

Why You Should Learn Cultures, Not Languages

by Ian Bremmer

President of Eurasia Group

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I wish I was better at learning languages — it's something that never came easily. The only language I really speak other than English is Russian (lessons in French never stuck), and it took me nine years, three degrees, and a Cold War to develop the proficiency I have today. Learning languages is hard, and unless you have a special talent for them, chances are you will never reach the language skills of a native speaker.

Given the nature of my work, I'm constantly asked what languages people should invest their energies learning. If you do have a knack for languages, and lots of time on your hands, study Chinese. It's a business language of the future, and China remains the most politically disruptive force in the world order today. That's where the smart money is.

But looking back, I would have spent less time on learning a language. Seriously. Though I studied Russian for many years, my Russian skills have atrophied over time. What remains is the insight I gathered into the mentality, familiarizing myself with how other people in the world live by interacting with them directly. That's never gone away. It gave me the type of perspective that remains critical to my work to this day.

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*“Learn cultures,
not languages.*

*Study other points of
view. The more you
know about different
regions of the world,
the better off you
are. You'll need it
going forward.”*

*Ian Bremmer
President
Eurasia Group*

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A lot has changed since those days. The rise of technology plays a big role in the advice I'm handing out here. Technology will soon make language barriers obsolete, probably in the next five to 10 years. Google Translate has already removed most of the barriers of the written word, though with occasionally hilarious results, and new generations of smartphone apps will do the same for verbal communication in short order. Of course, it's important to show people that you care enough about their country to learn their language.

But technology will ensure that language barriers are no longer quite so high an obstacle for learning about other cultures. In fact, the breakdown of language barriers will make cross-cultural understanding more important than it's ever been. Instead of languages, these will be the fault lines of the future. Spend your time reading books from foreign authors, following the news of different countries, reading the op-eds of major foreign newspapers — and generally trying to understand world events from someone else's point of view. Go backpacking through Asia, live on a kibbutz, go on a walkabout — just get out there, get lost, and explore the world. That's the key.

I'm not saying that children shouldn't learn multiple languages growing up if they can. We know that learning foreign languages at a young age builds up synapses in the brain and helps the mind grow. If you're lucky enough to raise kids in a household with multiple languages, you should definitely do it. But if you're in your 20s or later and casting about for the next language that will give you a leg up, your efforts are probably better spent elsewhere.

Ian Bremmer is president of [Eurasia Group](#), global research professor at New York University and foreign affairs columnist at [TIME](#). You can also follow him on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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