Introduction

The world is shrinking every day. Television, the Internet, and jet travel have put people from all over the globe in closer contact than ever before in history. Because of this close contact, customs, beliefs, and cultures are shared on a regular basis. The door has also opened for greater interaction and economic interdependence in the global economy. However, one of the major stumbling blocks in this globalization and cultural sharing is the fact that communication among people still depends on an understanding of each other’s language, an understanding that entails the written, as well as, the spoken, word.
While English has become the *lingua franca* of today’s business world, not everyone in the world speaks or understands it. One need only travel in a foreign land to realize that outside of tourist and business centers, few can carry on a conversation in basic English. Even those who have studied, or been required to study, English for many years cannot speak it with ease. Pronunciation of English words is a major problem when learning the language from nonnative speakers who, in turn, cannot pronounce English correctly. In addition, many English idioms and everyday expressions suffer greatly when translated into French, Japanese, or Russian. The same may be said for translating foreign idioms into English. Even among English-speaking foreign businesspeople, subtle nuances in contracts, or business deals, are sometimes misunderstood because of language inadequacies.

While many foreign countries require their children to study English, there is no such mandate in America. The study of foreign languages is woefully inadequate in the United States. In a recent survey conducted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), only 33% of the students in Grades 7 through 12 were studying a language other than English. This amounts to a little over 6 million students. Of these, 64.5% were studying Spanish, 22.3% were studying French, 6.1% German, 3.5% Latin, and only 1% were studying Japanese. In Japan, English is taught universally beginning in middle school. In the United States, although many begin taking Spanish, by their senior year of high school, the attrition rate is so great that only 8.6% are still in Spanish class (Schultz, 2001). This lack of skill in speaking a second language has put many American travelers and businesspeople at a disadvantage at times when going abroad.

Nothing pleases citizens of a foreign country more than a traveler who understands local customs and makes an attempt to communicate in the language of the place. As mentioned earlier, Spanish is second only to English as the major language spoken in the United States. Hispanic Americans are the fastest growing minority group in our country. Look north to Canada as evidence of the impact large linguistic minorities have on the culture of a country. It is not unreasonable to assume that in the not too distant future, the United States will officially become a bilingual nation in English and Spanish, similar to the case in Canada with English and French.
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