

# Rethinking the Purpose of Foreign Language Study in the AI Era

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## Abstract:

Globalisation has driven a demand for people who can speak more than one language and, in many countries, has mandated the study of foreign languages at school, especially international lingua francas like English. Migration has also increased the variety of languages spoken in schools, workplaces and wider communities and given rise to support initiatives like EAL and innovative instructional approaches like translanguaging.

At the same time, the number of students voluntarily choosing to study foreign languages formally has dropped dramatically – especially in English-speaking countries – and we are seeing a growing push-back in many parts of the world against diversity and internationalism. Technological developments – specifically smart phones, online digital translation services and AI chatbots – offer us the ability to communicate with ever increasing fluency in a wide array of languages, apparently rendering the study of foreign languages redundant. Furthermore, nearly 40% of the world’s languages are in danger of extinction by the end of the century – primarily as a result of globalisation.

How are we to make sense of these two opposing forces on language, both of which are the result of globalisation? The time has come to rethink the purpose of foreign language study, especially in the light of the AI tools we now have at our disposal.

We have generally assumed that language is all about communication and that the purpose of studying a foreign language is thus to acquire the ability to communicate with speakers of that language. I have studied French, German and Chinese to high levels of proficiency, but today - with the aid of my smart phone - I can speak more fluently in Vietnamese (which I have never studied) than I can in any of those languages. So were the years I spent in foreign language study wasted? If they were not, then clearly their value lies somewhere other than in my ability to communicate.

In my experience, learning foreign languages has taught me less about “them” and more about “me.” Different languages have opened my eyes to alternative ways of looking at my own situation. This has led me to realise that a language is first and foremost a means of thought and only secondarily a means of communication. And it makes a difference which language we use to think with. Recent research into bilingualism has begun to demonstrate how people feel, think and act differently when they operate in different languages.

Human sensory hardware is only able to detect a fraction of the data available in the environment around us. Our brains must then select what we deem to be significant from the data that we have detected, before interpreting that filtered data. This means that we respond not to reality but to our brain’s reconstruction of reality based on its interpretation of the limited data it has selected from the narrow band of data points it has. Our brains use the language or languages we know in order to do all of this, and there is growing evidence to support the theory that our brains come to different conclusions depending on which language or languages they use. We might say that



different languages are different human thought algorithms.

This means that the greatest value of studying foreign languages is not being able to communicate what we already know to others; it is rather in discovering things that we do not know by looking through others' eyes and following others' thought processes. This skill is key to broadening our imaginations, to innovation, to problem-solving and to relationship-building, whatever means we may ultimately use to communicate with others. Anyone can acquire this skill using the AI tools that are available to us. But to do so, we must first be willing to reframe the purpose of language study and of the language programmes we offer.

**Keywords: foreign languages, cross-cultural collaboration, diversity, education**



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