

# Foreign Correspondence

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“Plastics” was the classic, one-word, unsolicited career advice offered to Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*. Fast-forward several decades, and that word today could well be “Mandarin.”

We’re bombarded almost daily with references to the economic rise of China.

- The White House hosts a state dinner for Chinese President Hu Jintao, aka, “America’s banker.”
- Chinese automaker Chang’an Auto has entered the U.S. market and is bringing jobs to suburban Detroit.

There may be no classroom subject more affected by the vagaries of current affairs than the study of foreign language. Choices and offerings are influenced by trends in national security, global economics, and prevailing academic beliefs, says Emily Spinelli, Ph.D., executive director of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese in Walled Lake.

Over time, she says, Latin, the standard for a classical education, gave way to modern European languages during World Wars I and II. Russian became a must-learn during the Cold War. And Japanese, popular in the 1990s thanks to that country’s then-surg-ing economy, has been surpassed by Chinese study, as economic fortunes shift.

Among entering college freshmen taking Advance Placement (AP) exams, Mandarin Chinese is

catching up to German, the College Board reports. Whatever the lingua franca du jour, many educators just urge: learn a language — any language. But that’s been a perennial tough sell in a country comfortably buffered on two sides by oceans and on the third by another primarily English-speaking nation.

There’s no doubt that daily discourse is challenging enough in our native English. Consider the recent tragedy-driven push for kinder, gentler public discussion. Then there’s the film *The King’s Speech*, which highlights the importance — and challenges — of oral communication. Given our struggles to converse in our mother tongue, why complicate things by learning another language — especially when ours is the go-to language of the world?

The reasons are plenty and well documented and timely in Michigan, where the class of 2016 (today’s seventh-graders) will be required to take two years of a “world” language to earn a high-school diploma.

That makes this a ripe time to consider why, what, and how to study a “world” language.

Why study? To participate in international business, to broaden

## MOST-STUDIED LANGUAGES ON U.S. COLLEGE CAMPUSES, FALL 2009:

LANGUAGE	ENROLLMENTS	CHANGE SINCE 2006
1. Spanish	864,986	+ 5.1%
2. French	216,419	+ 4.8%
3. German	96,349	+ 2.2%
4. ASL <small>American Sign Language</small>	91,763	+ 16.4%
5. Italian	80,752	+ 3%
6. Japanese	73,434	+ 10.3%
7. Chinese	60,976	+ 18.2%
8. Arabic	35,083	+ 46.3%
9. Latin	32,606	+ 1.3%
10. Russian	26,883	+ 8.2%
11. Ancient Greek	20,695	- 9.4%
12. Biblical Hebrew	13,807	- 2.4%
13. Portuguese	11,371	+ 10.8%
14. Korean	8,511	+ 19.1%
15. Modern Hebrew	8,245	- 14.2%

Source: [mla.org](http://mla.org)

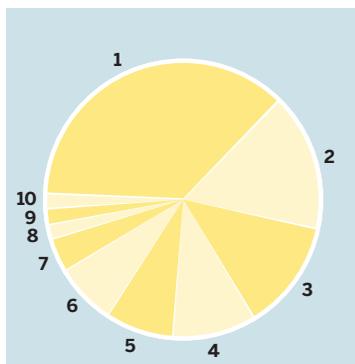
cultural understanding, to travel for pleasure, and to exercise our brains. A second language, proponents and researchers say, boosts conceptual powers.

“Experiments have shown, for example, that foreign-language study increases brain density in the left inferior parietal cortex,” Catherine Porter, former president of the Modern Language Association, wrote last year in a published essay, “English is Not Enough.” She added: “Virtually all ‘brain fitness’ experts include foreign-language study among the activities that may help delay the onset of dementia.”

What to study? In most countries, studying English is a no-brainer. So how should American students, who speak the world’s premier language, decide what to tackle when the options are so vast?

“We’d like to see elementary schools start with any language, and if the students want to switch to Hindi or Farsi in college, that’s good,” says Marty Abbott, Director of Education for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

Jen Weisbrodt, a Spanish teacher at Grosse Pointe North High School in Grosse Pointe Woods, says, “Students need to pick a language they are passionate about. Learning a language is a long process, and without passion it can be a long road.” Some of her Spanish students chose the language, she says, because they thought it was the easiest to learn. Others thought it would help with future employment. What stimulates them, she says, is when they experience the language in a real setting — in Detroit’s Mexicantown, for example. “I love seeing the excite-



EXECUTIVE LANGUAGE TRAINING CLIENT REQUESTS FOR BUSINESS-USE LEARNING:

1. Mandarin: **34%**
2. French: **16%**
3. German: **13%**
4. Spanish: **10%**
5. Portuguese: **9%**
6. Japanese: **8%**
7. Italian: **4%**
8. Hindi: **2%**
9. Arabic: **2%**
10. All other languages: **2%**

Source: [eltlearn.com](http://eltlearn.com)

### > HOW TO ENCOURAGE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE EDUCATION:

- Get a group of like-minded parents and start with the school PTA.
- Find a friend on the school board and ask for a feasibility study.
- Get school-district central-office staff to look at starting a pilot program.
- Consider hiring a nanny who speaks a specific language.
- Take children to the library and check out books in a foreign language.
- Watch a TV program in a foreign language.
- Say to them, ‘I wonder how you say such and such in a foreign language.’
- Remember that any exposure to a foreign language is better than no exposure.

## 2007 SURVEY OF FOREIGN-LANGUAGE STUDENTS:

- If given the option, more students would choose to study Italian than any other foreign language.
- 59 percent of students say they are at least somewhat likely to study two or more foreign languages in high school and college.
- Asian-American students, overall, indicated a very strong desire to study languages that correlated with their ethnic heritage.
- Compared to all other ethnic groups, more African-American students indicated they plan to stop taking foreign-language courses when they meet their high-school graduation requirements.
- 44 percent of students said studying a foreign language has helped them in their other classes.
- 64 percent of students see the study of foreign language as beneficial for travel, recreation, and enjoyment.
- 28 percent of students plan to use a foreign language in the business world.

Source: *actfl.org*

ment in my students' eyes when they return to tell me that they ordered for their family in a restaurant or eavesdropped on a conversation in the next booth," she says.

How to study? A younger start is generally better. And at least four years of study is better than two. But that wisdom isn't reflected in elementary curriculum in typical American schools. "The percentage of elementary and middle schools offering foreign-language instruction decreased significantly from 1997 to 2008," the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) reported in December 2010. "The decline at the elementary level occurred mainly in public elementary schools; the percentage of private elementary schools teaching languages remained about the same," the CAL report found. "The percentage of high schools teaching foreign languages stayed relatively steady at about 91 percent."

Schools that offer the International Baccalaureate (I.B.) degree mandate study of a non-native language.

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"They require four years [because] I.B. uses language fluency, rather than language proficiency, as a measure," says Rebecca Riggs, a Spanish teacher at the International Academy in Bloomfield Hills. "I.B. wants the student to be as close to native speaking as possible."

She says her students' parents see the value of

learning another language — after the fact. "I can't tell you how many parents say, 'I wish I'd kept up with my language,'" Riggs says. "I say, 'study along with them.'" Those parents and other adults often come to the same conclusion when they're confronted with the practical need in their own careers.

"More and more people are doing business with overseas companies and, even if they aren't traveling there, in their conversations they want to show that they're making an effort to speak the language," says Gina Gramatis, director of training and development for Illinois-based ELT (Executive Language Training), which offers instruction to corporate executives and other professionals.

Language-training requests tend to vary by career type, Gramatis says. She offers

this typical breakdown by sector:

Banking and finance: European languages, Russian, and Arabic (the latter mostly because of the boom in Dubai).

Manufacturing: Eastern European, Russian, and Chinese. "There's also been a significant rise in requests for Portuguese

because of things happening in Brazil: The World Cup, the Olympics, and business opportunities due to their growing economy," Gramatis says.

On the whole, she adds, French and German remain strong. They are the two largest markets in Europe, and their economies are quickly recovering. "We don't do a lot with Japanese," she says. "Mandarin is very strong."

ELT's adult students in metro Detroit and elsewhere usually study in their own corporate setting during twice weekly, two-hour sessions for a year. Not surprisingly, Gramatis says, "If people have previously learned a second language, it's much easier to pick up a third."

Yet another reason to start early. ▣

### Number of speakers per language in Michigan:

8,487,401 English	6,545 Gujarathi
246,688 Spanish or Spanish Creole	6,174 Miao, Hmong
75,412 Arabic	4,851 Hungarian
52,366 German	3,461 Armenian
40,372 Polish	3,275 Persian
38,914 French (including Patois, Cajun)	3,274 Hebrew
30,052 Italian	3,218 Portuguese or Portuguese Creole
26,955 Chinese	3,109 Scandinavian languages
13,314 Korean	3,016 Other Native North American languages
11,950 Serbo-Croatian	2,342 Laotian
11,917 Tagalog	1,942 Yiddish
11,776 Vietnamese	1,789 Thai
11,701 Russian	1,567 Mon-Khmer, Cambodian
11,480 Japanese	743 French Creole
11,167 Greek	86 Navajo
9,992 Hindi	Source: <i>mla.org</i>
8,276 African languages	
7,737 Urdu	

### Numbers of Students Taking Advanced Placement (AP) College Board Exams in 2010 in Six Foreign Languages:

<b>NATIONAL</b>	Chinese: 4,832	German: 230
Spanish: 116,904	Japanese: 1,676	Chinese: 67
French: 19,188	<b>MICHIGAN</b>	Latin: 46
Latin: 6,500	Spanish: 1,190	Japanese: 21
German: 4,932	French: 309	

Source: *collegeboard.com*

## > FOREIGN EXCHANGE

Language study and curriculum is a topic that inspires passionate debate, as these comments posted to the *Chronicle on Higher Education* website illustrate:

- "When I hear that we should learn a foreign language, my first question is, 'Which one?' I took a lot of French in high school and college and at that point I could actually converse with French people. Not anymore! And so what if I can't? ... Better to worry about good English skills and writing ability. Now there's something worth worrying about."
- "Asians and Europeans are learning each other's languages and are happy to leave Americans out of the bargaining."

- "Musicians wouldn't get very far if they couldn't read at least some German and Italian, and preferably French, as well. I imagine art historians would probably do well to know Italian at the very least. Archeologists might need to know some Greek or Latin, depending on what region they are studying."
- "I took mathematics, physics, and chemistry in college, and I did not become proficient in those subjects. The purpose of taking a language as a core curriculum requirement is to be introduced to an academic subject unlike any other. The exposure to another culture, however cursory, is also stimulating and instructive. Bright minds are attracted to subjects that allow them to transcend their parochial surroundings or past."