

Advice to Students Choosing a Foreign Language **GO ASIAN**

By John F. Copper

Editor's Note: *The following essay, written by a China specialist who is quite interested in promoting the study of other languages, is meant to cause both you and your students to think reflectively about the relative importance of various languages. How and why would you or your students rearrange these rankings?*

Having been a college professor for more than three decades, I have come to expect that one or two students will ask—almost weekly—what language he or she should study in college and why.

First, I tell my students that studying a foreign language requires a considerable commitment of time and energy, and it should be viewed as a lifetime endeavor; thus, the choice deserves careful consideration. Then I tell them that to answer the question, one must ask: What languages are going to be the most important in the future?

Learning a language that is spoken by a large and/or an increasing number of people is obviously preferable. As August Comte once said, “Demographics is destiny.” Thus, I suggest studying a “big language”—meaning one that a lot of people speak.

One should, I suggest, also consider the languages of nations that are large economically and/or are growing and that are advanced in science and technology to be more important. Why is English such an important language when it is smaller in number of speakers than three other languages—Chinese, Hindi and Spanish—and the number of first-language English speakers has declined from 9.8 percent of the world's population after World War II to a bit over 7 percent at the turn of the century? The answer is obvious: English is the language of business and of science.

Finally, the supply and demand for people who are fluent in a foreign language is something to consider. After all, language is a marketable skill, and there is a plethora of speakers of some foreign languages and too few who know others.

The following is my list of the top ten languages, in order of importance, that I recommend students choose, along with a brief explanation for the rankings:

1. Chinese, Mandarin or *putonghua* (the common language), I rank first. It is the national language in China and the language of most Chinese. Over 90 percent of Chinese now speak it (though many also speak a dialect or two), and an even higher percentage will in the future. It is the largest language in the world in number of speakers by a wide margin.

In addition, China is booming economically. “Greater China” (which includes Chinese not just in China), if purchasing power parity (PPP) or buying power is considered, passed the United States a year or two ago to become the world's largest economy. Based on PPP, the People's Republic of China (PRC) alone passed the United States in 2010. It is predicted China will pass the US without using PPP in ten or twenty years, and maybe the US, Europe, and Japan combined in fifty years.

Historically, China was the most advanced country in the world in science and technology. It now seems to be in the process of restoring this position. Recently, most of its exports have been high-tech products. It is increasing its spending on research and development by around 17 percent annually (com-

pared to 2 to 3 percent for the US, Europe, and Japan). China is now registering more patents than any country in the world.

Finally, Chinese is a very useful second language: More and more people are learning Chinese. In many Asian countries, especially those with whom China is their biggest trading partner and most important provider of aid and investment, it is supplanting English as the most popular language to study. After English, Chinese is the second most-important second language worldwide. Second languages make it possible for many more people to communicate.

2. I would argue that Arabic is the number two most valuable language to learn. Modern Arabic is the language spoken in most countries in the Middle East (though not Iran), making it one of

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the top languages in the world by number of speakers—fifth by most accounts. Most Arabic-speaking countries have high birth rates. Arabic is the language of Islam—the fastest-growing religion in the world (including in the US) and is projected to have more followers than any other religion in a decade or so. It is also the language of oil. Finally, few Americans study Arabic. Not surprisingly, there is a dire need for Arabic speakers in the US intelligence agencies.

3. Bahasa, the language spoken in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, I rank third. Indonesia is the fourth-largest nation in the world by population (after China, India, and the US). It is also the world's largest Islamic country; in fact, there are more adherents of Islam in Indonesia than all of the Arab countries combined.

The three countries where Bahasa is spoken are all doing well economically. According to top banking researchers, Indonesia's gross domestic product will exceed that of France, Germany, Italy, and the UK combined by mid-century. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei are all oil-exporting countries. Indonesia and Malaysia control the world's supply of tin and natural rubber. Finally, very few American students study or speak Bahasa.

4. I rank Japanese fourth. It is one of the world's top ten languages by number of speakers. Japan is the third-largest nation in the world in economic size—much more than double France, England, or Italy. Japan ranks number two in foreign exchange, and it is a big provider of investment funds and economic assistance to other countries. Japan is the leader, along with China, of the most economically dynamic part of the world—East Asia. Japan has many cutting-edge industries, including computers, artificial intelligence, optics, electronics, new materials, robotics, and more.

Japanese is also a useful second language. Many people in Korea and Taiwan (both with booming economies) and some in Southeast Asia speak Japanese. Not enough Americans are studying it.

5. Russian I rank fifth. Russia is the largest country in the world by land size and is sixth in population. Russia is blessed with natural resources. It is advanced in science and technology. Russian is a second language spoken by many people in border nations. At the close of the century, Russia's economy contracted, falling from the top ten largest economies, but it is now growing at more than double the pace of the European Union and is likely to continue to do so. Quite a number of Americans studied Russian during the Cold War, but they are aging now. There is, however, a caveat: Russia must reverse the trend of a rapidly declining population.

6. I place Portuguese sixth on my list. It is one of the world's top ten languages, and it is spoken in the largest Latin American country—Brazil. Brazil is the fifth-largest nation in the world in phys-

ical size and in population, and it is doing well economically. It may be the dominant nation in South America in the future. Far fewer Americans study Portuguese than Spanish and several other European languages.

7. I put Spanish seventh. It is the third- or fourth-largest language in the world by number of speakers and is spoken in most of the countries south of the US, in addition, of course, to Spain. Countries where Spanish is spoken have growing populations. There are many Spanish speakers in the US. There is one big drawback to learning Spanish, though: It is the most popular language to study in America and the supply-demand equation is quite unfavorable.

8. The eighth best language to learn, I submit, is Korean. South Korea is one of the economic miracle countries of the past fifty years, and it will no doubt continue to grow. North and South Korea will eventually unify, and that will produce a "combined" Korea that is more important politically, economically, and in other ways. Last but not least, Korean is not a language studied by many American students or students anywhere; thus, the market favors any American who knows Korean.

9. Hindi is number nine of my favorite languages to study. After Mandarin Chinese, it is the second-largest language in the world in terms of the number of speakers. In India, the world's second-most populated nation and a country growing fast economically, a plurality of educated Indians speak Hindi. Still, less than half of the Indian population speaks Hindi as their first language, hence English is used for national, political, and commercial communication.

10. I rank Bengali number ten of the most useful languages to learn. It is a top ten in number of speakers. Bengali is an important language in South Asia.

If I were to suggest alternatives, it would be two dialects of Chinese: Cantonese and Sichuanese, Punjabi (spoken in India), Thai, and Vietnamese. Cantonese is a business language in China and is spoken by many overseas Chinese. More than twice as many people speak Sichuan dialect as there are people in France or England. Both Thailand and Vietnam are mid-sized countries that are growing in population and are doing well economically.

Astonishing to some, I presume, I do not put French or German in my top ten. These two countries' populations are too small and are currently declining. Neither country is growing fast economically, and many people in both nations speak English, especially Germany. Lastly, there are too many American students studying these languages, and consequently, the supply of speakers is much bigger than the demand.

It is obvious that more American students should study an Asian language. This reflects Asia's successful economic growth, its rapid modernization, and the region's rise in political and strategic stature. Asian languages are, of course, more difficult, but the rewards in knowing one or more of them are large. ■

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