

COMMENTARY

Learn a Language, but Not a Human One

Fluency in coding is a more useful skill than French, Spanish or Russian.

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By Andy Kessler

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Donald Trump, whose wife speaks five languages, just wrapped up a pair of trips to Europe during which he spoke only English. Good for him. If Mr. Trump studied a language in college or high school, as most of us were required to, it was a complete waste of his time. I took five years of French and can't even talk to a French poodle.

Maybe there's a better way for students to spend their time. Last month Apple CEO Tim Cook urged the president: "Coding should be a requirement in every public school." I propose we do a swap.

Why do American schools still require foreign languages? Translating at the United Nations is not a growth industry. In the 1960s and '70s everyone suggested studying German, as most scientific papers were in that language. Or at least that's what they told me. In the '80s it was Japanese, since they ruled manufacturing and would soon rule computers. In the '90s a fountain of wealth was supposed to spout from post-Communist Moscow, so we all needed to learn Russian. Now parents elbow each other getting their children into immersive Mandarin programs starting in kindergarten.

Don't they know that the Tower of Babel has been torn down? On your average smartphone, apps like Google Translate can do real-time voice translation. No one ever has to say worthless phrases like *la plume de ma tante* anymore. The app Waygo lets you point your phone at signs in Chinese, Japanese or Korean and get translations in

English. Sometime in the next few years you'll be able to buy a Bluetooth-based universal translator for your ear.

Yet students still need to take at least two years of foreign-language classes in high school to attend most four-year colleges. Three if they want to impress the admissions officer. Four if they're masochists. Then they need to show language competency to graduate most liberal-arts programs. We tried to get my son out of a college language requirement. He pointed to his computer skills and argued that the internet is in English. (It's true. As of March, 51.6% of websites were in English. Just 2% were Chinese.) We lost the argument. He took Japanese and has fun ordering sushi.

It's not as if learning another language comes with a big payday. In 2002 the Federal Reserve and Harvard put out a study showing those who speak a foreign language earn 2% more than those who don't.

High schools tend to follow colleges' lead, but maybe that's beginning to change. I read through all 50 states' language requirements and only one requires either two years of a foreign language or two years of "computer technology approved for college admission requirements." Wow. Is that California? No. New York? No. Would you believe Oklahoma? South Dakota and Maryland also have flexible language skill laws. Foolishly, the Common Core state standards are silent on coding.

The U.S. is falling behind. In 2014 England made computing a part of its national primary curriculum. Estonia had already started coding in its schools as early as first grade. The Netherlands, Belgium and Finland also have national programs.

Maybe the U.S. can start the ball rolling by requiring colleges and high schools to allow computer languages to count as foreign languages. A handful of high schools already teach the Java computer language using a free tool called BlueJ. Nonprofit Code.org exposes students to a visual programming language called Blockly. To compete in this dog-eat-dog world, America should offer Python and Ruby on Rails instead of French and Spanish.

Knowledge is good. Great literature reshuffles the mind. Tough trigonometry problems provide puzzles for the brain. Yet there is no better challenge than writing code that teaches a machine to do exactly what you want. Some will respond, "So you want us to do vocational education?" As if computer programming is akin to auto shop and plumbing. Sorry, that's a *faux* argument. Even I remember the French word for bogus.

Let's face it, the world is headed toward one language anyway. The American-based Germanic-named Uber was *originato* at the Le Web conference in Paris. In Shanghai, I've seen ads on trains and storefronts signs that read "Learn Wall Street English."

Mr. Cook is right to want more coders, though a tad self-serving as Apple basically sells software wrapped in glass and metal. Same with Code.org, supported by Google and Microsoft . But every company requires coders. Even the formerly blue-collar job of operating machine tools now requires expertise in programming to control them. This will be increasingly true in workerless retail, doctorless medicine and even teacherless education. Time to modernize the dated curriculum—*pronto*.

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