

Why Learn Foreign Languages in the Era of Google Translate?

The main reason is that learning a language is **fun**. “Languages are some of the oldest, deepest, uncanniest, most thoughtful human inventions.” (Michael Hofmann, a German poet and translator)

One optimistic estimate is that half the world’s people might speak English by 2050. That leaves billions who will not, and billions of others who remain happier (and more willing to spend money) in their own language.

Learning a foreign language and getting immersed into an entirely **new culture and world view** is the surest way to become an **open-minded**, understanding individual, and that is, I would argue, absolutely priceless.

Music, movies, food, literature, poetry, theatre, fine arts: the list of fabulous things that **culture** brings to our lives is endless.

Learning a foreign language is an incredibly rewarding experience and a serious **confidence booster**. You’ll get to overcome some of your fears and doubts, learn more about yourself, **meet new people**, and perhaps **travel** to places you would’ve never dared to visit before.

Decision Making: A [study from the University of Chicago](#) found that when people speak in a language other than their native tongue, it helps eliminate their tendency toward so-called loss aversion—that is, getting too caught up in the “here and now” to make choices that could profit us further down the road.

Brain Power: As if making better decisions wasn’t enough, a psychologist at York University in Toronto, Ellen Bialystok, has found that students who study foreign languages [tend to score better on standardized tests](#) than their monolingual peers, particularly in the categories of math, reading, and vocabulary.

Get an Outsider’s Perspective about Your Own Culture: Too many people go their entire lives never questioning the universal “truths” they take for granted in their own culture. But step outside this narrow scope. Once your eyes are truly opened to that new perspective, you can never go back.

Some Tips for Learning Foreign Languages

- Let your child choose the language he or she finds attractive. Do not choose the language for its usefulness or international relations’ grounds. Learning should be **fun**. Please consider learning **a live (modern) language** if it is the only language a student will pursue.
- **Start early!** The window of opportunity starts to close by the high school age. For many students, it is impossible to master a difficult language during high school. The earlier, the better.
- Make sure that your child has **an enthusiastic teacher**. The relationships between a student and a foreign language teacher is a key. Online resources (Rosetta Stone,

Duolingo, Anki flash cards) may be helpful, but they are not a stand-alone program. Using a mix of resources is optimal for covering all the bases of language learning.

- **Classes vs. tutoring:** the class moves at the pace of its slowest student. Language learning is a fairly personal process — everyone naturally learns some words or topics more easily than others, and a class is not going to be able to address each student’s personal needs as well. One-on-one tutoring is the most efficient use of time, though it can be expensive. Small classes with equally motivated and hard-working peers can also be effective.
- You don’t need to spend a lot of time daily on a foreign language, but a student should work **daily**, even if only for 10 minutes. A foreign language could be practiced anytime and anywhere: during a car trip, while having breakfast, or watching a TV for fun.
- The more you invite a foreign language into your daily life, the more your brain will consider it something useful and worth caring about. Watch animations and films, listen to the music, eat ethnic food, using every opportunity **to get exposed to a new language**.
- **Having a native speaker or a non-native teacher with near-native fluency** as a teacher or tutor is ideal for developing the correct **pronunciation** at the very beginning. It is extremely difficult to “relearn” the pronunciation! Don’t practice in isolation: get feedback from a native speaker.
- **Practice the language** beyond the classroom and immerse yourself into it: listen to the news, podcasts, and songs, watch animations and films, play foreign computer games, write text messages, read kids’ books, and try to find ways to speak the language.
- You might want to consider **a study abroad program** before college.
- **Competitions:** please encourage your child to participate in competitions and national exams available for each language. Usually, students show their proficiency levels in different skills, and they rarely compete against other students. Even for Russian, not the most common foreign language in US, students could participate in the Olympiad of Spoken Russian and the Russian Essay Contest, as well as online poetry recitation contests after one year of study.
- If your child enjoys studying Spanish or French, consider adding **a second foreign language**. Also, if your child enjoys studying foreign languages, consider adding **a course in linguistics** to your curriculum.

Studying Rare and Critical Languages

“Critical Language” is a term used in the US to designate languages for which there is large demand for language professionals but little supply. The list of which languages considered critical changes over time as economic and political situations change and develop, but often these languages are radically different from English in grammatical structures, sound systems and writing systems. Achieving high-level proficiency in a critical language will boost your

salary, particularly for professionals employed in foreign service, diplomacy, law, science, engineering, and business.

Here are some of the languages considered critical right now: Arabic, Mandarin, Hindi, Urdu, Azerbaijani, Turkish, Bengali, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Punjabi, Persian (Farsi), Urdu, Swahili, Bangla, and Russian. The full list of 60 languages and the State Department-sponsored initiatives and flagship programs is available here: <https://www.nsep.gov/content/critical-languages>

It takes **determination and discipline** to get started with a critical language. Not only do you need to learn a new way of moving your pen, a new way of reading and how to produce foreign sounds from places in your mouth you never knew existed, but you often need to learn to wrap your mind around a different way of thinking, a different worldview.

It is a unique opportunity for a homeschool student to stand out (many of these languages are not taught in high schools in Illinois) and to obtain scholarships. Studying a more difficult language demonstrates maturity, dedication, and hard work.

Study abroad programs for critical languages: <http://www.nsliforyouth.org/> **The National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y)** program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, provides merit-based scholarships for eligible high school students and recent high school graduates to learn less commonly taught languages in summer and academic-year overseas immersion programs. This is a program for Arabic, Mandarin, Turkish, Russian, Persian (Tajiki), Korean, and Hindi.

FREE for undergraduate and graduate students: The Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) Program is a fully-funded overseas language and cultural immersion program for American undergraduate and graduate students: <http://www.clscholarship.org/about>

Here are some interesting and less commonly taught languages to study: **Portuguese, Turkish, Farsi, Russian, Polish** (or any other Slavic language). If Spanish, French, Italian, and German seem very easy for your child to master, please consider a very difficult and unusual language to add: Finnish, Hungarian, Navajo, Cantonese, or Icelandic. If learning a foreign language is a struggle, please consider studying Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, or Italian. You may have to spend a little more time finding the resources and teachers for these languages, but Chicago area is rich in such resources.

Please check the **foreign language difficulty levels**: <http://www.effectivelanguagelearning.com/language-guide/language-difficulty>