

As the dark days of “freedom fries” subside and their proponents spend time in jail or in deep political remorse, we turn to areas of advocacy where we hope to see some logic in the debate.

In promoting French, many of us like to point out that French has a large number of cognates with English, an even larger corpus of near cognates because of historical ties with Anglo-Norman, wide geographic accessibility of native speakers, relatively good availability of French teachers, French’s DLI/FSI categorization of “level one,” strong American historical or genealogical ties with French-speaking communities, the economic importance of trade or foreign direct investment, and plenty of college programs for articulated continuity. Thus, French is an easy choice of what to offer our students in elementary through secondary school. Some, however, have cautioned that choosing a commonly-taught language is an autopilot response, that we are not being practical and analytical, and that these are not the languages of the future. In light of these often aggressively delivered caveats, I would like to look at one factor that has an effect on how people feel about a particular language: the question of its relative difficulty.

Have you ever heard this answer—“They are all equally difficult”—to the question—“Which are the most difficult languages”? To be sure, the question is somewhat ambiguous, but there are usually enough implicit clues from the identity of the interlocutor or the group he or she represents to legitimize or at least clarify the question. The answer quoted is intellectually dishonest, because it is almost always delivered either as an ex cathedra universalist pronouncement or it is an “I dodged the bullet” politically correct reaction.

While there is no scientifically sanctioned overall way to say that one language is more difficult than another, the learning situation variables always make the mastery of some languages seem harder for a particular learner or a group of similar learners than others. In considering this, we should not allow the argument to be sidelined by people who disingenuously milk the distinction between “learn” and “acquire” or “assimilate.” The chief concern is with public perception rather than linguistic distinctions. Let me define my position. Like most people who want to know a foreign language, I would like to understand what others mean when they say or write something and to make myself understood when I say or write something. I would like to be truly interactive in any oral or written ex-

change and to have a grasp of the culture which effectively enhances all facets of my communication. I understand that there are measurable developmental stages which may not progress in the same pattern for all languages or for all learners.

Languages are perceived as more or less difficult because their characteristics present particular problems for certain learners or groups of learners (morphology, tone, syllabic flow, written characters, density of culturally informed idiomatic discourse, social formalities in speech and writing, etc.) because they require more time for mastery to develop to a certain stage of proficiency or because the learners want a certain balance of skills. Most second-language learner groups are only roughly defined by their own first language and cannot be a homogeneous demography, if only by the fact that their first language proficiencies are never the same. There are motivational, instructional, and technological factors which can move the group toward homogeneity once they are engaged in learning a particular language, but their reasons for choosing that language may well have to do with how difficult or desirable it is to learn, and there are always languages which are perceived to be more difficult or less desirable.

Below, I present a number of links to opinions, facts, impressions, and scales pronouncing or pointing to the comparative difficulty of different languages in the eyes of individuals or learning groups. Some of the conclusions in this random collection seem to be more statistically, logically, or scientifically grounded than others. Some are the interactive product of popular discussion forums. Some are the kind of statements you might expect from disgruntled learners. French does not always fare well, but overall it is judged to be among the easier to learn foreign languages for Anglophones.

Before presenting my links, let me give an example of the how quantification of time on task gives an impression of comparative difficulty among languages. Currently at DLI resident program [www.dliflc.edu], Chinese requires 157 weeks to get through “advanced” level while French requires 47 weeks to get through “advanced” level.

There have been scales constructed on this kind of information:

DLIFLC academic information (ACADEMIC CREDIT) [www.dliflc.edu/academics/academicaffairs/dli_catalog/acadcred.htm]

Language Training and Skills (Answers.com): [www.answers.com/topic/language-training-and-skills] (see “2:

What level of language skill is required?”) [www.thunderbird.edu/prospective_students/ft_degrees/dual_degree/curriculum/lang_reqs/language_faqs.htm#2]

In reading the links, remember the question of which language is the most difficult can have no universal answer but that accessible and well-stated opinions or well-presented factual information does have weight:

What is the most difficult [language] to learn? [www.micheloud.com/FXM/LA/LE/reldif.htm]

The Hardest Language to Learn Survey (Language-Learning-Advisor.com) [www.language-learning-advisor.com/hardest-language-to-learn-survey.html]

Which languages are the most difficult in your opinion? [http://help.berberber.com/forum27/8336-languages-most-difficult-your-opinion.html]

Which languages are the most difficult to learn? (Omniglot—the blog) [www.omniglot.com/blog/2006/04/21/difficult-languages/]

6 Responses to “Relative difficulty” [www.omniglot.com/blog/2006/05/17/relative-difficulty]

How Difficult Is German Compared With Other Languages? [www.aatg.org/content/view/253/44/]

What Makes One Language Harder or Easier Than Another? [www.aatg.org/content/view/253/44/]

Language difficulty scale? “Easy” vs. “Difficult” languages, etc. [http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9609&L=flteach&T=0&P=66914]

Language difficulty scale? [http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9609&Llteach&T=0&P=62347]

“The Japanese are Japanese because they speak Japanese” [http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/002041.html]

Student & teacher rankings of language difficulty [www.mtholyoke.edu/~eagerchm/tutorial/attitudes.html]

Language profiles [http://how-to-learn-any-language.com/e/languages/most-difficult-languages.html]

Specific Languages: Most difficult languages [http://how-to-learn-any-language.com/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=3121]

Difficulty of languages (MTG Salvation forums) [http://forums.mtgsalvation.com/showthread.php?t=58881]

Which is the most difficult language? (UsingEnglish.com) [www.usingenglish.com/articles/hardest-language.php]

What is the most difficult language to learn?
(Johns Hopkins Magazine)
[www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/0299web/degree.html#language]

Why Arabic Is the Most Difficult Language
for Localization (Translation.Directory.
com) [[www.translation_directory.com/
article460.htm](http://www.translation_directory.com/article460.htm)]

Spanish is Easier than French...Not! [[http://
french.bout.co/cs/teachingresources/a/
spanisheasier/htm](http://french.bout.co/cs/teachingresources/a/spanisheasier/htm)]

Easiest Language [[http://home.unilang.org/
main/forum/viewtopic.php?t=7951&
start=15&sid=f8407b0b7c0ca04977b
4676b2adb97136](http://home.unilang.org/main/forum/viewtopic.php?t=7951&start=15&sid=f8407b0b7c0ca04977b4676b2adb97136)]

What is the most difficult language to learn?
(E.L. Easton) [[http://eleaston.com/why/
html#diff](http://eleaston.com/why/html#diff)]

Language difficult essay: Mandarin vs.
Cantonese [[www.chinese-lessons.
com/cantonese/difficulty.htm](http://www.chinese-lessons.com/cantonese/difficulty.htm)]

Choosing which languages to offer in a school may well include the factor of their perceived relative difficulty for the learning community. For Anglophones and for those whose heritage is another Romance language, acquiring French with a moderate extension of the short time our schools and colleges generally allot to language study and by adding some immersion experience therefore seems a reasonably accomplishable goal. This is because, as our consciousness of foreign languages expands, many of us see French as a relatively easy language, one which can be conveniently mastered to a practical and usable level. The fact that *La Francophonie* presents so many interesting cultures to study from so many corners of the globe, the fact that in 2005 well over a quarter of a trillion export dollars came to the U.S. from the handful of countries in Europe and North America where French is an official language, and that these exports along with foreign direct investment from the same countries employs millions of Americans, all of these expose the shallowness of recent un-researched and misleading claims made by certain journalists wondering why we are still teaching French in our schools.

Get the word out that French is not a difficult language to learn, and if your school district is waffling about what languages to teach in a new school or a new program to begin language learning before high school, call on us in the AATF Commission on Advocacy: Ideas for French Language and Culture Advocacy in the U.S. [www.utm.edu/staff/globeg/advofr.shtml].

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Note: The Commission Web site also links to a hypertext version of the list of links in the body of this article.