

Which Language Should I Study and Why?

Or, What's the "Most Important" Language?

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World-language teachers are often in the position of advising students and their parents as to what world language the student should study. We know that motivations for studying a given language are multiple: family heritage, past travel, acquaintance with speakers of a given language, and so forth, all influence students' choices. But we are sometimes asked a good question: "What is the most important language for my child to study?"

We have grown used to hearing languages "ranked" according to the number of native speakers of those languages worldwide. A billion native speakers of Chinese, 300 million native speakers of Spanish, 130 million native speakers of French, etc.

But even if we are satisfied that such statistics are reliable (the variation in these estimates is remarkable), as language professionals we know that the answer to the "most important language" question is much more complex. And that's leaving out the personal and local factors that create "importance" for a given student.

We can easily find articles, blogs, and other internet sources that purport to decide which are the "most important" or "most influential" languages. As always, it's crucial to take the source's credibility and neutrality into account.

For instance, a translation service will want to use their rankings to direct readers to its services—which may not include all languages—and a layperson who has traveled the world may have lovely photos but less-reliable sources of information on languages. So, we need to prioritize sources that document their research and that let us know upfront what their criteria are.

On what do we base our judgment of "importance" as it influences a decision as to which language to study? Certainly how many people use the language as native speakers, but also how many use the language as a second language, the role of the language in worldwide business, the economic importance of the countries where the language is spoken, and the cultural influence of countries where the language is spoken are among the important elements. How much internet use happens in the language? How widespread is use of the language around the world?

Several articles address the complicated issue of trying to determine which languages are "most important" or "most influential" or "most useful." Their

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judgments are, of course, always subjective to some extent, but these articles do take into account a number of factors, and not just the number of speakers or even just the economic importance of countries where these languages are spoken.

A useful set of criteria was laid out in an article entitled "Top Languages: The World's 10 Most Influential Languages" by George Weber. It appeared in the December 1997 issue of Language Today, was reprinted in the AATF National Bulletin (Vol. 24, No. 3), and is available online at https://www.frenchteachers.org/bulletin/articles/promote/advocacy/useful/toplang_uages.pdf and at <http://www.andaman.org/BOOK/reprints/weber/rep-weber.htm>.

Weber created a formula that used six criteria to judge the worldwide significance of each language. These criteria are:

- 1) Number of primary speakers;
- 2) Number of secondary speakers;
- 3) Number and population of countries using the language;
- 4) Number of major areas of human activity in which the language is important;
- 5) Economic power of countries using the language; and
- 6) Socio-literary prestige of the language.

His results had English as by far the most influential, with 37 points. French was second at 23 points; Spanish was third at 20; Russian was fourth at 16. The article contains much more information than this simple ranking, and provides a rationale for each of the criteria.

It's important to note that the research for this article was done several decades ago; the world has certainly changed since then, but the criteria he uses to judge language "importance" are still worth considering, though results might be different today.

An article by Dominic Ambrose comes at the issue from the point of view of a native speaker of English. Though the article dates from the mid-2000s, the criteria he uses to judge what is "most useful" are—like those of Weber described above—worth considering.

Ambrose bases his conclusions on three criteria in measuring the "most useful" second languages.

The first is demographics, which he describes as "opportunity to use the language actively: the number of native and second language speakers, and the chances of communicating with them in this language."

The second criterion is personal impact, defined as how this language study will "increase the learner's own sophistication regarding languages."

The third criterion is business factors, regarding how this language will "open new business and commercial opportunities."

Languages are ranked and assigned points within each category: In "demographics," at the time Ambrose was writing, Spanish was first and French second; in "personal impact," French was first and Spanish second; in "economic impact," French was first and Spanish second. Thus, his final ranking has French as the most useful language for an English speaker to learn.

Stephen Brockmann of the Department of Modern Languages at Carnegie Mellon University published, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, an opinion piece entitled "The Study of Foreign Languages Should Not Be a Zero-Sum Game" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 March, 2009: A33.) It is also available on the French Advocacy Resource Bank.

Brockmann does not rank languages, but rather looks at the portrait of world-language education in the United States in the light of globalization and its pressures. He points to a trend in which colleges and universities eliminate programs in European languages in order to add programs in Asian languages. Brockmann argues that universities "need to get away from either/or thinking" and states American college students "should study both European and Asian languages." He goes on to support the continued study of European languages, making three major points. First, "studying [European languages] is crucial to understanding the world as it exists today, which has been largely formed by Europe." Second, he points out that "the cultures of Europe and the culture of the United States have a mutual affinity." And finally, "we should not underestimate the importance of ethnic heritage for individual language learners."

To understand the place of French in the world, the principal source for reliable information is the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*, which regularly publishes a report on the place of the French language in the world. To learn how many French speakers there are in the world, the position of French in cyberspace, or how many students of French there are worldwide—among other statistics—this is the place to go. Their statistics are regularly updated.

<http://observatoire.francophonie.org/>

And of course, additional sources of statistics about French speakers, about the economic presence of French-language entities like Quebec or France, and French-language cultural expression, can be found in the French Advocacy Resource Bank.

If language teachers acquaint themselves with the ideas expressed in these articles and the statistics they locate in the sources mentioned, they may find that they are more confident in advising their students and students' parents who are asking what language a student should study. And they will find arguments that help them to explain that the study of French remains both important and useful in the twenty-first century.

In the end, teachers should adopt a “both-and” set of arguments to help students decide if they should study French. Why?

First, students' motivation to learn French varies widely! It goes from “I want to study a different language than the one my sister studies” to “I like French fashion” to “Victor Wembayana is cool” to “I like to listen to French popular music” to “I'd like to work in France someday,” and more. And second, beyond this personal motivation is parents' concern that students' classes should set them up for career success.

So, teachers would do well to highlight both the intangible factors that push student interest and the economic and cultural importance of French. Ideally, classroom experiences will leverage and confirm both kinds of motivations, the practical and the emotional.