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July 27, 2009

The Real Reasons to Support Language Study

By Mauro F. Guillén



Pep Montserrat for The Chronicle

In an era of dwindling budgets, universities have identified language programs as an area for possible cuts. Languages with few students are being framed as luxuries that cannot be afforded during a time of scarcity. The target is easy: Language instruction is delivered by nontenured faculty members to a much greater extent than most other subjects are. Some universities have even announced that entire language departments might be eliminated as a way to, euphemistically, realign resource allocation with emerging priorities. There is a fundamental misunderstanding of the role that language learning should play in undergraduate and graduate curricula, which could seriously imperil the ability of the university to educate the students of the 21st century.

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The conventional wisdom among university administrators is that languages are helpful only as tools to achieve an end, such as being able to live, work, or do research in countries where operating in English is not an option. My casual conversations with parents of students and with officials of external sources of support, including government agencies and foundations, reveal a similarly limited view. This stance is as shortsighted as it is widespread among the people who make key decisions about resource allocation across disciplines and programs, and among those who pay for our students' education.

For starters, research indicates that effective language instruction must be culturally grounded. Acquiring a language involves learning the culture or cultures intimately associated with it. Although business students, for example, can operate in English in a large number of countries, a deeper understanding of the cultures there would enhance their performance as employees or entrepreneurs. Interactions and negotiations in English may be possible, but there is nothing like knowing the local language to become aware of the nuances and the sensitivities involved in everyday life or work situations.

We also know from research and experience that acquiring another language makes students better problem solvers, unleashing their ability to identify problems, enriching the ways in which they search and process information, and making them aware of issues and perspectives that they would otherwise ignore. I have often observed that students with exposure to two or more languages and cultures are more creative in their thinking, especially when it comes to tackling complex problems that do not have clear solutions.

Learners of languages, by exposing themselves to other cultures and institutional arrangements, are more likely to see differences of opinion and conflicts by approaching a problem from

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perspectives that incorporate the values and norms of others as well as their own. Knowledge of other languages also fosters tolerance and mutual understanding. Language learning is thus much more than becoming operational in an environment different than one's own. It is a powerful way of appreciating and respecting the diversity of the world.

Another common misconception about the study of languages is that globalization has reduced the market value of most of them while increasing that of English, the lingua franca of business, science, and technology. According to that logic, students would be wise to invest their time and energy in other subjects once they have mastered spoken and written English. While it is true that major multinational companies use English at their most important meetings, I continue to come across case-based evidence indicating that if you work for a German, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, or Brazilian company, you'd better speak the language of the home country, or you will be at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding the subtleties of decision-making and advancing your career. English proficiency may have become a necessary qualification for employment at most multinational organizations, but it is certainly not sufficient to pursue a successful professional career in an international context. The argument that the market value of the English language is increasing relative to the value of other languages, if pushed to its logical extreme, would present native English speakers with a false choice between allocating their energies to learning another language and focusing on other academic subjects.

Many universities have lost touch with an evolving reality in the international business world. Some undergraduate and graduate business programs claim to offer an international education, in some cases involving short study trips. But few integrate a rigorous course of study in languages with standard business subjects. At the graduate level, we have convinced ourselves that a one- or two-week trip to meet business leaders in some country can be a substitute for the deep study of at least one foreign language and culture. We are fooling ourselves if we believe that a global management education consists of short study trips instead of serious language instruction.

Students who are serious about engaging in a demanding activity, whether learning to speak a language or play a musical instrument, are more motivated to learn other subjects. The language learner is undaunted by the difficulty of the task and eager to benefit from the discipline that language instruction offers. I teach sociology and management courses to undergraduate and graduate students. Those who have knowledge of languages other than English tend to perform better.

By undermining the importance of learning other languages, we are losing an opportunity to educate our students to be better citizens of the world, and failing to provide them with the tools and mind-set they need to understand and solve complex problems. Learning a language exercises the mind and enriches the spirit. It is a fundamentally humbling process by which students learn that their culture and way of expressing it are relative, not absolute. That perspective makes them more open to other points of view, and more likely to avoid one-size-fits-all solutions to the problems of the world.

Mauro F. Guillén is director of the Joseph H. Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Comments

dnewton137 - July 27, 2009 at 11:48 am

As a scientist and academic administrator who has functioned reasonably well in the international environment, mostly but not entirely in English, I respond to Professor Guillen's essay with a heartfelt AMEN!!! Don Langenberg

12094478 - July 27, 2009 at 01:32 pm

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Strong language programs, aside from teaching an intellectually rewarding subject matter in the classroom, often encourage students to study abroad. Certainly, this endeavor does as much to broaden student horizons as any other, if not more. We are talking about the "university" curriculum, aren't we? Aside from that, I've found that majors in foreign languages--especially in Spanish and French--often find jobs immediately upon graduation as high school teachers, or go on to be accepted at first-rate graduate programs. Several students in recent years got their first jobs at large newspapers translating stories for their paper's website. Thanks for the great article, Professor Guillen! Daniel Nappo

jdelap - July 27, 2009 at 02:31 pm

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Very nicely put!

fcslchron - July 28, 2009 at 09:40 am

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Ah, the benefits of learning foreign languages. The world becomes a more flexible place, where all is not black and white, where it is not only OK for things to be different, but where one learns to see that the difference has a beautiful logic in the context of another culture. Then there is the joy of discovering a beautiful word or turn of phrase, or a concept expressed so neatly in a way one's native language does not and cannot. I'll leave you with an example: The Basque word for butterfly is *pinpilinpauxa* (PEEN pee leen PAU sha). How beautiful is that!

yorklibrary - July 28, 2009 at 10:12 am

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Another career goal increasingly popular among students is health professions - where speaking another language is an invaluable skill and one which certainly opens doors to jobs that monolingual graduates will not be qualified for. If ever there was a context where nuanced understanding of a language was essential, health care is it.

weizhang2009 - July 28, 2009 at 10:16 am

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I cannot agree more, although I have always been a slower language learner. Being a Chinese speaker, I truly appreciated the subtle difference in the cultures when I started learning English.

bekka_alice - July 28, 2009 at 01:48 pm

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Well written and to the point. As someone with a childhood foundation in Japanese, adult work with Japanese speakers is much more straightforward for me than for some of my compatriots without this basis, because I recognize many cultural assumptions buried in the communications, whether it is a point of hesitation based on the need for common agreement or a situation where a participant's overwhelming feeling of personal responsibility can be eased by the right saying. I do also love the different ideas in different languages, which help to open our eyes to a wider world, whether it is aware (ah-wah-reh), the piercing feeling of knowing something is at its moment of perfection and in the next it will begin to fade, or kanji characters, where one dragon is the character for dragon, but three together is the character for "dragons moving." I love that there is a character, pronounced Rei, which means "the sound of jewels." It is clear in the language that it is a culture of sensitivity to exquisite points of feeling, which helps to understand that small things, whether tone and presentation or apology and tact, matter a great deal.

renprof - July 28, 2009 at 04:51 pm

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I could not agree more. Language studies usually involve some element of culture studies as

well: it's important for students to learn that thinking in Italian is not exactly the same as thinking in English. Also, it's useful. I will not quickly forget the grammar lesson I learned in Rome: that's "il fa freddo" (it's cold outside) is not the same as "e freddo" (it's cold. . . because the radiator is busted.)

vakunta - July 28, 2009 at 05:28 pm

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I think Professor Mauro F. Guillén has hit the nail on the head! We cannot continue to consign second-language education to a second fiddle position. Monolingualism is anathema in the 21st century. In order to give our students the tools and wherewithal to stay afloat and be able to weather the tide of global competitiveness, we must be open to linguistic plurality. This is no time for cultural myopia! Let our paranoia for language learning not be transformed into lingusite phobia. DR PETER VAKUNTA UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON USA

psychout - July 28, 2009 at 05:30 pm

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There are now people in the world who know me only through my French. How different I must seem. How great is that!

awildaolson - July 28, 2009 at 05:38 pm

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Wonderful article. We have to agree that learning a foreign language and culture is powerful in many ways. It is an essential component of "education." As Nelson Mandela one time said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." Just imagine the potential of speaking other languages and understanding well other cultures.

jziegelmayer - July 29, 2009 at 04:16 pm

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What's more, I believe that in learning the grammar of a second language, a student comes to better understand English grammar. Many (if not most) of our students could benefit from this!

charliemarlow - July 31, 2009 at 05:53 pm

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So American...how about learning another language in order to open up to us the riches of other cultures, to improve our knowledge and understanding of other parts of the world. to allow us to engage directly thoughts from very different perspectives that may enhance or challenge our own? It's not always about money, power, control.

gavinmoodie - July 31, 2009 at 11:52 pm

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Yes, we are all in furious agreement about the cultural, cognitive and aesthetic benefits of having a second language. Now let us return to a little realism and the manager's dilemma: how many subjects with tiny enrolments can a college afford to support? Sure, closing a subject would close off the opportunity for enrichment enjoyed by the few students who choose it, but is it better to keep the unpopular subject by reducing funding for and thus degrading the educational experience in the more popular subjects or even risking the viability of the whole college?

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