Alumni

Ask an Alum: ¿Por qué se debe aprender otro idioma?

Judy Martialay ’68GSAS spent 31 years teaching foreign languages and is the author of *¡Hola! Let’s Learn Spanish* and *Bonjour*! *Let’s Learn French*. Since retiring in 1995, she has become an advocate for language education.

By
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|
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Judy Martialay

What are the benefits of learning a foreign language?

Children who learn another language are more tolerant of cultural differences and more appreciative of diversity. And there are cognitive benefits to being bilingual: the discipline needed to separate two or more languages gives the brain a workout, which, as you age, can help stave off dementia.

What advice would you give to an adult trying to learn a foreign language?

It takes time, patience, and discipline. You need to stick with it, because after the first ten weeks or so, lessons become more difficult. Online programs like Rosetta Stone and Duolingo can have positive results, but it’s important to supplement those lessons with face-to-face conversations. Skype is an effective tool because it allows students to interact directly with people in other countries, in real time.

Does our education system do a sufficient job of promoting foreign-language instruction?

Most students in the US don’t start learning a foreign language until middle or high school, if at all. Language programs rarely take priority in school budgets. This is unfortunate, because biliteracy is such a desirable attribute in today’s job market. Most students learn Spanish, which is useful, but Mandarin, Arabic, Urdu, and Pashto are growing in importance, because they are prevalent in business and international relations. Americans underestimate the value of speaking another language. People think that everybody on earth knows English, but in reality, only 7 percent of foreign speakers have achieved advanced proficiency, and 75 percent of the world neither speaks nor understands English.

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