, "The American Attitude Toward Foreign Language Education From The 1700's To 2006." University of Pittsburgh. April 26. http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/7833/1/NSterniak_etd_092908_final.pdf, 70.

When World War I hit in 1914, however, French was the most studied until Spanish became, and remains, the most popular after 1948. After the 9/11 attack in 2001, many proponents of foreign language education have argued for the study of languages critical to the public safety such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi, and Farsi.

Elementary language education programs thrived in the 17th and 18th centuries in private schools and in the 19th and early 20th centuries in state-run, or public, schools, but are now a rarity in the 21st century. According to the most recent survey on foreign language programs in U.S. schools, only 15% of elementary schools offer any foreign language instruction.⁹ Many blame the decrease in language programs on “budget cuts and a heightened focus on math and reading inspired by the federal No Child Left Behind law.”¹⁰ The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA) requires that all students take a standardized test that determines the funding a school receives.¹¹ The NCLBA has reduced the popularity of foreign language education in public schools because schools attempt to meet the STEM and reading standards of the NCLBA standardized testing.¹²

Because of the innumerable issues surrounding education policy and ESL (English as a Second Language) students in America, I will not be addressing the minute details of practical implementation, regulation, or legislation concerning mandatory foreign language education. In other words, my argument would be considered more theoretical than practical. I will not be discussing the problems of funding programs, training teachers, issuing government grants, and the like. I will, however, be proving that foreign language education for English-speaking

⁹ Chandler, "From Spanglish To Bilingual"

¹⁰ Chandler, "From Spanglish To Bilingual"

¹¹ Reuters, Thomas. "No Child Left Behind and Bilingual Education." Findlaw. Accessed February 23, 2018. <http://education.findlaw.com/curriculum-standards-school-funding/no-child-left-behind-and-bilingual-education.html>.

¹² Reuters, Thomas, "No Child Left Behind"

students in the United States is important and that foreign language education must begin in the elementary years, as they are the most crucial years for foreign language acquisition. Thus, all American elementary schools should institute foreign language education programs for English-speaking students because foreign language education allows us to love others better and because elementary years are the best time to learn a language.

My first point is that foreign language acquisition helps us serve others better. According to Dr. David Smith of Calvin College, learning a second language helps us understand and love other people better. We need to have a willingness to meet people halfway by learning a second language; there are other humans who speak other languages, and we need to make an effort to love and understand them. When discussing the importance of second language acquisition, he mentioned “Neighbor Ethics” which says that we must do to others what we would have them do for us. Americans should realize that the whole world does not revolve around us, that there are other people outside our own language group, and that we need to learn to speak a second language. Learning a foreign language means becoming better people.¹³

When we use Neighbor Ethics as our guiding principle, it becomes obvious that in order to love other people better, we must learn a foreign language. Exposure to new cultures and languages through foreign language instruction encourages empathy and understanding for people of other cultures. When we learn someone else’s language, we show that we truly care about the well-being of other people outside of our own country, let alone within our own borders. To show how behind America is in foreign language education as compared to other countries, allow me to reference Norway’s public education requirements. In Norway, the English language is taught at age six, and a “foreign language” (not including English) is begun

¹³ David Smith, interview by author, March 7, 2018.

at age eleven.¹⁴ Compare this to the 19 states that require no foreign language credits whatsoever and the other 30 states that allow students to opt out of foreign language classes with various Arts and Computer Science classes. If Americans cannot even learn one language other than our own, how are we exemplifying Neighbor Ethics? We expect that tour guides in other countries speak to us in perfect English. We expect that our waiters and waitresses accommodate our inability to learn even basic questions in their language by taking our order in English. In short, we demand that all men and women who will serve us during our travel in *foreign* countries speak to us in *our* language, while we do not lift a finger to learn any foreign language at home. The United States has been a remarkably poor example of Neighbor Ethics for decades now due to our lack of foreign language education requirements in public schools. If we have any desire to treat our neighbors how we would like to be treated, then we must learn foreign languages.

With the number of immigrants that America receives each year, it is not difficult to imagine occasionally encountering someone who does not speak English fluently. However, many more Americans are lacking English skills than you would expect. As I have previously stated, 20.8% of Americans do not speak English at home; a more shocking fact is that 25 million of those residents categorize their English proficiency as less than “very well”.¹⁵ To put it another way, twenty-one out of one hundred Americans experience English as a second language, and seven out of one hundred Americans claim that they could not express themselves nearly as fully in English as in another language. Therefore, elementary foreign language education programs for English-speaking students in the United States would positively benefit 7% of Americans, or 25 million people! If we learn second languages, we will not only develop a more empathetic perspective of others, but we will also be able to better love and understand

¹⁴ David Smith, interview.

¹⁵ Stephen Dinan, “English Isn’t Main Language at Home for 21 Percent in America,” *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2015.

people within our own borders. Because of the frequency of poor English skills in today's America, learning a second language will help Americans reach out to people not only outside of their borders in target countries, but also inside their borders and within their own communities.

To properly ensure that the foreign language education programs are truly teaching us to love others better and not to serve ourselves, the classroom lessons should be centered around a non-consumerist approach to language acquisition. Although no language textbook author would ever directly say this, the truth is that 21st century foreign language textbooks are centered around what the *reader* can get by mastering this foreign language. As David Smith pointed out in our interview, language textbooks all cover material like buying a ticket for the train, asking where the bathroom is, ordering food, and extrapolating information on the locations of various monuments. The books often begin with cartoon characters and a list of description words about the characters such as "fat," "skinny," "short," "tall," "pretty," "ugly," "smart," "dumb." These two observations should cause us to pause. Foreign language education should not focus on how students can get things from other people or how they can verbalize their judgment of someone else's physical attributes. Instead, foreign language education should teach students how to converse with speakers of the foreign language and verbalize recognition of virtues or honorable character traits in others. This way, students can learn more about the people in the target language and, consequently, love them better. One way that teachers can implement this holistic approach into their curriculum is by showing students a picture of a person from the target culture and asking the students for a probable background story of this person: where did they come from?, what do they do?, who do they want to be?. With this non-consumerist approach to

language instruction, students will learn to use language not to get things from other people, but to understand and love other people better.¹⁶

Given that Americans are obligated to learn a second language, I will now prove that foreign language education must begin in elementary school. As has been stated, childhood is the time that the brain grows the most and can therefore take in the most new information. The scientific term for the age range when humans can most easily and efficiently acquire a second language is known as the “critical period.”¹⁷ Many scientists have different opinions on when the critical period begins and ends, and all of them have studies that support their individual, but contradictive, findings. However, the critical period for language learning is generally assumed to abruptly end at puberty. Others say that the critical period ends at only 6 months old, and still others say that the range is from 4 to 10.¹⁸ A more tangible manifestation of the critical period hypothesis is the story of the wild boy of Aveyron as told by Matthew Saxton in his book, *Child Language: Acquisition and Development*. In the year 1800, a young boy between the ages of 10 and 12 emerged from the forest of Aveyron in France; the boy was supposed to have been living in the wild on his own since 1788 and to have never experienced any form of verbal communication. After years of French language instruction, he was found incapable of learning any human language except “Oh, Dieu” (“Oh, God!”) and “lait” (“milk”), demonstrating how critical the “critical period” really is concerning language acquisition.¹⁹ Regardless of the exact end of the critical period, all of these studies show the decrease of language-learning ability after puberty, and thus the importance of the elementary years for acquiring a foreign language.

¹⁶ David Smith, interview.

¹⁷ Ellen Bialystok, *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy, and Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 71-73.

¹⁸ Ellen Bialystok, *Bilingualism in Development*, 71-73.

¹⁹ Matthew Saxton, "The Critical Theory Hypothesis: Now or Never?" in *Child Language: Acquisition and Development* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), 51-77.

The critical period is not the only reason that foreign language education should begin in the elementary years. As Monika Schmid notes in her article “The Best Age to Learn a Second Language,” “Children can spend more time and effort on learning than adults who have many competing demands; the motivation for children to fit in is much higher, and the habits of pronunciation and grammar of their first language are less deeply ingrained and thus easier to overcome. And, of course, all learning gets harder with age.”²⁰ Because of the numerous studies showing that the critical period for language acquisition definitely occurs within the elementary years, and because of children’s heightened ability over adults to learn any new given information, the elementary years are when foreign language education must begin.

Due to the importance of learning a foreign language to be good neighbors, and the criticality of the childhood years for the acquisition of a foreign language, the United States *must* institute foreign language education programs within their elementary schools for English-speaking students in its elementary schools.

Some may argue that immigrants within our country should learn our language, but this statement actually strengthens my argument. An example of a proponent of monolingualism is the retired Senator Walter Dee Huddleston of Kentucky. In her book “*Why Don’t They Learn English?*” *Separating Fact from Fallacy in the U.S. Language Debate*, Lucy Tse quotes Senator Huddleston’s speech on making English the official language of the United States through an amendment to the constitution in 1983. He argues, “For us to consciously make the decision to throw away this stabilizing force [monolingualism] would be seen as foolish and stupid in countries that have paid a high price for not having a universally accepted language.”²¹ The problem with Senator Huddleston’s argument lies in his false assumption that a more bilingual

²⁰ Monika Schmid, “The Best Age to Learn a Second Language,” *Independent*, February 8, 2016.

²¹ Lucy Tse, “*Why Don’t They Learn English?*” *Separating Fact from Fallacy in the U.S. Language Debate* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 2.

population would yield a disconnected or fragmented population. On the contrary, when either ESL students or English-speaking students study a second language, they are reaching out to people of another culture and developing empathy for another people group who speaks a different language. My argument does only concern English-speaking students and not ESL students in the United States, but the argument remains that every American should learn a second language to love others better by learning about their culture and how to communicate with them. Barack Obama himself argued that everyone in America should know at least two languages; he was in no way saying that immigrants do not have to try to learn English since English-speakers will learn their language, but rather that everyone, English-speakers and non-English speakers alike, should learn more than one language.²²

Some may argue that this is not a feasible goal; they will ask what classes will be dropped to make space for the new foreign language classes and where we will get the funding. Concerning which classes will be removed from the elementary school schedule, I believe that each class should incorporate the foreign language into its curriculum instead of taking the place of any one existing class. Bilingual education, where the students are taught certain classes in the target language and certain classes in English, is a lofty goal. However, I do believe that numbers, the alphabet and phonetics, simple scientific terms, and songs could be taught in English as well as the target language in Math, Language Arts, Science, and Music respectively. Even Physical Education and the Arts could include sports and art forms from the target culture.

Although allocating resources for these programs will be difficult, should we not do things just because they are hard? We are morally obligated to learn foreign languages because we are morally obligated to love other people. Should we not provide children with the ability to develop empathy and communication skills toward people who speak a different language than

²² Daniel Ward, "A Trilingual America," *Language* 7, no. 11 (July 2008).

them? Just because it will be difficult to supply funding, teachers, and training for foreign language education programs does not mean that we should not have foreign language education programs. Just because something is hard does not give us an excuse not to do it.

From the foregoing, it is clear that we cannot love our neighbors as ourselves if we cannot converse with our neighbors. Acquiring foreign language is fundamental to that precept and is easier the earlier it is taught and integrated into curricula; we must begin to understand our neighbors by learning their language and culture, and the best time to do that is in the elementary years. Therefore, the best way to accomplish my goal of an America where more than 15% of you can converse with me in a foreign language is to institute foreign language education programs for English-speaking students in all American elementary schools. *Ich hoffe, dass du mich eines Tages verstehen kannst. Espero que algún día me puedas entender. J'espère qu'un jour tu peux me comprendre.* I hope that one day you can understand me. Better yet- I hope that one day your children and their children and the generations after them can understand me.

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Monolingualism is knowing and using just one language. This language will be the speaker's mother tongue. Contrast this with bilingualism, where someone knows. So many languages! Monolingualism is knowing and using just one language. This language will be the speaker's mother tongue. Contrast this with bilingualism, where someone knows and uses 2 languages as mother tongues and also multilingualism where someone has more than 2 languages as their mother tongues. Monoglossism or, more commonly, monolingualism or unilingualism, is the condition of being able to speak only a single language, as opposed to multilingualism. In a different context, "unilingualism" may refer to a language policy which enforces an official or national language over others. Being monolingual or unilingual is also said of a text, dictionary, or conversation written or conducted in only one language, and of an entity in which a single language is either used or officially recognized