

You can't read this: Amerika'nın ikinci dil eğitim sorunu.

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Abstract

Even though most high schools in the US require foreign language study in order to graduate, these programs fail as the vast majority of Americans only speak one language. In this paper, the author goes over possible causes for this phenomenon, and presents several possible solutions to the problem.

A brief note on content and formatting

This paper is written using sources freely accessible to the general public, with preference for Open Access journals, journals that are freely available for all to access and use for any purpose. Accuracy may suffer as a result. This is done out of the principle that all knowledge should be free for all humanity to access and exploit, instead of locked behind prohibitively expensive paywalls, a practice holding academia back from independent learning and research, and making topics harder to get into and engage with for outsiders.

This paper is written and formatted using Markdown, so that it is easy for pretty much anyone to read/write in any context, whether it be through print, the internet, or a screen reader. LaTeX applied for the print version.

Length is determined by how long it takes to get the point across instead of an arbitrary page or word count, because I'd rather not waste your time nor mine with needless fluff.

Introduction

Right now, there are over two-hundred million Americans who can only speak English. Half of the approximately 60 million who do speak another language classify themselves as not being able to speak it well.¹ This is especially alarming when you take into account that over 90% of American high schools teach

¹Commission on Language Learning

languages other than English,² and that less than 20% of the adults fluent in another language acquired that language at school.³ This is in comparison to Europe, where over 60% of people aged 25-64 reported knowing a foreign language.⁴

Reasons

Immersion

One of the reasons for this disparity might be the amount of time spent teaching languages in the US compared to Europe. In Europe, most students are required to start taking foreign language classes before they turn seven,⁵ whereas in the US, less than 20% of public elementary schools even offer a second language.⁶

English as a Lingua Franca

The status of English as a global lingua franca has made L1 speakers complacent. Everywhere they look is English, and there's almost certainly an English speaker at arms reach, even if one finds themselves in a region where a different language is more common. And, it's fine. It's perfectly natural that people will seek the path of least resistance when doing anything, and since English works well enough in almost all contexts one can find themselves in, and they already know English, it is the path of least resistance.

The real question is how long this will last. *Lingua franca* originally referred to Mediterranean Lingua Franca, a pidgin language used in and around the Mediterranean Basin from the 11th to 19th centuries for trade.⁷ It would not be inaccurate to call this the original lingua franca, and, as you might have guessed, it is no longer a lingua franca. If *the* lingua franca fell out of use, then how long until English shares the same fate?

There are an estimated 1.132bn⁸ English speakers, which puts English at the top. Barely. Mandarin, the second most spoken language, has approximately 1.116bn⁹ speakers. The catch is that most English speakers are L2 speakers,¹⁰ meaning that they probably do not use the language in day-to-day interactions. Mandarin, on the other hand, with its 900+ million native speakers¹¹ that are constantly using the language daily, coupled with insane government spending on research¹² makes it possible that it will become the lingua franca in academic

²Pufahl and Rhodes

³Commission on Language Learning

⁴("Foreign Language Skills Statistics - Statistics Explained")

⁵EACEA et al.

⁶Pufahl and Rhodes

⁷("Mediterranean Lingua Franca")

⁸("What Are the Top 200 Most Spoken Languages?")

⁹("What Are the Top 200 Most Spoken Languages?")

¹⁰("List of Languages by Total Number of Speakers")

¹¹("List of Languages by Total Number of Speakers")

¹²("China's R&D Spending up 11.8 Per Cent in 2018 to US\$275 Billion")

and business contexts. It probably won't happen soon, but someday English will be dethroned as the lingua franca.

Advent of (accurate) Machine Translation

Artificial intelligence has arrived, and with it, machine translation has entered an incredible trough. Okay, so maybe not perfect yet, but apart from translating “the uncanny valley” to “an incredible trough,” it makes perfect sense.

On November 15, 2016, Google engineers flicked the AI switch,¹³ and with it Google Translate gained as much accuracy overnight as it had over a decade of existence and maintenance.¹⁴

Other researchers have been working on ways to generate accurate translations for languages with a small corpus,¹⁵ achieved human parity in news translation,¹⁶ and even identify and translate humour.¹⁷

But are these systems practical? Well, very soon, machine translation will be used to translate reviews and property descriptions on Booking.com to different languages.¹⁸ The model presents usable results. Not perfect, mind you, with subtleties and rhetorical speech thrown out the window, but it does get the point across, in a syntactically correct way, and even compensates for spelling and punctuation errors.¹⁹

So, why even learn a second language?

By now you must be thinking “I know the de-facto lingua franca, AND machine translation is *almost there*, so why bother with learning a second language?”

Putting aside all the “it’ll make you smarter” or “it’ll make you think differently” claims that are possibly affected by the replication crisis.²⁰

Machines are still not humans

Well, uh, there is a reason AI is being used to translate reviews and property descriptions and not movies and novels, and that is that the text on a site like Booking.com generally gets its point across concisely and without much wordplay or abstraction.²¹

¹³Le and Schuster

¹⁴Lewis-Kraus

¹⁵Gu et al.

¹⁶Hassan et al.

¹⁷Yang et al.

¹⁸Levin et al.

¹⁹Zaenen and Kumar

²⁰Actually, all of the research cited could be affected, and some of it almost certainly *is*. Which is why the interpretation/opinion part of a paper is really the most important part of one, and everything else is just context used to draw the conclusions of the paper.

²¹Zaenen and Kumar

The cost of monolingualism

The lack of Americans proficient in multiple languages hampers multinational businesses, money has to get spent teaching service members foreign languages, and the lack of bilingualism puts monolinguals at a disadvantage in the international job market.²²

According to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, in the UK, “[the] economy is already losing around £50bn a year in lost contracts” and “over 27% of admin and clerical jobs went unfilled because of the languages deficit.”²³

Of course, learning another language also gives you access to not only the people who speak that language, but also to a vast and/or obscure trove of literature that a computer probably cannot translate in a non-literal sense.

So, how *do* we get people learning more languages?

Exploit the popularity of foreign media

As the world gets smaller, more and more people want to learn a second language as a result of their exposure to other cultures.

K-pop (Korean pop) is an international phenomenon whose phenomenon-ness cannot fit into one sentence²⁴, taking the top three slots in the Billboard Social 50.²⁵ International *anime* (Japanese animation) exports make up nearly half of the entire anime market.²⁶

It is much easier to pitch learning Japanese to someone who is already interacting with media in Japanese than it would be to pitch learning Spanish or Latin to them, and vice versa.

Teach similar *leids*

The Internet is the global seestem o interconnectit computer networks that uise the Internet protocol suite (TCP/IP) tae link devices worldwide. It is a network o networks that conseests o private, public, academic, business, an govrenment networks o local tae global scope, linked bi a broad array o electronic, wireless, an optical networkin technologies.

Assuming you are proficient in English, you (probably) understood most of that. Which means that you already have a partial grasp of this language, Scots.

²²Crawford

²³Richardson

²⁴Blake

²⁵(“Social 50”)

²⁶(*Anime Industry Report 2018*)

Not only are languages with a high degree of mutual intelligibility to the L1 language easier to teach, but, in many cases, there is often a large body of people nearby who also speak the language, such as with the UK and Scotland, the languages being English and Scots respectively. This is also the case with many other language pairs, such as Spanish and Portuguese and Turkish and Azerbaijani, among others. This also makes it harder for language attrition²⁷ to affect any of the speaker’s tongues.

Conclusion

What my solutions have in common is that the languages would see some use. Whether it be because of your content preferences or the people around you, there is a very real chance that you will be using the language you learn somewhat actively for a long time to come. Which, in my opinion solves the biggest problem with second language education. That learning it is pointless and seldom works if you won’t be using it at least somewhat actively.

The next step is research, then.

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²⁷(“What Is Language Attrition?”)

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