

Importance of studying foreign languages in the united states



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With the development of technology, improvement of transportation, and expansion of social media, globalization is occurring faster than ever. Now more than ever, companies are looking to expand internationally, and employers are looking to hire multilingual employees. Because of this, the study of foreign language plays a critical role in the ever-expanding global market. While many other nations, such as Germany and the Netherlands, put strong emphasis on multilingualism, the United States and other English-speaking countries are currently lagging far behind. American society is described as “ linguistically malnourished,” with less than one in ten college students majoring in a foreign language (Cutshall). The general apathetic mindset that the American people cling to is in part due to the widespread, yet false belief that one can simply “ get by” with English as the global language.

It is vital for Americans to change priorities and study foreign languages because of the international competitiveness in the job market, need for national security, and protection of international relations. Parents, teachers, policy makers, and educators need to become aware of the benefits of language acquisition. These benefits include, but are not limited to, an improved understanding of the native language and a broadened horizon in relation to foreign cultures. It has been said that children are best fit for picking up unfamiliar linguistic concepts, which is why focusing on the education of younger generations is so crucial. While some say that foreign language classes, generally not categorized as core classes, are unnecessary, it has been proven that multilingualism is a great asset in this rapidly growing global market.

In order to understand why we as a nation are so utterly monolingual, it is important to look at our history. With Christopher Columbus in 1492, the colonists in the 1600s, and the immigrants who came to America through Ellis Island from 1892 to 1954, we are, from the very beginning of our history as a country, a land of immigrants – a “melting pot.” However, for a country so proud of its immigrant history, it is almost unbelievable that we are so linguistically barren. In 1954, 56 percent of high schools in America did not offer any sort of foreign language program (*The Melting Pot* 346). While many people spoke their native languages in the privacy of their own homes, because there was a need for a unifying language, speaking anything besides English in public was often discouraged. This could help explain American’s general apathy towards second languages. Even today, English is used all over the world as the lingua franca – a common language with which two speakers of different native tongues can converse. It is also often regarded as the business language of the world. The combination of the impact of British colonization and the popularity of American media makes English so widespread that many native speakers deem it unnecessary to learn any another language. However, there is no guarantee that this will forever be the case. Because of our history, it is easy to understand how we could have developed into a monolingual society, but it is also becomes very clear that this apathetic mindset is only a hindrance, which will be later discussed, both economically and socially.

It is not just in America, however, that this apathy towards foreign languages can be seen: “ On September 30, 2013, experts from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia met to discuss strategies for language education.” These educators, researchers, government representatives and <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-studying-foreign-languages-in-the-united-states/>

business leaders kept coming back to one recurring theme: the need for multilingual employees in the global market (Moronoes). These three countries all share some things in common – the advantage that one of the most spoken languages in the world is also the mother tongue, and the disadvantage that foreign language study is not adequate to meet the needs of the country. The fact that English has become the lingua franca could be a cause of English speakers' general apathetic mindset towards second languages. As of now, English is used for business around the world, but in the future, that might not be the case. However, American can only seek to change ourselves for the better.

However, the situation for Americans of accepting to speak another language is not very positive, especially comparing to the Europeans. According to the data from 2010 U. S. Census, only 10 percent of native-born American citizens say they feel comfortable conversing in another language. This is a stark contrast to Europeans. More than half of the European population, 53 percent, feels competent speaking a foreign tongue (Morones). Contrasts can also be seen between school systems in Europe and the United States. For instance, a 2008 article published in the *Züricher Zeitung* debates the pros and cons of kindergarten students in Switzerland, a country with four official languages and innumerable dialects, learning a foreign language so early on (Baigger). Countries on the other side of the world are having discussions about foreign languages being taught as early as kindergarten, while high schools in Ridgewood, New Jersey are having to install programs like Rosetta Stone to combat budget cuts in hopes of keeping their foreign language programs alive (Hu). These two examples show how differently the issue is

being handled on different sides of the globe. Currently, foreign language classes are not seen as core classes in the United States, and despite research suggesting cognitive and developmental benefits of foreign language study, these classes are not getting the emphasis in school that they deserve..

Some say that because of the immense size of the United States, one can travel for thousands of miles and still be surrounded by English. While this is true, this does not eliminate the need for foreign languages in this country. In fact, it almost beckons it. America already has the advantage of being seen as a global leader; however, this may not be the case in the future. Other countries, such as China, are becoming increasingly dominant forces in sectors such as economics, business, politics, and science. For this reason it is important that we do not simply give to our multilingual foreign competition the strong advantage. There is too much at stake, such as national security and global competitiveness to let this issue slip by the wayside. Apart from the business world, the lack of language abilities jeopardizes our ability to participate in diplomatic and military situations, and leaves us at risk. For instance, during World War II, the Army was in need of Americans with knowledge in languages such as German or Japanese. It was shocking how few Americans had competency in these subjects. With the possibility of a war with Japan looming, the urgency for foreign language study became increasingly apparent. In December 1940, only 12 out of 200, 000 Navy sailors were considered competent in Japanese, far fewer than ideal. Additionally, in 1957, the launching of Sputnik was a surprise to most Americans. Arguably, if more Americans were competent in Russian at the time, the news could have been discovered up to five months

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prior (Huebener). Foreign language study in relation to our national security is so important that there is even a sector of the FBI dedicated to it. Since September 11, 2001, the FBI's Language Service Section has recognized the need for foreign language capabilities, especially in widely spoken but less commonly studied languages like Arabic and Chinese (fbi. gov). The ability to speak and understand foreign languages is vital to our national security. In order to preserve our stance as an economic, political, cultural, and military powerhouse we must as a society demand more foreign language education.

Along with affecting our national security, language capabilities are shown to increase job opportunities and provide a competitive advantage in the job market (Nebraska Department of Education 16). More and more companies are looking for job candidates who can be of aid in the expanding global economy. Many career paths call for knowledge in another language. For instance, police officers, especially those working border patrol, can benefit from a decrease in miscommunication due to increased foreign language study.

American put themselves at a disadvantage by not studying languages to the extent of our foreign competitors. People from other countries, such as Switzerland, where foreign language study begins as early as kindergarten, are offering fluency in both English and their native tongue (Baigger). This puts them already a step ahead because they are able to speak to, negotiate with, and form relationships with people from either background. Companies can then theoretically hire one person who speaks both languages, as opposed to hiring two monolingual people. It can be seen that

multilingualism enhances career opportunities. Thus, we need to put more of an emphasis on foreign language lest we Americans want to keep our job opportunities away from foreign, multilingual competition. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, or ACTFL, seeks to express the significance of foreign language study to parents and students across the United States. According to Martha G. Abbott, the executive director of ACTFL, the American people “ have reached a tipping point” (Morones). Now is the time to address this issue, as the expansion of technology and globalization continues. Multilingualism is becoming progressively more valuable in the workplace, and an increasing amount of U. S. companies are looking globally while hiring. Hiring foreign employees or outsourcing jobs is not a solution to the already high unemployment rate in the United States. In order to make American potential employees more attractive and valuable to employers, language skills are key. Recent polls conducted by the ACTFL show that “ the possibility of more career opportunities that comes with speaking another language is a message that resonates.” Now more than ever, foreign language skills are a vital asset to the workplace (Morones). The benefits of foreign language study go beyond job opportunities. Foreign language acquisition also directly affects the brain cognitively and academically. A study performed by Kathryn W. Bamford and Donald T. Mizokawa in 1991 suggests that students who are studying another language display greater creativity in regard to complex problem solving than their monolingual peers (National Council of State Supervisors for Languages). It is also interesting to note that multilingual stroke survivors often do not fully lose their abilities in all languages, due to the fact that different languages are stored in different parts of the brain. Multilingualism also has connections <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-studying-foreign-languages-in-the-united-states/>

with delaying Alzheimer's disease (Morones). Based on these findings alone, it would be almost laughable to not learn another language. Academically, those who study foreign languages tend to have an advantage over their monolingual peers. Studies using tests of intelligence, which include verbal and nonverbal components such as math and critical thinking, show that bilinguals outperform monolingual individuals (Speaking in Tongues). Studying foreign languages is beneficial to people of all ages, but according to research, there seems to be an age where beginning foreign language study is most advantageous. Many scientists believe that linguistic ability is biologically related to age and brain development. This means that younger children can absorb languages easier than post-pubescent children. This is called the "critical period" hypothesis (Vilke). It is important to note that there are a few advantages adults have when it comes to learning languages: they already have an established insight about linguistics, previous experience studying grammar, and advanced intellectual capacity. While these advantages make language learning possible at this stage of life, Mirjana Vilke, the author of *Teaching Foreign Languages to the Very Young: Papers from Seven Countries on Work with 4- to 8-Year-Olds* argues that children still have the upper hand in language acquisition because of their ability to easily master what adults cannot – proper pronunciation. Vilke also references a study conducted in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (present-day Croatia), which looks at 60 adults and 60 children learning English as a second language. The results show that while adults had made commendable strides in vocabulary and structure, they simply could not grasp phonetics.

Therefore, children have higher successes in learning languages because of their ability to grasp vocabulary, structure, and phonetics. Based on this <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-studying-foreign-languages-in-the-united-states/>

evidence, it seems that the citizens of Zurich are on to something... It is advisable that we look to European educational systems as examples; other countries begin foreign language study at an early age when children's minds are most impressionable and open to unfamiliar concepts (Cutshall). University of Texas Arabic professor Mahmoud Al-Batal argues that "the inability to speak a foreign language makes it difficult for Americans to compete globally on a linguistic and cultural level." This means that American's largely monolingual society is essentially self-destructive (Franklin). To keep job opportunities in America, uphold national security as a highest priority, and educate our youth so that they can go on to be knowledgeable and successful global citizens, it is essential that Americans demand more emphasis on foreign language study. If Americans are serious about the education of our children, the future leaders of this country, something must change. There is a need for members of society who can engage with different people from different backgrounds. Americans should strive to no longer be merely content with the reliance on English and no longer be a nation that simply "gets by" with one language. Instead, we need to act. We need to educate our children. We need to continue to be the great country that we are, just an improved, multilingual version.

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