

Only English Spoken

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When the young François-Marie Arouet was a student at the Jesuit *collège* Louis-le-Grand in 18th-century Paris, he spent many of his classroom hours studying Latin, along with a little ancient Greek. Had he ventured over to the nearby Collège Royal, today the Collège de France, he could have also taken lessons in Hebrew, Arabic, or Syriac. During a subsequent two-year stay in England, Arouet made it a priority to learn English; he would later pick up Italian. Upon his return, he published the *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (subsequently renamed the *Lettres philosophiques*), a founding text of the French Enlightenment, which established its author's reputation as the *philosophe* called Voltaire.



As any foreign language instructor knows well, the study of languages alone does not a genius make. But it is easy to forget today the central place that language instruction once occupied in humanist curricula. Tradition is an insufficient argument for the continuation of past practices, yet at a time when foreign language requirements are embarrassingly [minimal](#), and enrollment in foreign language courses (with the exception of Arabic and Chinese) are [largely below](#) their 1960-80's levels, the critical importance of knowing more than one language cannot be stressed enough – particularly as the recession has led some universities to further reduce their language requirements, substitute [classroom instruction with online courses](#), or even to [close some language departments](#) entirely.

Not wishing to be overly alarmist, I would nonetheless submit that the very future of liberal education depends on our students' ability to become proficient in more than one language. Monolingual students will struggle to achieve the critical distance that foreign languages provide from their culture, history, language, and even their own thoughts.

The arguments for studying languages are legion. Many have noted the lasting importance of speaking more than just English for business ventures and other [international professions](#). There are geopolitical reasons to study languages, as well: if we can't speak Arabic, Russian, Urdu, or Chinese, we have little chance of [engaging](#) effectively with large segments of the world. And if English has become the lingua franca of science, this is far from being the case in the humanities or social sciences. By reading only scholarship in a single language, students (and dare I say some faculty?) are missing out on a wide array of arguments and experience. Hence, the grudging recognition that foreign language requirements must be more strenuously [enforced](#) for graduate students in Anglophone humanities departments.

Most of these arguments emphasize the utilitarian advantages of foreign language acquisition, stressing the “cultural skills” and “linguistic proficiency” that it conveys. In most cases, however, such intellectual strengths do not translate as directly into professional or civic achievements as, say, writing composition or American history. Sadly, one of the reasons so many articles — present company included — continue to be written in defense of foreign language instruction is that it is an uphill battle: as a recent study by the American Council on Education [found](#), “fewer than one in five” American universities and colleges have “a foreign-language requirement for all undergraduates.” At my own institution, Stanford University, students are only required to fulfill one year of instruction: Rosemary Feal, executive director of the MLA, recently [told](#) the *Chronicle* that this is “like taking

one year of piano lessons or math. It's just not enough to give you all the immersion that you would need to get some lasting and significant benefit."

In an ideal world, of course, students would learn a foreign language well *before* they arrived at college, back in elementary school, when their minds were [still wired](#) for language processing. There is admittedly something remedial about obliging undergraduates to learn a foreign language. But then again, in an ideal world we wouldn't need to teach them composition skills, either, yet we recognize that their high school training is often sub par in this domain. While it is debatable exactly how much language instruction is needed to acquire "some lasting and significant benefit" — and the amount of time will vary from language to language — it is generally accepted that at the very least four semesters of study are necessary to acquire [intermediate-level proficiency](#) in a cognate language (as opposed to, say, a non-Western language).

"Proficiency," here, is a bit of a misnomer, since [professional language programs](#) require the equivalent of 10 semesters (720 hours) to obtain high-level language proficiency. After two years of language study, by contrast, students are merely expected to understand "short routine telephone conversations and some deliberate speech, such as simple announcements and reports over the media," as well as "short, straightforward descriptions of persons, places, and things written for a wide audience," according to [ACTFL guidelines](#). That said, [immersion programs](#), such as those offered at Middlebury College, can speed acquisition up considerably, as can well-designed study abroad programs (unfortunately, as I argue below, such programs rarely fulfill their mission). There are creative ways, in other words, to help students assimilate foreign languages. But token requirements — say, anything less than two years — are simply nowhere near good enough.

If humanists wish to make a stronger case to cash-strapped administrators and credit-hungry science and engineering chairs for the essential importance of foreign language instruction, we need to move beyond purely utilitarian rationales. The vast majority of presidents, provosts, deans, and professors recognize that American higher education is more than professional school, and not simply a matter of transmitting skill-sets to our students. We have a tradition of liberal education in this country that has served our students well, not only with respect to our [civic culture](#), but arguably also to our [economy](#).

Attempts to define the core ambitions of a liberal education, however, often lapse into rather nebulous statements about "[social responsibility](#)." These are good, noble ambitions, to be sure. But what do they really mean? Instead of consulting think-tank reports, we might be better off turning to more classical authorities on the subject. And no author better described the stakes of liberal education than Montaigne. The core value of an education, for Montaigne (as he wrote in "[De l'institution des enfants](#)"), was not so much knowledge, as the ability to question knowledge. We must learn to challenge all authorities, and let nothing be retained "par simple autorité et à crédit" ("merely on authority and credit"). It is far better to remain uncertain than set in one's ways, since "il n'y a que les fols certains et résolus" ("only idiots are convinced and resolute"). Hence, Montaigne's famous conclusion, in fact expressed a propos of the ideal tutor: "plutôt la tête bien faite que bien pleine" ("better a well-molded than a filled mind").

Of course, in order to doubt the well-established beliefs of others one has to acquire a fair amount of knowledge oneself: otherwise, there would be no point of comparison. Reading and studying were

key resources in this regard, but Montaigne placed particular emphasis on travel. Students must go abroad, not simply to see the sights, but to “frotter et limer notre cervelle contre celle d’autrui” (“to rub and sharpen our minds against others”). Only by seeing the world from a different cultural angle can we obtain the critical distance necessary to raise a skeptical eyebrow at hallowed truths back home.

Study abroad has become a linchpin of many undergraduate curricula in the country today: at least one college has even made it [mandatory](#). Yet without sufficient foreign language instruction, such trips are often mere simulacra of cultural exchanges. Many of my students have complained that for some of their classmates, the prime objective of their study-abroad quarter was, “Hey, let’s go hang out in a McDonald’s with other American students – in Paris!” Conversely, when students spend a quarter or year abroad with actual linguistic proficiency, it can be a truly transformative experience. One of my students lived with a *comte* and his family in Paris; she was even invited to his countryside *château*. This was not just a fairytale story, however: she witnessed how obsessed her foster-siblings were with French aristocratic genealogies, to the point of highlighting eligible mates in a book on pedigreed families. No history lesson could have conveyed so much knowledge about the French past, or provided such a contrast with American culture.

Even students who are unable to study abroad gain many of its advantages by learning a foreign language and culture in school. Indeed, language instruction has evolved considerably from the dismal days of “language labs” and repetitive exercises. Today’s language instructors seek to impart cultural, as well as linguistic, proficiency, and introduce essays, movies, magazine articles, and literature into the classroom. With two years of language instruction under their belts, students can readily move on to upper-level culture and literature classes, reading and discussing texts in their original language, or bring their unique perspective to philosophy, political theory, international relations, history, and other humanities fields.

Most importantly, however, such linguistic and cultural proficiency is an antidote to the intellectual provincialism that is often the result of a monolingual education. Some might say that reading works in translation can provide students with a similar cosmopolitan perspective. But in addition to the fact that only a fraction of important texts are translated into English (and only a tiny fraction of scholarly studies), it is an illusion to assume that translations offer an identical experience of other cultures. Many students read *The Stranger* in English, but miss Camus’ jarring use of the oral *passé composé*, rather than the more literary *passé simple*, in the opening pages. The sway of Pushkin’s poetry over Russian speakers only becomes apparent when one hears its incantatory assonances. Experiencing a foreign culture in translation is like watching the movie version of a novel: the basic elements are recognizable, but the richness of detail is gone.

In another founding text of the Enlightenment, Montesquieu staged an encounter between a Parisian, representing the *nec plus ultra* of civility and civilization in the eighteenth century, and a visiting Persian. “How can one possibly be Persian?” asks the Frenchman. His question was a mirror held up to his readers, yet we, too, must look at our reflection. How many of our students can imagine not being American? If they can’t, then we must recognize that we have failed to provide them with a genuine liberal education.

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