

SCHIFFRES: Kill the language requirement

GAVIN SCHIFFRES FEB 03, 2012

When Yale was founded, students were supposed to converse only in Latin — even in dorms.

Nearly a century later, a member of the Yale Corporation moved that "dead languages" be made elective in favor of courses "more meaningful and useful for contemporary life."

The requirements were relaxed, but it wasn't until 1945 that Yale, reassessing its graduation prerequisites, codified the precursor to today's language requirement. Now, it is time for Yale to evolve once again: get rid of the language requirement.

Before arguing against a specific requirement, though, I should define my litmus test for a legitimate College mandate. Put simply, Yale should require students to do something only if Yale knows that something will be the best use of each student's time. Learning how to write well, for example, is a fair requirement. Beyond its importance to clear thinking, effective writing is one of the few skills every Yale student will use regularly throughout his or her life. The same cannot be said of speaking a foreign language.

The conventional wisdom, stated on the Center for Language Study's website, is that knowledge of a foreign language has become "increasingly important" in our increasingly globalized world.

That sounds nice — like Yale values diversity — but is it actually true? Is knowledge of Zulu or Dutch — two languages one can study to fulfill the language requirement — really "increasingly important" to succeed in the world? Ask yourself: Of all the successful people you know, how many of them speak those, or any foreign language, regularly? Either the administration actually believes what it says and only mainstream, "increasingly important" languages — such as Mandarin, Hindi, or Arabic — should count toward the language requirement, or it tacitly admits not all students need to know another tongue in order to succeed.

Now let me address the conflict with my American-centric attitude. English is the official language of more countries than any other in the world. This claim is not American in nature — it is a fact.

This is not a claim that English is inherently superior to any other language. Nor is this a claim that a language's only value is for communication. But the only use Yale knows every student will have for language is communication, and the only language most students will need is English.

So does this mean the philosopher shouldn't study German or the classicist Latin? Of course not. It means Yale, before making a blanket mandate, ought to consider the biology major forced to spend three terms studying a language he will forget every word of by graduation. Many of us justify that seemingly wasted time by focusing on our enjoyment of the class (read: Yalies like to learn). Moreover, we benefit from it — perhaps now we can read a foreign text or apply to an international internship.

"It wasn't the worst thing ever," we tell ourselves. But was it the best? How many of us continue after three semesters? At Yale, we get only a handful of credits. Who knows what intellectual gems we sacrificed for those 4.5 for language — the secrets of the brain, music composition, Greek mythology? The question is not, "Was studying my language really that bad?" Rather, ask yourself, "Was that the best way I could have spent my time?"

The legitimate counter to this question is, "Yes, the benefits of learning a particular language might be arbitrary, but a second cultural perspective on the nature of society and life is universally invaluable." If this is true — if the language requirement is really to offer students a new lens through which to view the world — then students should be able to fulfill it through culture classes taught in English. Surely reading Jean de La Bruyère's *Caractères* offers students more insight into French culture than merely memorizing the meaning of the word *caractères*. To fully understand a culture, one needs to speak its language, but then again one also needs to study it for more than three semesters. If Yale wants to instill a worldly perspective, it should expose students to a culture's spirit, not its syntax.

Like Yalies who came before us, we are adults paying money for an opportunity to educate ourselves as best we can. With the information explosion, though, there is no longer a finite sum of knowledge that defines an educated individual. We must sacrifice some classes — some education — for others we value more. As students, we have a duty to make the best tradeoffs we can; as customers, we have a right. So is language study a tradeoff that is in all our best interests? Even *The Yale Herald* knows the answer: "Listen long and hard. You simply won't hear [a Yalie say] ... 'This language requirement is enriching.'"

Gavin Schiffres is a freshman in Saybrook College. Contact him at gavin.schiffres@yale.edu.