

Harley Nefe

Feature 3

Word Count 1276

For some students in the United States, taking language classes are mandatory; often times, it is a requirement in the high school education system; however not every curriculum is the same.

My elementary school in Greensboro used to teach Spanish as an elective course for students in third through fifth grade. However, the school eventually eliminated the Spanish classes.

“We hear it all the time with languages, theater, music and arts programs. Those are always the first things to be cut, and it’s crazy because we have the data to show that when those things are kept in place, those are advantageous for students,” Benjamin Souza said.

Souza teaches a variety of intermediate, upper-level and graduate Spanish and linguistic classes at App State, as he has his doctorate in Spanish. Souza is fluent in English and Spanish, and he has been learning Spanish since he was in high school. Therefore, Souza has been learning Spanish for 28 years.

There is a wide range of benefits to learning another language, Souza said.

“Studies have shown that individuals who speak more than one language are able to show advancements in decision making and thinking through complex problems because they see them in different ways,” Souza said.

Another beneficial component can include learning about other cultures and being aware of the world.

“When you know another language, you view the world in a different way,” Souza said. “The better my Spanish has become, the more access I have into those cultures. Spanish speakers don’t feel like I am such an outsider.”

Souza also mentioned how identities change with proficiencies and how that is a benefit.

“Early on, we don’t feel a whole lot like the speakers of the languages we are learning, but the better we become in the other language, the more we feel like, ‘oh, I’m not so different from them. I’m more like them.’ That changes who we are and how we relate to other people,” Souza said.

Freshman international business major Kevin Mawuntu knows Indonesian as his primary language. Mawuntu began learning English at the age of nine and Spanish when he was 14 years old. He considers himself fluent in all three languages, and is pursuing a minor in Spanish.

“I think students should learn another language because it benefits them in the future,” Mawuntu said. “Languages provide culture and connections.”

When referring to moments when he met other students on campus that speak Indonesian, Mawuntu said, “It’s just pretty cool to speak in another language that is not seen a lot.”

Freshman elementary education major Grace Le knows Vietnamese and English fluently. Vietnamese was her first language, and she started learning English as she began school.

“My dad told me that I would speak Vietnamese to my peers, and they would respond back with English, so I don’t remember it being difficult,” Le said.

Le described knowing a second language as “so useful and helpful.”

Le said she wishes the American school system “would start teaching languages at a young age, and keep it consistent,” while offering a variety of language courses.

“You’ll never know who you are able to meet because you share the same language,” Le said. “You just find that joy when you meet someone and know the same language, besides English.”

Le said she knows many students who have or are taking language courses, but she is not sure how many students continue their studies.

“Learning a language in a classroom is really difficult to impossible,” Souza said. Souza explained that some of the biggest challenges in learning another language he see in his students are that they are in the presence of the language for such a short amount of time on a daily basis.

Another challenge is the age in which students start learning a language, Souza said.

“The later you are in life, the harder it is to learn a language. It’s not just being surrounded by the language but being required to use the language,” Souza said. “Our brains are dealing with languages differently depending on where we are in life,”

The language individuals process for their second language is in a different part of their brain than their native language, Souza said.

Mawuntu said that he finds switching from one language to the other language and changing his thought process to be the most difficult.

“Learning English was a little harder because the sentence structure was so different from Indonesian,” Mawuntu said. “The words do not have similar roots, but when I learned Spanish, it was so much easier because the sentence structure is similar to Indonesian.”

Le said she found learning multiple languages to be easy. She took Spanish classes throughout her high school career.

“Learning another language comes easy because I already know two,” Le said. “There’s some similarities between them.”

Le said the most beneficial skill she has from being bilingual is being able to relate to others “on another level.” She also likes to help others by being able to translate between Vietnamese and English.

Souza also lived in Spain for a portion of his life, and he provided me with insight on the differences in language learning between other countries and the United States.

“There is an emphasis on learning a language,” Souza said. “A lot of countries have a second language as a requirement from grade one.”

Souza also mentioned that other countries tend to have a more communicative methodology toward teaching languages.

“In classrooms here in the United States, you don’t hear a lot of speaking from the students,” Souza said.

There are many reasons and theories behind why the United States does not enforce language learning compared to other countries.

“Globally, English is becoming the language of businesses,” Souza said. “The United States is so big, and because we speak the dominant language in most places of the world, there’s this sense that it would be cool to learn another language, but it’s not a necessity in life.”

Economic movement can be seen as a reason as to why other countries encourage learning other languages, especially English.

When referring to the United States, Souza said, “Most people don’t see an economic advantage to knowing another language. Unless you are in really specific fields where you are

going to be traveling or working in another county, there is not a big need to know another language.”

Souza said other parts of the language divide include prejudice and racism.

“If you view people from other countries as potential threats to your way of life, you’re probably not going to think too highly of the language that they speak or have any motivation to learn what they are speaking,” Souza said.

Souza also said that politics of the country also play a role in language learning.

“We seem to be going down a path of a more nationalistic way of life, and if that’s the case, then that tends to reinforce our sense of Americanism and English centered way of life,” Souza said.

“I don’t see any sort of change in a positive direction for language being in the schools, but that can always change,” Souza said. “The importance for change is only growing.”

Souza said even through the reality of language learning in the American educational system, he hopes that his students improve their knowledge in whatever class it may be.

“I want them to have a positive feeling about the language itself,” Souza said. “It really is a lifelong process, and I am just one tiny piece along the way, and if I can keep them interested and on that path, then I have reached my goal.”