



Which is the most useful language to learn?

A special feature for parents, business people and anyone with an eye on the future.



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Which is the most useful language to learn?

"We are about to embark on a renaissance in languages in schools and beyond."

So said Alan Johnson, the then education secretary, in March 2007. Mr Johnson was responding to the publication of a report¹ by Lord Dearing recommending that language learning become compulsory for all 7-year-old children.

We took part in Lord Dearing's consultation for his report, and we raised a fundamental question: *which* languages should our children be learning in the 21st century?

"Although there are over 6,000 languages spoken in the world," we argued, "just 3 of these - French, German and Spanish - account for 94% of GCSE entries for modern foreign languages. French alone accounts for 59% of GCSE entries, although it is not one of the ten most commonly-spoken mother tongues worldwide. The EU operates in 23 official languages, yet only 9 of these are available as GCSEs. Arabic and Chinese are widely tipped to be two of the four most influential languages over the next fifty years, but - across the whole of the UK in 2004 - there were less than 4,000 GCSE entries for Chinese, and less than 3,000 GCSE entries for Arabic.

"If more children are to become excited about languages, if more individuals are to be enfranchised in the global village, and if UK business is to become more competitive, we believe there needs to be a clear signal that the adventure of learning a foreign language can - and must - extend far beyond the traditional path of French, German and Spanish."

So which *is* the most useful language to learn? In this special feature we present the case for fifteen languages.

We look at the world's top ten most widely-spoken 'mother tongues', from Mandarin and Spanish (ranked first and second) to Japanese and German (ranked ninth and tenth).

We present the case for two 'new EU' languages: Turkish (Turkey is the largest of the three official candidate countries for European Union membership) and Polish (Poland was the largest of the ten new member states that joined the EU in 2004).

We highlight two of the most widely-spoken African languages: Amharic (which uses the historic Ethiopic alphabet) and Swahili (the only African language to have been adopted as an official language by the African Union).

And we look at British Sign Language, which became officially recognized by the UK government in 2003.

Clearly, our list of fifteen languages barely scratches the surface. It is possible to make a powerful argument in favour of *any* language, living or dead. The objective of our list is simply to encourage a debate. If you would like to join in, please send us your thoughts by e-mail to hello@languageiseverything.com.

Chinese Mandarin

國語

Number of speakers (as first language)

873 million²

World ranking

1st

Number of countries where it is official

3 (China, Taiwan, Singapore)

Language family

Sino-Tibetan, Sinitic subgroup³

Alphabet

There are between 40,000 and 50,000 different Chinese characters

How to say "Hello" in Chinese

Ni hao [nee haOW]

Chinese words you already know

tea, typhoon, kowtow

Reasons to learn Chinese

Chinese Mandarin is easily the world's most commonly-spoken mother tongue: it has more first language speakers than Spanish (ranked second), English (third) and Arabic (fourth) combined. There are many other dialects of Chinese, including Cantonese, which is an official language of the special administrative region of Hong Kong.

Our expert says

"Chinese culture is one of the oldest in the world. Learning Chinese helps you understand Chinese culture, literature and history. Also, China will soon become UK's most important export market. UK companies need Chinese speakers." *Yali Quan, Chinese linguist, Language is Everything*

Spanish

Español

Number of speakers (as first language)

322 million

World ranking

2nd

Number of countries where it is official

21 (including Spain, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, Chile)

Language family

Indo-European, Romance subgroup

Alphabet

Roman

How to say "Hello" in Spanish

Hola [OH-lah]

Spanish words you already know

patio, mañana, cargo

Reasons to learn Spanish

Spanish is widely spoken throughout the western hemisphere, from the US states of New Mexico, Texas and California (where more than a third of the population use it as their mother tongue), through Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. It is also spoken in the African countries of Morocco and Equatorial Guinea.

Our expert says

"Business, development and the environment are at the top of the international agenda, and South America is at the forefront of these issues. Spanish is not a difficult language to learn, and it will open doors for your career."

Isolda Montero, Spanish linguist, Language is Everything

English

Number of speakers (as first language)

309 million

World ranking

3rd

Number of countries where it is official

58. The top 10 by number of speakers is:

1. USA
2. UK
3. Canada
4. Australia
5. Ireland
6. South Africa
7. New Zealand
8. Jamaica
9. Trinidad & Tobago
10. Guyana

Language family

Indo-European, Germanic subgroup

Our expert says

"It is estimated that around 1½ billion people use English as a second language, and this number is set to increase rapidly over the next ten years. But the more people speak English, the more important it becomes for English-speakers to learn another language. As David Graddol, a researcher and applied linguist, explains in a recent report for the British Council: 'Monolingual English speakers face a bleak economic future... The competitive advantage which English has historically provided its acquirers (personally, organisationally, and nationally) will ebb away as English becomes a near-universal basic skill. The need to maintain the advantage by moving beyond English will be felt more acutely.'"

Graham Jones, former English teacher and company secretary, Language is Everything

Arabic

العربية

Number of speakers (as first language)

206 million

World ranking

4th

Number of countries where it is official

25 (including Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia)

Language family

Afro-Asiatic, Semitic subgroup

Alphabet

Arabic

How to say "Hello" in Arabic

Al salaam a'alaykum [ahl sah-LAHM ah ah'LAY-koom]

Arabic words you already know

alcohol, giraffe, sofa

Reasons to learn Arabic

Arabic is the official language of a band of countries reaching from Mauritania and Morocco on the Atlantic coast to Oman on the Indian Ocean. Arabic has many dialects, but Modern Standard Arabic is used as a universal language throughout the region. It was adopted as an official language of the United Nations in 1974.

Our expert says

"Learning Arabic - or any other language - is like discovering a new sense. It's like opening a new source of information that enables you to learn more and get a better understanding of people from different cultures and traditions."

Ali Khairiddine, Arabic linguist, Language is Everything

Hindi

हिन्दी

Number of speakers (as first language)

177 million

World ranking

5th

Number of countries where it is official

1 (India)

Language family

Indo-European, Indo-Iranian subgroup

Alphabet

Sanskrit

How to say "Hello" in Hindi

Namasthe [nah-mah-STAY]

Hindi words you already know

cot, shampoo, juggernaut

Reasons to learn Hindi

At least 150 languages are spoken in India, but Hindi is the mother tongue for more than one-third of the population. Hindi is very similar to Urdu, the official language of Pakistan. One of the main differences is that Hindi is written in the Devanagari script, whereas Urdu is written in the Perso-Arabic script.

Our expert says

"India, the largest democracy in the world, is on its way to becoming an economic superpower. Hindi is India's national language, so bilingual skills are becoming increasingly important for businesses. Plus, Hindi is an easy and fun language to learn!"

Anjee Kohli, Hindi linguist, Language is Everything

Portuguese

português

Number of speakers (as first language)
177 million

World ranking
6th

Number of countries where it is official
8 (including Portugal, Brazil, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, East Timor)

Language family
Indo-European, Romance branch

Alphabet
Roman

How to say "Hello" in Portuguese
Bom dia [bohn DEE-ah]

Portuguese words you already know
samba, piranha, China

Reasons to learn Portuguese

Similar but different from Spanish, Portuguese provides access to four continents. The Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries has eight members: Portugal (Europe), Brazil (South America), Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe (Africa) and East Timor (southeast Asia).

Our expert says

"Add samba, carnival and a wonderful natural happiness to your life. Learn how to smile. Learn the melodious Brazilian Portuguese, the language of the people with no doubts about the meaning of life: you are here on Earth to be happy."
Claudio Solano, Brazilian Portuguese linguist, Language is Everything

Bengali

বাংলা

Number of speakers (as first language)
171 million

World ranking
7th

Number of countries where it is official
2 (Bangladesh, India)

Language family
Indo-European, Indo-Iranian subgroup

Alphabet
Bengali

How to say "Hello" in Bengali
Ei je [EYE-jay]

Bengali words you already know
bungalow

Reasons to learn Bengali

Bengali is spoken throughout the Bengal region and within many Bengali communities worldwide. Bengali culture includes such legends as Rabindranath Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, and Satyajit Ray, who won an honorary Oscar in 1991 for his influence on filmmakers worldwide.

Our expert says

"The depth and richness of Bengali is said to be unparalleled. It is descended from one of the world's oldest languages, Sanskrit, and, over time, has become enriched by absorbing many others. Learn Bengali and experience for yourself its uniqueness."
Chinmoy Mondol, Bengali linguist, Language is Everything

Russian

Русский

Number of speakers (as first language)

145 million

World ranking

8th

Number of countries where it is official

2 (Russia, Belarus)

Language family

Indo-European, Slavic subgroup

Alphabet

Cyrillic

How to say "Hello" in Russian

Zdravstvuite [zzDRAST-vet-yah]

Russian words you already know

vodka, tsar, sputnik [which means 'satellite' or 'travelling companion']

Reasons to learn Russian

Spoken Russian is widely regarded as being one of the most beautiful languages in the world. The Cyrillic alphabet appears daunting at first glance, but it is not difficult to learn. Russian literature boasts names such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. And from the G8 to the UN and beyond, Russia plays a crucial role in world affairs.

Our expert says

"Learning a language is like having a key to a magic door. It gives you an insight into other people's culture, behaviour, attitudes and thinking. Life is not about how much you have in the bank, it's about how you communicate and express yourself."

Oleg Pasichnyi, linguist, Slavic languages, Language is Everything

Japanese

日本語

Number of speakers (as first language)

122 million

World ranking

9th

Number of countries where it is official

1 (Japan)

Language family

Independent

Alphabet

There are four: kanji (Chinese characters), hiragana, katakana and romaji (Roman)

How to say "Hello" in Japanese

Konnichiwa [koh-nee-chee-wah]

Japanese words you already know

karaoke, kimono, satsuma

Reasons to learn Japanese

For business people, Japan is the world's second biggest economy and a key trading partner of the UK. For culture vultures, Japan offers everything from ikebana to sumo, from haiku to manga. For travellers, Japan is home to some of the most breathtaking landscapes and cityscapes on the planet.

Our expert says

"One of the great challenges about learning Japanese is that it doesn't have any connection to English. Everything is different: the alphabet, the grammar and the pronunciation. It's a chance to start everything anew!"

Noriko Kimura, Japanese linguist, Language is Everything

German

Deutsch

Number of speakers (as first language)
95 million

World ranking
10th

Number of countries where it is official
6 (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein)

Language family
Indo-European, Germanic subgroup

Alphabet
Roman (plus *ß*, for double *s* in lower case)

How to say "Hello" in German
Guten Tag [GOOT-en tahk]

German words you already know
Hand, Butter, Name

Reasons to learn German

After the enlargements of 2004 and 2007, German has become the most widely-spoken second language in the EU after English. In addition, there are large German-speaking communities in North and South America, as well as in the southern African country of Namibia and the central Asian republic of Kazakhstan.

Our expert says

"Learning the German language opens up many career opportunities. In addition, travelling in German-speaking countries will become much more interesting, as communication builds bridges between different cultures."

Pia Foster, German linguist, Language is Everything

Turkish

Türkçe

Number of speakers (as first language)
51 million

World ranking
19th

Number of countries where it is official
2 (Turkey, Cyprus)

Language family
Altaic, Turkic subgroup

Alphabet
Slightly modified Roman alphabet (with 21 consonants and 8 vowels)

How to say "Hello" in Turkish
Merhaba [MER-ha-ba]

Turkish words you already know
yoghurt, tulip

Reasons to learn Turkish

Turkey is the historic - and current - gateway between East and West. As one of the European Union's three 'candidate countries', the republic may replace Germany as the EU's biggest member state in the next decade. A mainly Muslim country with a vibrant democracy, Turkey is a key player on the global stage.

Our expert says

"There's a growing number of British people living in Turkey, and there's a growing number of Turkish people living in the UK. This means that, if you want to learn Turkish, there is no shortage of teachers, or people to practise with."

Gamze Ustun, Turkish linguist, Language is Everything

Polish

polski

Number of speakers (as first language)

43 million

World ranking

24th

Number of countries where it is official

1 (Poland)

Language family

Indo-European, Slavic subgroup

Alphabet

Roman (without the letters *q*, *v* and *x*)

How to say "Hello" in Polish

Dzien dobry [jajn doh-bray]

Polish words you already know

intelligentsia

Reasons to learn Polish

Located at the heart of Europe, Poland was the largest of the ten new member states that joined the European Union in 2004. Steeped in history and brimming with ambition, the country exemplified the spirit of the 'new Europe'. Economically, politically and culturally, Poland's influence within the EU is set to grow and grow.

Our expert says

"Why learn Polish? Its grammar is complex, and its popularity is not immense. But more and more people in the UK are learning Polish, whether it's to exchange a few phrases with our ubiquitous Polish tradesmen, or to impress Polish girls." *Eva Dabrowska, Polish linguist, Language is Everything*

Amharic

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Number of speakers (as first language)

17 million

World ranking

55th

Number of countries where it is official

1 (Ethiopia)

Language family

Afro-Asiatic, Semitic subgroup

Alphabet

Ethiopic

How to say "Hello" in Amharic

Teanastellen [tee-nah-steh-lehn]

Amharic words you already know

Rastafarian ['Ras Tafari' was the title of Haile Selassie, the last emperor of Ethiopia]

Reasons to learn Amharic

Become a time traveller: the Ethiopic alphabet, which is used for Amharic and also Tigrinya, has been in use for 2,200 years - it is Africa's oldest script. Ethiopia itself, meanwhile, has a rich culture and is Africa's oldest independent country. Apart from a period of Italian rule between 1936 and 1941, it has never been colonized.

Our expert says

"Amharic is a courteous and respectful language, particularly when addressing older or higher-ranking people than oneself. Over time, the language has grown through literature and as a spoken language. The people are most generous and hospitable." *Yisehak Yacob, Amharic linguist, Language is Everything*

Swahili

Kiswahili

Number of speakers (as first language)
800,000

World ranking
500th (approx)

Number of countries where it is official
3 (Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda)

Language family
Niger-Congo, Benue-Congo subgroup

Alphabet
Roman

How to say "Hello" in Swahili
Jambo [JAM-boh]

Swahili words you already know
safari, simba [which means 'lion'], hakuna matata

Reasons to learn Swahili

Although less than 1 million people speak Swahili as a mother tongue, around 30 million East Africans use it as a second language. Swahili is the only African tongue to have been made an official language of the 53-member African Union - the other official languages are Arabic, English, French and Portuguese.

Our expert says

"Swahili vocabulary has been influenced by Arabic, through culture and trade, and more recently by English, through technology. The word 'swahili' comes from the Arabic word for 'coast', since the language developed along the East African coast " *Kenneth Maina, Swahili linguist, Language is Everything*

British Sign Language

Number of users (as first language)
40,000

World ranking
2,000th (approx)

Number of countries where it is official
1 (UK). According to the Home Office⁵, the UK's officially recognized languages are:

- English
- Welsh
- Scottish Gaelic
- Irish Gaelic
- Lowland Scots
- Ulster Scots
- Cornish
- British Sign Language

Language family
BANZL (British, Australian and New Zealand Sign Language)

Reasons to learn British Sign Language

In addition to being a first language for many deaf people, British Sign Language (BSL) is also used by more than 100,000 hearing people. Like all sign languages, BSL is governed by complex linguistic rules, and is completely independent of English. It was recognized as an official language by the UK government in March 2003.

Our expert says

"BSL is different: it's a visual language that will challenge all your perceptions about learning languages! BSL is fun: it's about using your face, hands and body rather than your voice. There's a structured teaching curriculum, and qualifications for beginners through to advanced level." *Gloria Ogborn, BSL linguist, Sign Solutions*



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