

Frequently asked questions about Learning Languages

What is the point in studying another language when English is now the international language?

An important part of being literate in the 21st century is to be able to manage communication and knowledge transfer across languages and cultures. To understand the cultures of other people it is essential to understand how their language works. Besides, the process of learning a language can bring many benefits, as outlined in the answer to the next question.

What benefits can come from learning a language?

What use is it anyway?

1. **At the simplest level, learning a language will enable students to communicate with other speakers of that language in written or oral form.**

That sounds simple enough but what does it really mean?

- The communication may be at survival level, enabling you to buy a baguette or a train ticket in another country without embarrassment. This may appear a simple thing but just speak to anyone with a limited amount of another language who has successfully performed such a task and see what pleasure and satisfaction can be derived from it!
- It may take place on a personal level, paving the way for friendships and possibly even romance. Those friendships are not limited to native speakers of the language either but include all others who may have learnt that language as a second or foreign language. There is currently a lot of emphasis on the economic benefits of education but the potential personal benefits should not be forgotten. It is all too easy to underestimate them.
- The communication may also be at professional or business level, enabling the transfer of information and research, facilitating sales, business transactions, joint ventures... Remember that the person who wants to sell you something will make an effort to learn your language but if you have something you want to sell, it is you that needs to make that effort... or lose your competitive edge.
- The communication may also take place on a political level – all embassy staff recognise the importance of using the language of the country they are based in and political ties can only be strengthened when politicians take a step towards others by showing a willingness to speak to them in their language. When John F Kennedy spoke those famous words “Ich bin ein Berliner” he may not have been linguistically correct but the people of Berlin did not dwell on the mistake. They were touched by Kennedy’s (and through him, America’s) goodwill, by the feeling of solidarity - a barrier had been broken down. If one sentence in another language has that power, just imagine what a whole speech might achieve!

2. **Many skills and abilities are developed and/or enhanced by the learning of languages, including:**

- Self-discipline and perseverance
- Problem-solving – in logical and creative ways
- Analytical skills
- Flexibility of mind, the ability to adapt to new situations, to cope with the unexpected
- Understanding of other cultures and people and a greater tolerance of both individual and cultural differences
- Ability to work cooperatively with others
- Listening skills
- Confidence and clarity in oral and written communications
- Research skills

- Literacy skills in English
 - Language-learning skills: the learning of further languages, including computer languages, and of specialised jargon in other subject areas is made easier!
 - Ability to reason, to compare and contrast
 - Memory and retention skills
 - Ability to look at problems and issues from different perspectives
 - A world view and a preparedness for global citizenship
3. **Knowing another language can provide a competitive advantage in the workforce**, especially in companies and organisations with international links. It opens up additional job opportunities both in New Zealand and overseas.
 4. **Studying languages may have benefits for other subject areas too.** US research has shown that students of foreign languages score statistically higher on standardized tests conducted in English. A 1992 study showed that students who averaged four or more years of foreign language study scored higher on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) than those who had studied 4 or more years in any other subject area. In addition, the average mathematics score for students who had taken four or more years of foreign language study was identical to the average score of those who had studied four years of mathematics. These findings are consistent with results in previous years.

Do you have to be bright to learn a language?

- **NO, according to the Education Review Office:** in their report on second language learning, Winter 1994, it is stated that *“Despite the reported student perceptions that only “bright” children are able to learn a second language, all children are born with a learning aptitude, without which they could not be able to speak the dominant language of the country in which they are brought up. It is this same aptitude that allows them to study and learn second and third languages.”*
- **NO, if you live in most other parts of the world**, where learning a second, third or fourth language is taken for granted, whether it be in Africa, where most people speak both a tribal language and a learned official language (often French or English), or in Europe, Canada or Australia, where learning a second language is a matter of course, not an option.
- **NO, if study a language in New Zealand schools which recognise** the sequential nature of language learning and which allocates a reasonable amount of class time to the subject.

BUT

- **YES, if you learn languages in some New Zealand schools.**
The aforementioned ERO report states: *“The study of a second language is not intrinsically difficult; it is the exigencies that schools place on the second language learning and teaching that makes the study difficult. It is the organisation and delivery of the curriculum rather than student ability that perpetuates the perceived elite status of second language learning in schools.”* In some schools language students have as little as one term in Year 9 (Form 3) and a semester in Year 10. It is hardly surprising then that these students find it extremely difficult to achieve high grades in NCEA, when other students at this level have studied the language for three full years...or more! Nor can it be surprising that students in these schools choose to drop the language because they don't think they are any good at it (their results are not as good as in other subjects) even if they really enjoy it.

Won't learning another language interfere with students' progress in English?

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that learning a second language can enhance English literacy.

Some of the ways are listed below:

- By comparing features of their first language with those of another language learners are better able to understand the structure and workings of English.
- Language learners develop and enhance their skills and strategies for decoding and making meaning from words and this transfers to English.
- Learners develop flexibility and competence in dealing with language concepts.
- A second language can provide a new beginning and success for learners who have struggled with English. This has been shown to be beneficial, both in terms of English language development and for the self-esteem of learners.
- Common vocabulary also helps children learn the meaning of new words in English.

In an age of new technologies, multimedia and increasing global connections, it is important for children to know how to manage communication and knowledge transfer across languages and cultures. The study of a language in addition to English supports the development of these skills. Experimental studies have shown that no long-term delay in native English language development occurs in children participating in second language classes, even in full immersion programs

In fact, children enrolled in foreign language programmes score statistically higher on standardised tests conducted in English. A number of reports have demonstrated that children who have learned a second language earn higher SAT scores, particularly on the verbal section of the test. One study showed that by the fifth year of an immersion program, students outperformed all comparison groups and remained high academic achievers throughout their schooling.

I had to learn a language at school and it didn't do me any good. Why should it be any different now?

This statement often assumes that nothing has changed in the world of language teaching over the years since the speaker was at school. Not so. Not only do schools now offer a much wider range of languages than in the past – not just European languages but also Asian and Pacific ones – but language teaching methods have changed considerably over the years. Many people remember learning by the grammar / translation method – lots of painstaking analysis and very little communication.

In today's language classrooms today the emphasis is placed firmly on developing the ability to communicate in the target language – in both speech and writing – at various stages of development. The terms used to describe these stages of development in curriculum documents give a clear picture of the aims of current language teaching:

- Emergent Communication
- Survival Skills
- Social Competence
- Personal Independence

Why is it better for children to learn languages at primary school?

Studies have shown -and experience has supported - that children who learn a language before the onset of adolescence are much more likely to have native-like pronunciation. A number of experts

attribute this proficiency to physiological changes that occur in the maturing brain as a child enters puberty.

Of course, as with any subject, the more years a child can devote to learning a language, the more competent he or she will become.

How can parents help support students' language learning?

Most importantly, parents can help by encouraging a child's interest in the language and in other cultures. Parents can show that they value the ability to speak a second language. Just listening to students showing off their language skill can be a great encouragement. Parents can attend cultural events that feature music, dance, or food from the country or countries where the language is spoken. They may also be able to provide some books, videos, or other materials in the second language. If parents are familiar with the language themselves, they can read to their child.

Parents may also encourage older students to participate in international exchange programmes, which offer valuable opportunities to speak a second language and explore a different culture firsthand. Students normally live with a host family, which provides them with a safe and sheltered environment where they can practise their language skills.

Which is the best language to teach?

No language is intrinsically better than any other – all offer the benefits referred to above. However, factors like the language skills of staff, available support and the wishes of the wider school community can mean that one language is a better choice for an individual school than others might be.

If English is already a second language should a child study a third?

Most people in the world speak more than one language. None of the studies of multilingual acquisition demonstrates negative effects from learning more than two languages. In fact, it seems the more languages you learn the more able you are to learn language. Added to this are the advantages of being able to experience the cultures and ideas of different people through their language.

For students from a non-English-speaking background, learning a third language can be a positive experience because their skills in that language are comparable to the skills of their classmates. It also provides these students with further opportunities to consider English as a language system.

From: www.curriculum.edu.au/nalsas/linking.htm

Being bilingual 'protects brain' ([more](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3794479.stm)) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3794479.stm>

.....

Getting it wrong – more international marketing blunders

Companies who do not pay sufficient attention to languages skills within their organisation, or who choose not to pay for quality translations are taking an enormous risk. Consider the likely success of the following real-life ventures:

- A Canadian importer of Turkish shirts destined for Quebec used a dictionary to help him translate into French the label "Made in Turkey." His final translation: "Fabrique en Dinde." True, "dinde" means "turkey." But it refers to the bird, not to the country, which in French is Turquie.

- Japan's Olfa Corp. sold knives in the United States with the warning "Caution: Blade extremely sharp. Keep out of children."
- One company in Taiwan, trying to sell diet food to expatriates living there, urged consumers to buy its product to add "roughage" to their systems. The instructions claimed that a person should consume enough roughage until "your tool floats." Someone dropped the "s" from "stool."
- How about the Hong Kong dentist who advertised "Teeth extracted by the latest Methodists."
- Or the hotel in notoriously polluted Mexico City that proclaimed: "The manager has personally passed all the water served here."
- General Motors Corp.'s promotion in Belgium for its car that had a "body by Fisher" turned out to be, in the Flemish translation, "corpse by Fisher."

*From "Don't Let Your Global Business Efforts Get Lost in the Translation!"
by Laurel Delaney*

<http://www.marketingprofs.com/2/delany2.asp>

What's in a gesture? – A class activity for International Languages Week

Have participants number their papers from 1 to 10.

Make each gesture and ask them to write down what they think it means.

Participants should also indicate if they think the gesture is considered rude in New Zealand or in the culture of individual students.

When you've done this, use the results (and the answers given) as the basis for a group discuss how body language might influence communication between cultures.

- 1. Beckon with index finger.**
- 2. Point at something in the room.**
- 3. Make a "V" sign.**
- 4. Smile.**
- 5. Sit with sole of feet or shoe showing.**
- 6. Form a circle with fingers to indicate "O.K."**
- 7. Hold up the right "pointer" finger with hand folded and facing away from body.**
- 8. Pass an item to someone with one hand.**
- 9. Wave hand with palm facing outward to greet someone.**
- 10. Nod head up and down to say "Yes."**

What's in a Gesture - Answer Key

1. Beckon with index finger. This means "Come here" in NZ. To use the finger(s) to call someone is insulting in many cultures. Expect a reaction when you beckon to a student from the Middle or Far East; Portugal, Spain, Latin America, Japan, Indonesia and Hong Kong. It is more acceptable to beckon with the palm down, with fingers or whole hand waving.

2. Point at something in the room. It is impolite to point with the index finger in the Middle and Far East. Use an open hand or your thumb (in Indonesia)

3. Make a "V" sign. This means "Victory" in most of Europe when you make this sign with your palm facing away from you. If you face your palm in, the same gesture means "Shove it."

4. Smile. This gesture is universally understood. However, in various cultures there are different reasons for smiling. The Japanese may smile when they are confused or angry. In other parts of Asia, people may smile when they are embarrassed. People in other cultures may not smile at everyone to indicate "Hello." A smile may be reserved for friends.

5. Sit with soles shoes showing. In many cultures this sends a rude message. In Thailand, Japan and France as well as countries of the Middle and Near East showing the soles of the feet demonstrates disrespect. You are exposing the lowest and dirtiest part of your body so this is insulting.

6. Form a circle with fingers to indicate "O.K." Although this means "O.K." in NZ and in many countries around the world, there are some notable exceptions:

- In Brazil and Germany, this gesture is obscene.
- In Japan, this means "money."
- In France, it has the additional meaning of "zero" or "worthless."

7. Hold up the right "pointer" finger with hand folded and facing away from body.

In non-British countries of Europe, it can mean two of something. They start counting with the thumb. In Japan it would mean "four," as the Japanese start counting with the pinkie.

8. Pass an item to someone with one hand. - In Japan this is very rude. Even a very small item such as a pencil must be passed with two hands. In many Middle and Far Eastern countries it is rude to pass something with your left hand, which is considered "unclean."

9. Wave hand with the palm facing outward to greet someone. In Europe, waving the hand back and forth can mean "No." To wave "good-bye," raise the palm outward and wag the fingers in unison. This is also a serious insult in Nigeria if the hand is too close to another person's face.

10. Nod head up and down to say "Yes." In Bulgaria and Greece, this gesture means "No."

Adapted from a resource by Judie Haynes, 2002