

2) Is there any point to learning another language when technology is able to translate quickly and accurately?

Learning New Languages – An Art Untranslatable by Technology

Language is one of the essences in the culture of a race. It creates a unique flair for each group, but at the same time brings about miscommunication among groups. This has been a major reason why so many people are willing to learn a second language these days – to ease communication and look deeper into a region’s culture. Nowadays, translation technology, including computer-aided technology, machine translation, and even AI models, have become more and more efficient and accurate, and here, we realize the possible disadvantages of learning a new language when compared to using machine translation - it takes a long time for one to pick up a new language and to understand all its patterns and cultural bits, and an even longer time for one to converse fluently in the language; however, it only takes a few seconds to obtain a translation result from a machine for daily use.¹ So, some may ask: is there any point to learning another language at all these days?

As we delve into the necessity of learning a new language, it should be kept in mind that the point of learning a new language is not only about surviving in a foreign region or climbing up the career ladder, but is also about forming deeper connections with other people and their cultures, and the enrichment of our minds and spirits as well. Through this angle, we can truly see how learning new languages can act as a valuable means to achieve a higher state of mind, a niche that can never be replaced by the output of ice-cold translation tools.

To start with, one important function learning a new language can perform – and that machines can never replicate – is to allow us to connect with people from other culture, heart-to-heart. Learning languages allow us to taste the cultural differences in addressing different situations; for instance, the

¹ Cherry, Kendra. “Learning a New Language Is Hard, But Your Brain Will Thank You”. <https://www.verywellmind.com/benefits-of-learning-a-new-language-8695564>. Retrieved August 16, 2024.

concept of using different pronouns or honorifics to differentiate people of different social levels is prevalent in languages such as Japanese ², and less so in my first language, Cantonese. Only through learning Japanese from speaking with real-life people can we understand the importance of little details such as honorifics for people of different strata for the Japanese, and through attempting to utilise these honorifics and language tactics with real-life people, we can truly come to understand the traditional culture of respect among people of different social levels among the Japanese. This could never be acquired through simply typing a sentence into a translation app and obtaining the quick translation.

It is also undoubtedly easier to connect with and build a good relationship with a foreign person by speaking their language and abiding to their language customs than by letting a translator app do the same job for you, even if the result is accurate. In the sole reliance of translators, the ability to convey our sentiments to and develop relationships with those speaking foreign languages through non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, is lost.³ As a result, the ability to convey our sentiments and form relationships, to foster bonding and understanding among people of different cultures, is hindered. This is solid proof of the importance of learning a new language even in an age of accurate translators – it catalyses cultural understanding, and promotes goodwill among individuals.

Concerning our personal development, learning languages has also been shown to be able to bring positive effects to the human brain, and this gives a point to learning languages as well. As a Cantonese and English-speaking person who has studied French as a third language, I can speak from experience that learning two foreign languages has indeed made my mind sharper. Through memorizing the many different language rules associated with the languages and practising these languages with those

² “Japanese Honorifics: The Basics”. <https://www.busuu.com/en/japanese/honorifics>. Retrieved November 2, 2024.

³ Lewis, Benny. “Non-verbal skills: essential but ignored aspects of foreign language communication”. <https://www.fluentin3months.com/non-verbal/>. Retrieved November 2, 2024.

around me, my memory capacity has been increased significantly, and my reaction time when trying to communicate with other people has also been shortened.

On top of this, being able to master Cantonese and English has made my mind more flexible too. There are gaps such as tenses that are missing in the Chinese language; by learning English, I can patch up these missing parts and think alternately in Chinese and English, rendering my thinking processes faster and more flexible. This also produces a unique point of view of the world for me: had English been my first language instead, the way these languages would manifest in my thinking and the image of the world they create for me may have been a lot different from how it is now. All this has indeed significantly benefited my studies by providing me with a sharper mind to memorize academic terms, allowing me to gain better communication skills with other people, and letting me view the world from a different perspective as well.

In fact, research has also proved that these positive effects are universal to anyone learning any language⁴ – it has been shown that speakers of multiple languages have better brain plasticity, which indicates an increase in the adaptability of the brain to new experiences. These people have also shown an increase in grey matter density when compared to monolingual people, which is associated with an improved ability to process information and solve problems, and an increase in neural connections, which indicates an increase in memory and attention span.⁵ This just shows how language learning is valuable in its ability to improve the functioning of the brain, something that can only be achieved by throwing oneself into the rules and words of a new language and savouring them – never by typing a

⁴ Spence, Carley. “How learning a new language changes your brain”.

<https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2022/04/29/learning-language-changes-your-brain/>. Retrieved November 2, 2024.

⁵ “Neuroscience and language learning: benefits for the brain”.

<https://www.britishschoolbarcelona.com/blog/neuroscience-and-language-learning-benefits-for-the-brain/>. Retrieved April 11, 2024.

few words into a translator and watching the words pop up, and this is what makes language learning necessary in an age of machine translating.

Some may argue that present-day technologies such as machine translation are indeed able to interpret and translate regional phrases and ways of speaking quickly and accurately, even much more so nowadays, with the advent of artificial intelligence, which is able to translate even Generation Z slang correctly⁶ ; thus, miscommunication is eliminated and thus learning a new language is no longer necessary. However, there are still flaws in translation systems that make learning languages necessary, such as not being able to produce appropriate responses according to context, something only humans are programmed to do.⁷ For instance, depending on the choice of words, saying ‘thank you’ in a foreign language could either be grateful or sarcastic, and could carry completely different meanings with regard to the person’s opinion of you. However, lacking context, a machine will generate the same translation for both phrases, and thus the end user would be likely to misunderstand the speaker’s intent. No matter how powerful the machine tool is, it will be unable to understand the situation in which a sentence is said. Thus, only by actually learning a language and hearing for yourself the meanings behind the subtly different words can real miscommunication be eliminated – not by the usage of machine translation tools.

To conclude, in an age where translation technology has become increasingly accurate and efficient, learning a foreign language still has its benefits towards the understanding of people from other cultures, and the enrichment of the human mind. Therefore, the niche of learning another language continues to stand even in this age of technological advancement, and with a bit of effort, it can perhaps be a valuable tool for us to nourish our minds and hearts even in the technologically developed future.

⁶ "Unlock the Secret: AI Translating Gen Z Slang for You!". <https://blog.lingoedit.com/unpacking-gen-z-slang-how-ai-is-translating-teen-speak/>. Retrieved November 2, 2024.

⁷ “Why AI Fails at Capturing Cultural Context in Translation”. <https://unidatranslation.com/why-ai-fails-at-capturing-cultural-context-in-translation/>. Retrieved July 15, 2024.