

How to Inspire Students in English to Learn a Foreign Language. A Biased But Concerned Perspective from a College Teacher of German

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Abstract: In this essay I outline the profound significance of studying foreign language, or languages, for the entire field of Humanities, at the risk of preaching to the converted, but even those need to listen at times to the old sermons again. Both literary and cultural studies cannot maintain to pursue their goals in a complex and thorough approach without having the ability to read relevant sources, reference works, and encyclopedias in order to establish the important background and to understand linguistic, philosophical, religious, and art-historical contexts, what simply requires the knowledge of other languages. While advocating the study of foreign languages at large, this paper focuses primarily on the importance of German within the academic context.

Key words: study of foreign languages today; humanities and foreign languages; German language for the study of world literature; reference works in foreign languages.

I would like to belabor a point that continues to be of great importance and needs to be addressed over and over again; however not only to potential students and their parents, but also to many of our colleagues in English and other disciplines, specifically, however, to university administrators. Foreign language teachers always face the same fundamental question from (potential) students, their parents, and also from the bureaucrats: Why should an American, or any other Anglophone person, for instance, study a foreign language? The whole world seems to speak English, and the United States continue to be, despite many problems in economics, finance, global politics, etc., a superpower, at least for the time being. Hence it would seem quite natural and normal to assume that English, as spoken in the U.S., for instance, represents a, if not the, dominant language in this world. As Stephen Brockmann recently confirmed, the increasing process of globalization connecting virtually all economies with one another does not mean the decreased need to learn foreign languages or the necessity to shift the interest in specific foreign languages to others, say, from French to Chinese, or Italian to Arabic.¹ As he rightfully observes, “a country that merely wants to buy goods and services from other countries, thus accumulating a huge trade deficit, may be able to rely on others’ willingness to speak its language. But a country that wants to sell goods and services must learn the languages and cultures of its prospective customers.” Moreover, and here he is certainly speaking to the choir, though it still needs to be underscored once again, the world as it is today was primarily determined by two thousand years of European history, culture, and technology, and much of the North American world is an intrinsic part of that living and thriving tradition.²

Studying a foreign language requires a lot of time commitment, dedication, motivation, and even considerable financial resources, so many people believe that all these efforts are simply not worth it. Case in point: The United States are a country of immigrants, and all immigrants have learned, and continue to

do so, if they want to survive and prosper here, English. There is no apparent need to bother with a second language, irrespective of the requirements by many, if not most, colleges and universities in this country that students graduating from their institution have mastered at least the second-, often the fourth-semester level of proficiency in a foreign language.

By contrast, many representatives of foreign language departments, cultural institutions (*Alliance Française*, *Goethe-Institut*), high school teachers, and others have long made serious efforts to defend the study of a foreign language as an epistemological tool, not to speak of the linguistic, cultural, and political usefulness, to grasp the fundamental political, cultural, religious, and economic structures in this world (Reagan). Yet the many arguments that can be rattled down sound all too familiar by now, and those in the practical field, such as English teachers, might not find the traditional reasoning convincing enough anymore to encourage their students to take the actual step and to begin studying a foreign language.³

Of course, as Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) once said – which is copied on countless T-shirts, posters, and pictures – “Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their of their own” (*Maximen und Reflexionen über Literatur und Ethik*). At first sight this sounds almost trite, but at closer analysis it might be a great springboard to defend the requirement to study a foreign language and to create the necessary motivation to proceed in this endeavor.

I have, of course, vested interests, but these interests carry over into many other disciplines, so my colleagues in English probably share many of the same concerns as I do in German Studies, and a combination of the efforts to educate the young generation using a multi-pronged approach seems to be the only reasonable way to go. To address the question as directly as possible, I will not deal with the significance of German or French, Russian or Chinese for international economics, politics, and sciences – certainly a given for those working in such areas, but not of real relevance for students in an English literature class, for instance. Instead, let us focus on the world of literature first to grasp why learning a foreign language at any level would be helpful, important, indeed necessary.

No writer creates his/her works in a vacuum, and most, if not all, authors of English literature have widely read, including foreign literature, often in the original language. This has a direct impact on the creation of each text because images, phrases, quotes, allusions, individual words, and concepts borrowed from other writers/poets reappear in the new texts. The history of Western literature has to be grasped as a holistic entity, as Ernst Robert Curtius has taught us more than half a century ago, and we would misread or fail to understand properly any text if we don't observe its connections with, references to, and borrowings from earlier or contemporary cultures, hence languages (Weisstein).

Still in the nineteenth century it would have been inconceivable that a university student would not have known Latin and Greek fluently, which only then would have been the basis for a careful study of vernacular literature, as the examples of the American founding fathers indicate who were able to formulate the fundamental documents for the creation of our nation because they were trained in foreign, especially classical, languages and hence had first-hand knowledge of democratic ideas expressed both in antiquity and in modern times in France and elsewhere.

Further, how could one dare to approach critically such giants as Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton without at least a rudimentary knowledge of Italian, French, and Latin, to mention just a few of those languages that those writers must have been familiar with in one or the other way? Attempting to interpret the *Canterbury Tales* or *Paradise Lost* without some understanding what the sources meant for the poets would seem like an act of hubris. The same applies, of course, to German students who would not know basic English, to French students without familiarity with Italian or German, or to Spanish students without a grasp of Italian and German.

Of course, most readers today simply read for entertainment and do not want to question further, but here I would like to take aim at students of English who are supposed to acquire a critical reading skill, hence need to probe deeper into the discourse represented by the texts under investigation. And that discourse consists of many different voices in many different languages, both in the past and in the present. To listen only to one sector, or one filter, in this vast discourse, would severely impoverish us in our efforts to reach a more global perspective regarding the rich tapestry of any of the literary masterpieces, irrespective in whatever language they were written originally.

Not to have command of at least some rudimentary level of one or two foreign languages would be tantamount to blinding oneself to the reality surrounding us, and this both in a virtual, literary, and in a most pragmatic sense. Of course, and without voicing any criticism here, most people do not have any idea of their own blindness because they live within a more or less closed, monolingual, system, normally simply by default. But one of the major tasks of literature consists of opening the window toward other realities, other people, other cultures, hence other ideas and concepts, other values, ethics, and even other morality. Learning from others – in our context poets – and enriching one’s own existence constitutes life itself. Those who do no longer do that and only regurgitate everything without aspiring for new shores have virtually stopped breathing, hence living. Naturally, such shores can be as minuscule as enjoying a bird song or some music, and they can be as huge and imposing as philosophical ideas and concepts expressed in a different tongue. At any rate, those shores must be aspired for to address the human component of our existence. And put very simply, at those new shores they normally speak a different language.

On a much more basic level, and at the risk of preaching to the choir, we would also have to remember that English as a language did not develop in isolation; instead it has actually emerged over the last thousand years by adapting to constantly changing conditions, by accommodating to external and internal pressures and influences, and by integrating countless outside phrases and terms. This process continues until today, and will probably never stop because it is the essential instrument of language formation per se. If we read any newspaper or listen to any communication, for instance, we are constantly confronted with foreign terms, whether *a propos*, *grosso modo*, *in flagrante*, *Angst*, *Schadenfreude*, *Rucksack*, *pro bono*, *Zeitgeist*, etc. So, Goethe was right, after all, if we do not understand a foreign language then we also do not understand our own.⁴

In a recent discussion about ethical issues it occurred to me that the German word “Mundraub” has no English equivalent and would have to be adopted as such in order to deal with the underlying phenomenon: some impoverished person’s desperate act to steal food for survival, which the courts would not regard as a real criminal act. Other powerful words would be *mundtot* or *wortgewaltig*, two words that allow us to examine critically how revolutions are made, how dictatorships establish themselves, and for which there are really good English words.

It goes without saying that no one would expect our students to acquire perfect foreign language skills at the level of native-speakers – though this could be a long-term goal for some gifted individuals – especially not for that task of comprehending the etymology of the words that we speak. However, pronunciation, spelling, even the grammatically correct use of our words depend on the understanding of their roots and the process of their adaptation into English. Most students would at first reject this approach to their own language, discarding it as an irrelevant philological method of no help for their current practice of speaking.

Nevertheless, American-English is going through a rapid change today, perhaps even more so than in the past, picking up many new phrases from abroad and integrating them into our vocabulary.⁵ Those who do not know how to pronounce those sophisticated expressions will soon be an embarrassment, and English teachers really need to drive this point home for their students as poignantly as possible. The influx

of Mexican Spanish, or Spanglish,⁶ for that matter, seems to be, *horribile dictu*, very normal, almost acceptable, particularly in the border regions of the southern part of the U.S., but when French or German terms pop up—and they do increasingly⁷ (even satirically, such as in the phrase “pardon my French”)—should we then not be able to meet that challenge? And would not schools be the location where these tasks can and should be dealt with?

Simply sending our students abroad without any preparation and assuming that this will take care of the general need to engender knowledge of a foreign language and culture, as the president of Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, had arranged in 2001, against the wisdom of the entire community of foreign language teachers, seems to be the least advisable and contrary to all pedagogical principles (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/02/21/language>).

Increasingly every type of knowledge presented on the world wide web is available in a vast variety of languages, while English as the dominant language in that virtual reality has lost much ground and might hold by now only a 60% majority of websites, or less. By the same token, perhaps not so surprisingly, German book publishers are close to holding the world record; after all, book printing was invented in Germany by Johann Gutenberg (ca. 1450), and the Frankfurt book fair continues to be the biggest and most important in the world. Many of the best reference works, encyclopedias, and lexicons are published in German, and students are simply not in a good position if they have no access to them because of a lack of foreign language skills.

The interpretation of any art work, music piece, or literary text requires a comprehensive approach, considering aspects such as religion, history, mythology, philology, rhetoric, etc. In many literary texts one can find references to artists, musical performances, religious practices, rhetorical features, or philosophical concepts. There are, of course, good lexicons and encyclopedias on many different topics published in English, but many times the most authoritative reference works have been published in other languages and they continue to dominate the field. One remarkable example would be the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (1975-) which provides arguably the best and most comprehensive information concerning world narrative literature, including—which explains the title—fairy tales, extending from antiquity to the present, and then also the vast scope of world literature. Anyone interested in motifs, literary topics, themes, *Stoffe*, genres, stereotypical figures, narrative traditions etc. will find the most comprehensive and detailed coverage here, but all articles are written in German.

Any good reference library both in a high school and especially at the university contains a plethora of significant works about the widest range of information necessary for the full understanding of a literary text, but many times specialized information can only be found in encyclopedias published in a foreign language. A short sample list would be: Bénézit, *Dictionnaire des peintres, sculpteurs...*, 1999-; *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (1977-); *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (1937-1995; also available in a more condensed English translation, but by far not a match with the original work); *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* (1954-1956); *Kindlers Neues Literaturlexikon* (1988-1992); *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* (1992-); or, perhaps most dramatically, *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1949-1998), maybe even superior to *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1928, and many times thereafter).

Students coming from high schools across the country would be poorly prepared to handle the demands of college courses if they are not empowered to utilize these most valuable reference works published in a variety of foreign languages (reality check: mostly they are not!). The history of English literature, for instance, cannot be fully understood without the integration and consideration of the essential sources or contemporary texts that address the same and similar issues, all of them participants in a larger discourse. Thomas Dekker's *Old Fortunatus* (1599), for instance, proves to be more or less a direct translation from the German *Fortunatus* (1509); much of early nineteenth-century British and American literature was

deeply influenced by German Romantic writers, and this list can easily be extended far and wide pertaining to literature in many different languages. It might be unlikely that high school students will ever read Dekker's play, but it serves well to illustrate how important it would be to have at least a reading knowledge of another language to understand the sources behind the English literary texts, hence to comprehend how the English play came about and ultimately differed from its source.

Those who oppose the study of foreign languages normally also oppose the study of foreign cultures, and the underlying reasons might be the fear that a familiarity with them tends to empower the users, or readers, more than seems to be welcome in certain circles. But the principles of education are predicated on this idea of empowerment of young people to handle the demands of this world in preparation for the future, and this also very much by way of looking into past and present literature, both written in English and in the vast spectrum of world languages.

One thing remains for sure: those who live in one language only are caught in an isolated world, which, on the surface at least, operates more or less alright for them. In reality, however, and that is one of the key messages from studying literature both in the native tongue and in a foreign language, the truth of all matters consists in grasping the complexities of all reality, or life. This complexity can only be approached by means of a complexity of tools, and a maximum of language abilities promises to meet that very demand.

We are all frail and limited, and no one will ever be able to return in metaphorical terms to the time before the Tower of Babel or to relive the Pentecostal experience. However, the challenges of the future rest in knowledge, as it always has been, and this knowledge is not simply contained in English-language resources only, never has been, and never will be. All foreign language teachers know that, but some of the arguments that I have tried to develop here might not be at their finger tips when they are challenged by administrators, parents, or students as to why foreign languages are really important.

The relevance of French or German for literary studies is probably self-evident, but most people forget the larger context of the humanities, and here, suddenly, at least the reading ability of one of the major European languages aside from English proves to be absolutely fundamental and critical. We only need to visit any reference room in a major university library to discover that still today a vast majority of the most important reference works in religion, art history, social and economic history, anthropology, folklore, music, architecture, and legal history have been and continue to be published in foreign languages.⁸ After all, we live in a global village, and despite the constant death of languages worldwide, the linguistic challenges for most of our students do not go away at a

¹ Stephen Brockmann, 2009, Volume 55, Issue 26, Page A33;

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i26/26a03301.htm>; last accessed on March 29, 2009.

² See Huntington; for the heavy debate resulting from his only seemingly Eurocentric viewpoint, see Metzinger; cf. also Müller.

³ http://www.geocities.com/wilr_neuhaus/toptenlist2.html;

<http://eagle.stillwater.k12.mn.us/~stows/Deutsch/Why%20Should%20Students%20learn.htm>;

<http://www.goethe.de/ins/us/pro/german4U.pdf> (all last accessed on March 29, 2009).

⁴ Though outdated today in some respects, see the still seminal study by Baugh, 1935.

⁵ <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0001619.html>;

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Lists_of_English_words_of_foreign_origin (both last accessed on March 29, 2009).

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanglish> (last accessed on March 29, 2009).

⁷ <http://germanenglishwords.com/>; <http://www.daube.ch/opinions/sprache06.html> (both last accessed on March 29, 2009). Online there are many more lists for German words in modern English.

⁸ See my introductory article, Classen, 2010.

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