

Give kids an edge, a foreign language

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Perhaps the biggest mistake I've made in life - and I've made some doozies - was in not learning a foreign language.

It's an error I hope today's school kids don't repeat.

I fiddled around with high school French and Russian. In college, there was a feeble attempt at more Russian and at German, which was rather tough to handle since it had a 7:30 a.m. lab. (It just seemed better to snuggle under the covers in Hillcrest dorm than brave the winter winds over the Iowa River in Iowa City to go conjugate words.) Foreign languages seemed irrelevant.

What a fool I was.

That mistake came home earlier this month on a vacation trip to Paris. There, an American tourist can sit in a cafe and overhear young - and old - conversing in a variety of languages. I watched a store clerk and a hotel doorman move flawlessly from French to English to German to Spanish, depending on the language needs of their customers. The Asian cab driver chatting in some Oriental language on his cell phone loaded bags in English and collected fares in French.

In the future, multilingual people like these will inherit the earth. Americans are in an uncompetitive position.

Multilingual people will be more valuable to employers because they can couple whatever they do with fluency in another language. And it isn't just white-collar CEOs. You understand that lesson as you watch a landscape architect explain a project in Spanish to the workers installing the project. A landscape architect can earn a decent living but is also a little more valuable to an employer when able to guide a staff, too. Go onto any construction site today, and you hear a lot of Spanish. The English-speaking construction worker who has some fluency in that language will be in a better position to become a foreman or a union leader someday.

In Iowa, state education officials are reviewing school graduation requirements and academic standards. Regardless of whether those standards are set by a state agency or local officials, they need to include some competencies in foreign languages. The earlier in school, the better.

We also need more opportunities for adults to learn other languages and cultures. My little vacation convinced me of that. Not only can it make our personal lives more varied, interesting and profitable, it may help cultures minimize conflict and get along.

And, when we can't do that, we'll need better language skills to deal with adversaries. For example, our effort in the war on terrorism is hindered by our lack of competency in Arabic dialects.

It isn't just language fluency. It's also learning something about other peoples so we don't do rude or offensive things. In Paris, it's often easy to spot American tourists. We're the fat, boisterous ones drinking Budweiser and ordering hamburgers - in English - from a bistro waiter.

After watching a group like that, I shook my head and wondered why they even bothered to come visit. After they left, it was instantly quieter, and it was the Frenchmen who were shaking their heads.

Americans no longer have the luxury of such haughty behavior. Thanks to globalization, jobs and technology skills are moving to places like China and India. You can make a pretty good case that the 18th century was the French Century, the 19th was the British one, the 20th was American and the 21st will be the Chinese Century. Faced with Asian and Indian competition, Americans would do well to be less boisterous and more studious.

The single most important force that will shape Iowa - and all the rest of the world - in the 21st century is globalization. (Read Tom Friedman's new book, "The World Is Flat," for the scary details.) One thing we can do to help our children survive and succeed in this new world is to get them all the education we can.

Part of that is fluency in a foreign language.

Au revoir.