

Why learn French when your phone can do it for you?

Learning a foreign language is hard, using AI is easy... but Henry Mance thinks the rewards are worth the effort

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Terry Lamb taught foreign languages in Britain for several decades. He knows it's not easy to get young people to learn languages other than English. But on a recent trip to China, he found a new dynamic. Teachers told him that their students were losing interest in English too. "They were saying they didn't need to learn English, they'll use their phones," says Lamb, now a professor of languages at the University of Westminster.



Who can blame them? AI translation is remarkable. Google Translate, ChatGPT and other models interpret even slang and fragments of text with aplomb. They handle dozens of languages well.

Before smartphones, a friend and I struggled to ask a taxi driver in China to take us to a McDonald's. (Singing its jingle did the trick.) You won't have that problem this summer. Now your phone is better than any phrase book.

It's not just text. "Within the next 10 years, we will see speech translation technology reaching the status of the current text translation technology", predicts Lei Li, an associate professor at Carnegie Mellon University, who works on machine translation.

Duolingo, the language teaching company, is already "AI-first". It uses computer voices, not humans, to sound out words. This raises an existential question. If AI is so good, why should Duolingo's customers bother to learn languages at all? Could learning a foreign language become akin to learning Latin, an anachronism that most students do without?

In British schools, foreign languages have long been in decline. Since 2004, it has not been compulsory for English pupils to study a foreign language as a GCSE. GCSE entries for modern languages have fallen by a third since then.

In only four European countries — Luxembourg, Latvia, Sweden and Iceland — do most working-age adults claim to be proficient in a foreign language.

The west is unusual. Most people in the world are bilingual or multilingual. Many of them learn more than one tongue from birth.

The discussion would be different if learning a foreign language were easy. Unfortunately, it's very, very hard.

Like many British people, I started learning French in primary school. Sadly, by the time I stopped French aged 16, neither Muzzy nor anyone else had cracked the nut.

At least I had started Spanish. This year Spanish overtook French as the most popular foreign language among English students. I can guess why: it's much easier. Thanks to some years in Latin America and an unhealthy interest in Shakira lyrics, I became proficient.

Proficiency feels like a huge achievement, yet the job isn't done. People speak to you faster. They throw in more complex ideas. You experience the world through a slight fog.

The non-native speaker is always at risk of being blindsided. Students gaining the top grade at French A-level had an average vocabulary of around 2,700 words, according to a 2006 study.

A native speaker's vocabulary is closer to 20,000 words. How do non-native speakers manage in high-pressure office jobs? How do couples tolerate each other without a language in which they are both fluent? I have never quite understood. The non-native speaker has to work so much harder.

So, even proficient speakers will rely on AI. During a recent spell in Spain, I turned to auto-translation when I felt hurried, lazy or simply curious as to how a computer would render something. Web browsers such as Chrome and Firefox let you just click a button. (The FT now offers AI translations of its articles.) I started wondering if my prized proficiency had been worth the effort.

Large language models aren't perfect. They may not grasp the cultural context. They may not express things as we would have chosen. They are certainly unlikely to match the beauty and creativity of literary translators.

What AI also can't do, at the moment, is replicate the flow of a conversation. For speech translation, it faces extra hurdles. There is much less training data available. Processing speech also takes longer, creating the risk of delays. "There's still a huge challenge to translate at high quality with a one- or two-second latency," says Li of Carnegie Mellon University. But within 10 years, he envisages people sitting in a business meeting speaking different languages, seamlessly translated via headphones.

I didn't want to speak to my friends and acquaintances in Spain through headphones. Even if I hadn't spoken the language, I would have preferred to use my hands or utter a few broken phrases, not a machine.

AI might offer precision. One day, through headphones or brain implants, it may offer immediacy too. But speaking a foreign language tells your interlocutor that you are humble and committed enough to come into their world.

Research suggests that proficiency in a foreign tongue may delay the onset of dementia. Learning a language has been linked to better memory, better focus and more empathy.

A new language may also liberate us. Cook, of Birkbeck, University of London, interviewed three LGBTI refugees who had come to the UK. One participant told her that describing his homosexual love in his native language made his "body shake", but in English he could express it. "People find it much easier to talk about taboo subjects in their later-learned language than they do in their mother tongue," says Cook.

Cook herself finds AI "wonderful" for translating Italian legal documents. But she insists that it can't replace language-learning wholesale. "It's a very creative act to open yourself to other languages and cultures."

With the rise of AI, translators are on the back foot. Language teachers need a new sales pitch. Lamb encourages them to embrace technology but also get across the benefits of learning a language "beyond being able to buy ice cream". If foreign languages in Britain were declining before, this may be a losing battle.

Personally, I enjoy the feeling of foreign words flowing out of my mouth, the feeling of having stepped into a parallel life. I got bored with arriving at Gare du Nord, unable to make chit-chat when I bought *un sandwich*. So I have tried again with French. I followed an online course. I used a language-learning app. I listened to French public radio. I have probably given hundreds of hours to the task. I often learn words that I have already learnt once and forgotten. The gain has been modest. On any economic basis, it's been a fool's errand. AI can write infinitely better French emails than I can.

But I live in hope that it is worthwhile. In France this summer, I managed the odd conversation at the bakery. I understood the exchange between the train ticket inspector and an incompetent fare-dodger. I smiled when a watersports instructor told me how he had been to London for the first time, and marvelled at how much cleaner and friendlier it was than Paris. The contrast with Google Translate was sharper than I imagined. Anyone can get their phone out, but I had tasted the meaning of *joie de vivre*.

Written comprehension

What are the reasons for learning a foreign language according to the journalist ?

Can you think of any other reasons ?