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Spanish isn't always the 'best' language

By Lisa A. Sullivan

Learning Spanish can be useful, but I recently heard that a local high school principal wanted to require incoming students to take Spanish instead of letting students choose which foreign language they want to study.

The very idea of this requirement has prompted me to address several myths about the importance of learning Spanish that show that our society is unfairly inclined to emphasize the importance of American students' learning Spanish.

Myth 1: "In a few years, everybody in the United States is going to speak Spanish."

Out of the almost 50 million Americans who speak a language other than English at home, over 28 million speak Spanish. In contrast, more than 215 million Americans speak only English at home. At this rate, chances seem slim to none that "everybody" in the United States will speak only Spanish in the near future.

Myth 2: "As the Spanish-speaking population in the United States increases, American students must learn Spanish in order to communicate with 'them.'"

The popularization of phrases such as "Hasta la vista, baby" or "Yo quiero Taco Bell" constitutes neither a language trend nor a language "threat," as some see it, to our nation's predominant language, English.

Likewise, one need not learn Spanish, or Arabic, out of the fear that "they" will overtake "us" unless "we" understand "their" language. While language is a staple of cultural or ethnic identity, we should teach students to accept, not fear, otherness. Panicking that one language may be more widely spoken or more influential than one's native language, especially due to immigration or foreign affairs, is a disrespectful motivation for studying Spanish.

Myth 3: "Employers want employees who can speak Spanish," or "You need to know Spanish in order to get a good job."

Spanish or any foreign language "looks good" on a resume because it adds to an applicant's skills and experience, but Spanish's being a "need-to-know" language in business is a myth, unless the company deals directly with Spanish-speaking clients or personnel. Students

who want to learn a language based on their future career should first narrow down which jobs they desire and then decide which foreign languages could help them in those careers.

Unless one chooses a career that requires direct use of Spanish, a students' necessity to learn Spanish, rather than any other language, in order to gain better employment is a myth.

Myth 4: "More people speak Spanish than any other language in the world, so American students must learn Spanish in order to compete."

According to the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages at the Modern Language Association, Mandarin (Chinese) is spoken by more than 1 billion people. English is the second most spoken language with 514 million speakers, and Spanish is fourth with 425 million speakers.

Spanish, however, is the most studied language in the United States, with over 700,000 students enrolled in Spanish in 2002. Chinese ranked a distant seventh. If students are choosing to take a language based on this myth, then they should study Chinese, for Spanish is the most studied foreign language in the United States, not the most spoken language in the world.

Myth 5: "Spanish is 'easy.'"

Studying a foreign language takes practice and real-world experience, so students should not fool themselves into thinking that Spanish is easier than French, German, or Latin.

Fact: Studying Spanish can be useful, but I advocate that no language is inherently "better" than any other, and that is why administrators and parents should avoid impressing upon students the idea that Spanish (or Latin or French) is the "best" foreign language a student can take.

Learning any language can be beneficial, and learning any language system can help students understand other language systems, including English. School systems, the press, or society-at-large should not fool students into thinking that Spanish is the "best," "most useful," or "easiest" foreign language, because the study of any foreign language can provide insight into other cultures and the commonality of the human experience.

Give students the opportunity to discover for themselves which foreign languages interest them or which languages they think will benefit them, and stop telling America's students these myths about foreign language. Let the students choose which foreign language will impact their lives.

Hasta luego!