The Importance of Learning a Second Language

Culture shock. I have yet to experience it, although I have travelled to five countries in my lifetime. Everyone I have encountered in those countries that have an official language other than English is at least bilingual and potentially monolingual. This summer I travelled to Norway and the Netherlands. I had no problem navigating there because of the high percentage of people who spoke English as well as Norwegian and Dutch. I also travelled to Taiwan and interacted with people who spoke Taiwanese, but there was no sense of superiority between those who could and could not speak the language. In the United States, however, many people are disrespectful of people who speak different languages. What does this say about the United States? Our country is falling apart on the notion that speaking English is superior to speaking other languages. Learning to speak more than one language not only improves one’s grammar in their first language but also enhances the understanding of cultures and creates more collaboration and less division between groups of people.

Learning another language helps people understand other cultures, thus fostering an appreciation for cultures besides their own. Currently there are people who believe that America is superior to other countries. For the health and continuity of our nation in the years to come, it is imperative that we move past this mentality and become more welcoming and more appreciative of people from cultures that may be different from what we are used to. One of my friends is nearly fluent in Spanish and frequently speaks to me or talks to herself in Spanish for the sake of learning. People often tell her to speak English. This is not necessarily out of spite towards the language or those who speak it,
but it demonstrates an insecurity that Americans have when they do not understand a language that is being spoken. There’s a way to overcome this—to learn a second language. Empathy is something that many people lack, and learning to speak another language allows for the enhanced understanding of culture to develop into a widespread notion that leads to peace. Americans need to broaden their horizons and learn to embrace the challenge of being less self-centered.

Learning another language helps one improve their first language. The understanding of conjugations and processes in another language allows one to better conceptualize the processes and grammar in their first language. Although I am not fluent in Spanish, I have already noticed how it helps me in my understanding of English. For example, before I learned the subjunctive in Spanish I was essentially unaware that similar rules apply for the subjunctive mood in English. Over the time I was learning the subjunctive in my Spanish class the way I spoke English gradually changed. I now say, “If I were going to do that…” as opposed to “if I was going to do that….” People learn their first language when they are a young child and essentially pick up on the speech of their parents. This allows for various errors because, in all likelihood, the parent isn’t always correct. I have spent my life speaking and writing in a way that “sounds right,” and I am sure that others have, too. Learning a second language allows people to finally understand the processes they have come to disregard or not be aware of.

The fewer monolingual people, the easier it is to foster collaboration and trade between regions. The United States is a major trade entity in the world, but many businesspeople do not speak languages other than English. Trade is very important for the
economy, so it is crucial that Americans learn more languages in order to better collaborate with other businesspeople from foreign countries. Although English is the lingua franca of the world, widespread bilingualism will help with international relations. Numerous bilinguals from a country demonstrates that those people are not self-centered and the whole the country does not believe their language or culture to be superior. Learning other languages also helps with international collaboration as well as trade. The United Nations would not be able to function without multilingual people as its backbone, and many other organizations could benefit from them as well.

Some believe that learning a second language negatively affects culture because it creates a lack of unity within countries and culture, however, this is untrue because bilingualism can widen the reaches of communities and enrich them. A deeper understanding of other cultures is vital to the future of the world, and nationalism can have very negative effects on world peace because of its egocentricity.

Others may state that learning multiple languages is too time consuming to be beneficial. This is false because learning another language can lead to the discovery of how to challenge oneself and the growth of knowledge about another language and culture. A good challenge is a fantastic way to grow emotionally and intellectually.

The more bilingual people in the world, the more likely we are to achieve world peace. Bilingualism fosters trade and collaboration, it breaks down mental barriers between cultures and nationalities, and it enhances one’s ability to understand their own language. As individuals, Americans need to be more welcoming to people who are different from them. Learning another language will help this occur. When a foreigner or
asylum-seeking immigrant enters America with the desire to explore or make a better life for him or herself, we owe it to them to be as welcoming to them as they are to us. We must learn to embrace other cultures and truly become a melting pot of the world.