

WHITE PAPER



Languages in the world





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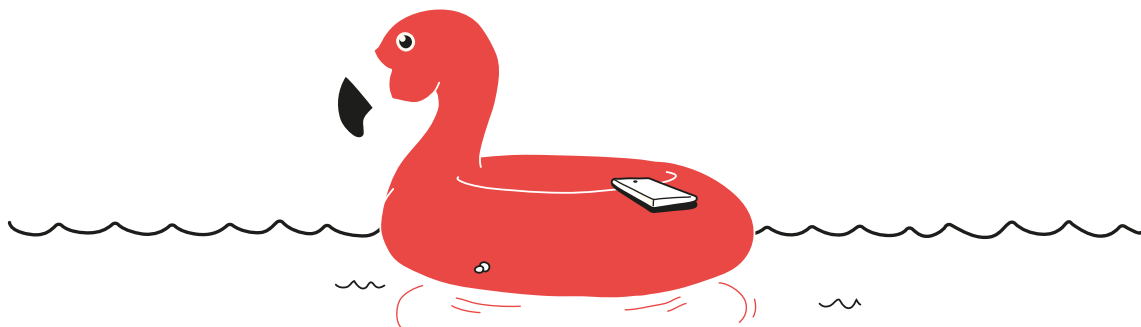


What are the advantages of learning a second language in 2022?

Introduction

2022. In an age of globalization, our need to communicate with foreign language speakers has never been greater. English has emerged as the new lingua franca and the non-English speaking world is busy learning it if they don't speak it already. At the same time, new technologies are constantly progressing and reducing language barriers. Translation tools have never been so accessible, relevant and comprehensive; it seems likely that we will soon be able to wear - as anticipated in the Black Mirror series - a small pin on our lapel that instantly detects a foreign language, translates what we say, and any replies we receive. Additionally, communicating abroad has never been easier. So why invest time and energy in learning another language, when English is enough to be understood almost everywhere, and a smartphone enables us to talk to anyone?

This white paper reviews the language landscape, with a focus on popular European languages and the reasons, past and present, for learning them.



I. Review: languages in the world

Richness and diversity

How many languages do you think exist in the world? 500? 999? 3,456? Ethnologists have established that there are currently around 7,100, and that is without counting dialects and variants. Even if you are fortunate or skilled enough to master a language other than your mother tongue, you will still only be using 0.03% of the world's linguistic possibility. Ioannis Ikonomou, the record holder for multilingualism with 32 modern languages under his belt, only reaches 0.45%.

Linguistic diversity does not start and end at the border. The United Nations recognizes 197 countries, meaning that there are 36 times as many languages spoken as there are countries. Multilingualism is also local: within a single country, common and minority languages coexist with one or several official languages. Faced with such numbers, knowing only one language seems remarkably isolating.

This rich multilingualism did not happen overnight. It is the result of thousands of years of history and continues to evolve. Languages as we know them are the result of countless mutations, influences and melting pots. But, if we go back in time, it appears that languages, though infinitely diverse, share more similarities than it might seem. Beyond the fantasy of an Adamic language (the original language spoken by Adam), they can all be linked to a large linguistic family defined by a common ancestor language. From this matrix, no less than 24 language families have been derived, which are themselves divided into subfamilies and even sub-sub-families.

The Indo-European language group, which includes Romance languages like Spanish and Portuguese, represents the most widespread language family on Earth. Unsurprisingly, these two languages show a lexical similarity of 0.89 (1 being the maximum): this is why it is commonly accepted that Spanish speakers find it easier to learn Portuguese, and vice versa. The same phenomenon is true for Italian and French (0.89): this historical proximity facilitates the transition from one language to the other. In comparison, English (Germanic subfamily) and French (Romance subfamily) have a coefficient of 0.27



The culture behind languages

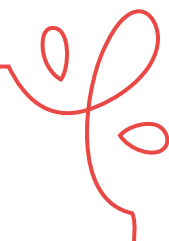
It seems that this remarkable linguistic diversity is under threat. Two languages are estimated to disappear every month. At this rate, more than half of humanity's linguistic heritage will disappear by the end of the 21st century. Some researchers are more pessimistic and fear that only 300 to 600 living languages will survive by 2100.

This phenomenon raises many concerns, one of the reasons being that the death of a language means the disappearance of a part of humanity's cultural heritage. This is true even when it is only spoken by a hundred people. There can be no doubt that language and culture are organically linked. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss summarized this relationship in his book *Structural Anthropology* (1958).

A language cannot be reduced to a set of acronyms assembled on the basis of established grammatical rules, nor is it a matter of being perfectly familiar with various pedagogical concepts. Learning a language is first and foremost learning the culture behind the language and how to communicate in different ways: expressing oneself, exclaiming, living, eating, ordering a loaf of bread, joking and working together. In this sense, learning only one language in one's life could be considered a form of cultural impoverishment.

"Learning a foreign language is about learning a new culture, lifestyles, attitudes, ways of thinking, a new and different logic; it's about entering a mysterious world, understanding individual behavior, broadening your knowledge and your own level of understanding."
(Jeanine Courtillon, *La notion de progression appliquée à l'enseignement de la civilisation*, 1984.)

Languages continue to adapt to new uses in the present day. Far from being monolithic and unchanging, they blend and influence each other. Languages have become established over centuries through multiple exchanges and absorptions. In particular, French has been enriched by many words belonging to other cultures: "brainstorming" from English, kawa (coffee in Arabic), pareo (Tahitian), lama (Tibetan) or kamikaze (Japanese). Every year, dozens of neologisms make their way into monolingual dictionaries. For example, in 2020, the Oxford English Dictionary embraced the terms chillax, whatevs and nomophobia. In 1990, the French Academy simplified a (small) number of spelling standards. Although this reform was limited in scope, it had the merit of demonstrating a real need for the language to be reappropriated by its users. Modernization for some, levelling for others: being subject to controversy is an intrinsic feature of a living language.





Studied vs. Spoken languages: what are the differences?

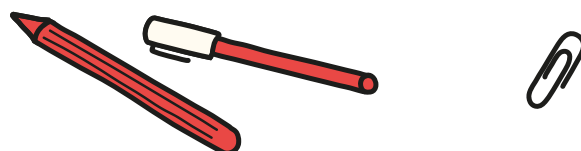
You might think that the most widely studied languages in the world are also the most spoken. Or that they are the most represented in schools. This is not always the case. The figures are startling: consider that 80% of people speak just 80 languages. At the same time, 40% of the world's languages are spoken by fewer than 1,000 people.

Today, the most common mother tongue in the world is Chinese. There are almost 1.2 billion native speakers in the world, which is nearly 1 in 7 people. However, Chinese is not the most studied language. In most of the rankings of the most widely taught languages in the world, it is only in fifth place, far behind languages with 2, 3 or even 18 times fewer native speakers (such as Italian or French). This despite China's rapid economic expansion, which at first glance would suggest growing interest from the business community.

The reverse is also true. Take Italian: with fewer than 65 million speakers, the language Dante does not even appear in the top ten most spoken languages in the world, but it somehow maintains 4th place in the ranking of most-taught languages, ahead of Chinese.

We often talk about "mother tongues", but let's not forget that speakers of a language are not always native. As mentioned above, many countries recognize several official and shared languages. This is where the notion of the "function" of a language becomes important. In India, there are two official languages: Hindi and English. Although people speak Hindi on a daily basis, the majority use English exclusively when they are communicating online and for commercial purposes. This means that English likely has a significant gap in its number of native speakers versus the general number of English speakers in the world. This might explain why English, rather than Chinese, now tops the list of the world's most widely spoken languages.

It would seem that there is no correlation between the number of speakers of a language and the interest in learning it. In other words, one does not learn a language for anything other than practical reasons. So what are the triggers for learning a language?



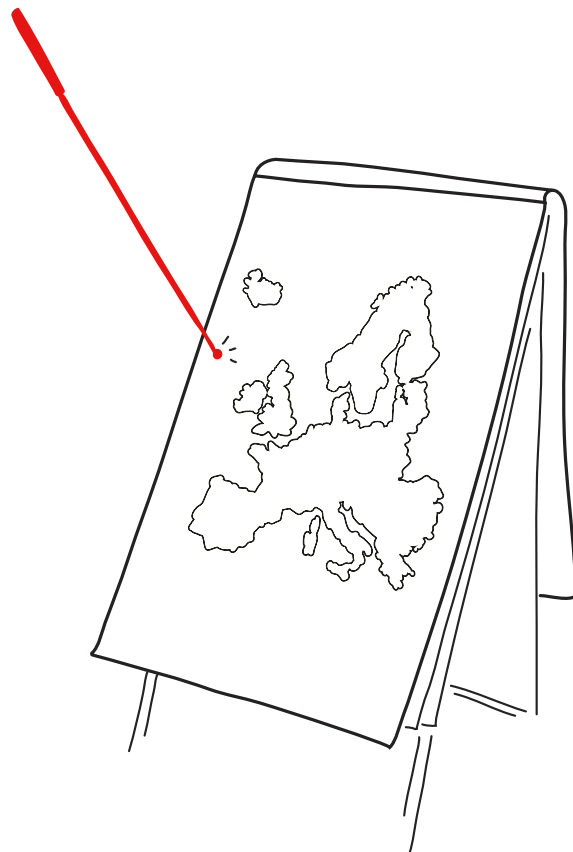
II/ Focus on European languages and their influence

The European language landscape

When it comes to linguistic diversity, Europe may appear to be a poor performer at first glance. In terms of indigenous languages, it accounts for only 3% of the world's spoken languages, a percentage that pales in comparison to 30% for Africa or Asia.

Yet four European languages are in the top 10 of the most widely spoken mother tongues around the world: Spanish, English, Portuguese and French. To these four, we could even add a fifth: Russian. As for the most widely learned languages, Europe again does well with English, French, Spanish, Italian and German in descending order.

While there is a strategic interest in learning most of these languages, necessity is far from being the only guarantee of their sustainability: they have many other assets that justify their expansion worldwide





English

Although English is far from being the most common mother tongue globally, it enjoys the status of an international language. Spoken by nearly 1 billion people, it is the most widely learned foreign language in the world.

Ranked first among the most influential languages, it has become an essential part of business, communication, science and diplomacy. The majority of learners agree that English is the language of business par excellence: in France alone, 48% of workers use English on a daily basis as part of their job. In many countries, India for example, a thorough knowledge of the language can lead to a higher salary.

But English is not only the language of international business: it is also the language of travel, of openness to the world and of leisure. In a 2007 sample of Swiss students, 91.5% said they were learning English to facilitate international travel - making it the number one reason for learning, just ahead of getting a job. This phenomenon is also true outside of school classrooms, since one in three people learn English to travel... and ultimately, to be able to communicate with others.

French

Centuries of abundant intellectual activity have associated the language of Molière a certain elitism that is still very much alive in the minds of our neighbours. Synonymous with elegance and excellence, France was one of the most popular destinations for the Grand Tour (an ancestor of the Erasmus programme) of the noble youth in the 17th and 18th centuries. At the same time, in privileged social circles, reading French was seen as the ultimate refinement. This linguistic prestige does not seem to have diminished, as French is still the second most studied foreign language in the European Union.

But learning French is also a matter of the heart. Its often scandalous history (e.g. during the sexual liberation of the 1970s), its sensual accent and the enduring success of the impassioned works of Victor Hugo, Chateaubriand and Lamartine have earned it the reputation of being the most romantic language in the world. And considering that 90.5% of non-French speakers say they are willing to learn a language for love, there can be no doubt that French has a promising future providing that love still exists going forward.

The strong interest in French despite the meteoric rise of a different global language is also linked to France's colonial past. The phenomenon is particularly evident in Africa, where a domination that some saw as "civilizing" was exercised for almost 400 years. Today, French is still the official language of many African states, and 59% of people who speak French on a daily basis reside on the African continent. Given the current population explosion, linguists predict that this percentage will increase dramatically in coming years.





German

German is spoken by 100 million native speakers, making it the European Union's first language. It is the third

most widely learned language in the EU, and there are around 15 million people worldwide currently learning German. German's reputation as a difficult, guttural language, and its association with the ideological excesses of the Second World War is fading, and the percentage of learners is rising sharply in secondary schools.

The main incentive for learning German remains its utility in the business world. Germany is Europe's leading economy, known for its competitiveness and industrial excellence. This is reflected in terms of job offers; German is the second most requested foreign language for European employers, after English. This industrial and entrepreneurial largesse also attracts migrant populations and stimulates the language-learning market. As well as having a strong economy, Germany actively welcomes immigrants and offers asylum.

Beyond these considerations of work and migration, German is a language that arouses interest at all ages. A 2020 study of a sample of 400 adult German speakers found that half had decided to learn the language simply out of personal interest. The German language is accompanied by a prolific artistic and scientific culture that spans several centuries: Goethe, Freud, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Kafka, Arendt, Einstein, Hertz among many have distinguished themselves in fields as varied as literature, music, chemistry, physics and philosophy. A tradition that continues with a wealth of published research (Germany is sixth in the ranking of countries that publish the most books!) and artistic works that have become popular throughout the Western world - who has not sung along to Nena's *99 Luftballons*?

Spanish

With 500 million speakers, Spanish is the second most spoken language in the world. It is also the third most studied language in schools, after English and French, and the third most used language on the Internet, after English and Chinese. Spanish is becoming increasingly popular, and researchers estimate that Spanish speakers will account for as much as 7.5% of the world's population by 2030.

As Spanish is the official language of 21 countries, its usefulness in the world of work is undeniable. It is expanding rapidly, particularly in the United States, where it is estimated that 30% of the population will be Spanish-speaking by 2050.



But if the Spanish language has many aficionados, it is also because of the culture with which it is associated. Since the 15th century colonization of American territories, Spanish has expanded far beyond Europe, and remains dominant in much of South America. Spain has made it a priority to promote its cultural heritage among Spanish-speaking countries. This rich, troubling past, pivotal to the changes in Europe and the post-medieval world, still attracts a great deal of interest.

Italian

Contrary to popular belief, there are still some sectors for which learning Italian is a necessity. This is the case, for example, in luxury and fashion. But only 5% of Europeans consider Italian an important language to be able to speak. On a global scale, it is not even among the 10 most influential languages¹. However, the language of *la dolce vita* continues to fascinate, and remains in the top 5 most learned languages in the world.

Italian is undeniably associated with a particularly rich cultural heritage. From the 13th century onwards, Dante's literary works were so influential that the codification of the Italian language served as a model for many European languages. More than half of UNESCO's world heritage sites are concentrated in Italy, and the country attracts 40 million tourists every year. The cultural aspects and the desire to communicate with locals during their holidays are two major reasons people tend to study Italian. These are closely followed by the intrinsic charm of the language, praised worldwide for its musicality and its famous rolled "Rs".

It is interesting to note that Italian is also a significant heritage language. Between 1860 and 1960, more than 26 million Italians left the peninsula for the United States, France, Argentina, Brazil and Austria. Many of these emigrants abandoned the language of their homeland and did not pass it on to subsequent generations. As a result, many young people from this diaspora nowadays choose to learn Italian with the sole aim of reconnecting with their roots.




¹ Influential" languages are those that offer the most potential benefits in five areas: geography (the ability to travel), economics, communication, knowledge and media, and diplomacy.

Trends

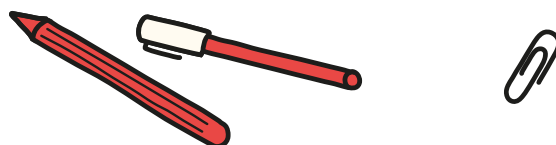

In this landscape of linguistic superpowers, there are a few UFOs, i.e. languages spoken by small pockets of speakers which do not (yet) rank high in any global ranking, yet which are attracting new interest from learner populations.

This is the case with Swedish. With 10 million speakers, Swedish is the most widely spoken Nordic language. And in the current environmental crisis, the minimalist philosophy of the Scandinavian countries is appealing. As a pioneer in environmental protection and a country that is emblematic of the famous "right of access to nature" (allmansrätt), Sweden is among the most advanced nations in terms of ecological transition. Moreover, its generous asylum policy combined with its particularly advantageous social model makes it one of the most attractive countries. The result: the most learned foreign language in Sweden is... Swedish!

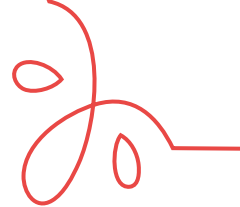
Hebrew is another language gaining ground. After narrowly escaping "dead language" status, the language is being resurrected - how biblical. The creation of the state of Israel gave Hebrew a massive boost. Recognized as one of the oldest alphabetic languages in the world, its millennia-old cultural influence permeates the foundations of today's Western society... and by extension Western languages, especially Latin (for example, the term ocean had Semitic origins before it became Greek). Reading and understanding Hebrew is a way of reconnecting with the world's memory and sharpening one's perception of its workings. So much so that it is no longer learned solely in the context of religious studies and is increasingly being taught in language schools.



European languages, which are sometimes described as "secondary", are still very much in demand among learners, students, travelers, migrants, and professionals... and cultural-seekers in all four corners of the world! Beyond practical or professional objectives, intellectual curiosity, the beauty of the language, the attraction of a way of life, a culture, as well as the desire to connect with others are all factors that contribute to triggering the desire to learn. The supremacy of English has not stifled learners' interest in other languages, even those considered marginal. Evolution in the way we learn languages and technological advances also have a role to play in this phenomenon.



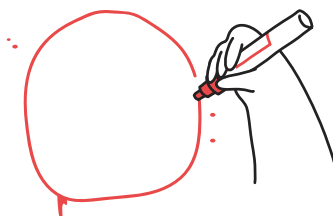
III/ 1001 ways to learn a language



Take your pick...

There are thousands of languages and almost as many ways of learning them. Books, vocabulary guides, individual or group language courses, at home, in school or online, exchange trips, immersion, e-learning software, mobile applications, adaptive learning, peer-to-peer learning, chatbots or hypnosis... free or paid, over several days or several years. In their infinite diversity, all of these methods serve the same purpose: to promote language learning and open up communication with people all over the world.

The issue of foreign language teaching has been much discussed for decades. Some criticize traditional approaches to learning, such as the standard classroom and top-down teaching, while others express reservations about any methods that combine learning and technology.



In reality, these judgements are made on the basis of relatively subjective criteria or training experiences with unrepresentative samples of students. In the Western world, language teaching is heavily influenced by linguistic theorizing. While these debates remain necessary for scientific progress, in our experience there is no one method that is clearly better than any another. Each has its own characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. The only determining factors in the choice of approach should be how well it is aligned with the learner's profile and expectations, and the constraints of the learning environment (budget, time, learning objectives, etc.). There is great diversity in the supply, which is good, because the demand is also very diverse.

Beyond the method adopted, it is a fact that the more languages you learn, the easier it becomes to learn them. The brain, exposed to new language systems, becomes more elastic and develops cognitive abilities that can be transposed to the learning of a new language. Research has shown that in hyperpolyglots (those who speak six or more languages fluently) Broca's area of the brain, which is responsible for language processing, is not constructed in the same way as in monolinguals. There is therefore a strong chance that learning a first foreign language will lead to learning a second foreign language! A real virtuous circle is created: learners gain confidence, leave behind any complexes and manage to communicate better. In the end, no matter which language is promoted or which learning method is chosen, the result will be the same: a greater openness to the world. This is why the promotion of a global language will never dampen interest in secondary languages, quite the contrary... and new technologies certainly have a role to play.




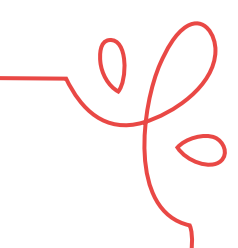
The promise of new learning technologies...

In the wake of new technologies (and more attention during the recent COVID period), e-learning and distance learning has progressed in leaps and bounds. In foreign languages as in other sectors, e-learning facilities are multiplying at a rapid pace, particularly under the growing pressure worldwide to be able to speak English. Innovative and connected learning solutions are emerging that can be grouped under the name EdTech, a contraction of the terms "Education" and "Technology". This very dynamic sector is focused on the challenge of individualizing learning.

Today, more than ever, we are faced with an abundance of new tools and online content: self-learning (tutored or not), MOOCs, courses with a teacher via telephone or videoconference, LMSs (Learning Management Systems) for organizing and gathering training resources, serious games, virtual reality, forums and platforms for networking (peer-to-peer learning), gamification... There is no shortage of buzzwords to illustrate the diversity of what is available.

In addition to companies and universities, schools themselves are beginning to open their doors to applications for use in the classroom. In France, technological solutions are most welcome as the country's education system struggles to produce bilingual students. In a study of English language skills, France ranked 23rd out of 33 European countries. This technology, which, while it may be primarily designed for English, actually benefits all languages.

Among the most ambitious innovations, and one that is featured heavily in our online courses, is adaptive learning: a method that exploits data provided by the learner in real time to offer a training course that is genuinely adapted to their profile (weak points, initial knowledge, expectations, objectives, interests etc.) and beneficial to their progress over time (forgotten material, revision requirements, memorization capacity). We are also keen on the spaced repetition learning approach, which consists in favoring shorter sessions, also known as microlearning, and spacing them out over time in order to assimilate the information learned over the long term, while also fitting more easily into learners' timetables. In our experience, all of these methods contribute to an improved user experience and increasingly engages learners.



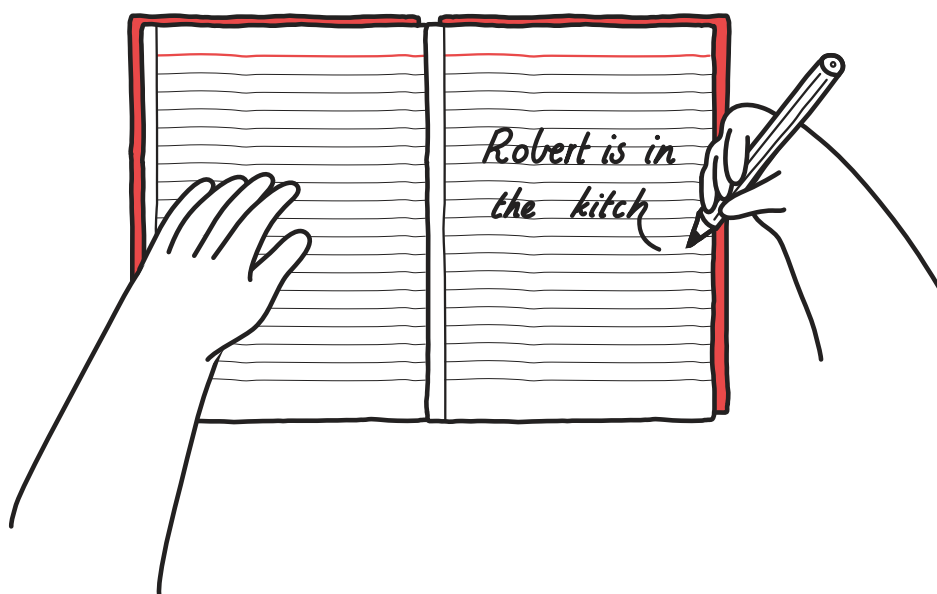
...and their limits

In the wake of new technologies (and more attention during the recent COVID period), Despite the plethora of language courses, methods and learning content available, certain questions persist. Do they really provide benefits? Are we learning better and more easily than before? Can we say for sure that more people have access to education?

If we take a closer look at the statistics, we see that MOOCs, despite the hype they generated in the early 2000s, have a low success rate: only 5-10% of those who enroll complete the entire course. Moreover, those who do tend to be qualified students who already have a more developed learning capacity.

At the same time, and after two decades of constant innovation in educational technology, many sociologists and economists warn that not only are financial inequalities increasing, but educational inequalities are also becoming more pronounced. What conclusions can be drawn? Far from calling into question the benefits of digital learning, this reaffirms the importance of the learning experience, beyond the provision of educational tools and content. With the Internet, it is as if everyone has a library downstairs, open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. However, this does not necessarily mean they are going to learn anything; they have to go there, identify something to learn, go back regularly, deepen their studies and memorize what they have learned.

Today, the existence of educational resources and technologies, no matter how sophisticated and comprehensive, is not enough. While it is a decisive and valuable first step, it requires further initiatives to complement the learning experience.





Focus on the learning experience

After the question "what do we learn?" comes "how do we learn?". Today, part of pedagogical innovation increasingly focuses on the expectations and profiles of individual students. It is no longer a question of developing more software or content for learning, but of offering an environment conducive to stimulation, continued participation and memorization.

Innovation in e-learning must now focus more on the learner's experience: motivation, enjoyment, psychology, availability and ability to concentrate are all parameters that must be taken into account in order to develop more effective 'learner-centered' approaches to language learning.

In light of these constraints and in response to the limits of self-taught learning, EdTech is now working to re-establish the importance of the teacher's role, and is embracing hybrid solutions, known as Blended Learning. This learning method combines self-directed learning (often online) and interaction with a coach or teacher (face-to-face or online). Among the various styles of Blended Learning, there is the coaching model, and tutorial sessions. These are sessions during which the tutor supervises the participants' progress on a personalized basis throughout the training course. The flipped classroom concept requires the learner to absorb ideas and knowledge upstream through a self-learning program before going to a physical training location, where they can see, discuss and interact with a teacher, coach and/or other students. The face-to-face sessions thus add extra value and really make the most of the teacher's presence, while also providing an opportunity for discussion and going into greater depth. Such programs can certainly help to address the participation and motivation issues associated with language courses.

To summarize, it is by considering things from the learners' point of view and developing ever more innovative tools that e-learning will be able to motivate learners, and ensure their continued participation, and that their learning will bear fruit.

It appears that the new instant translation and language learning tools now available do not discourage people from learning new languages. These innovations promote access to knowledge, curiosity about languages and ultimately stimulate many people to learn these languages. But access to knowledge does not guarantee learning: further work on this equation is required! This is confirmed by the persistence of educational inequalities.

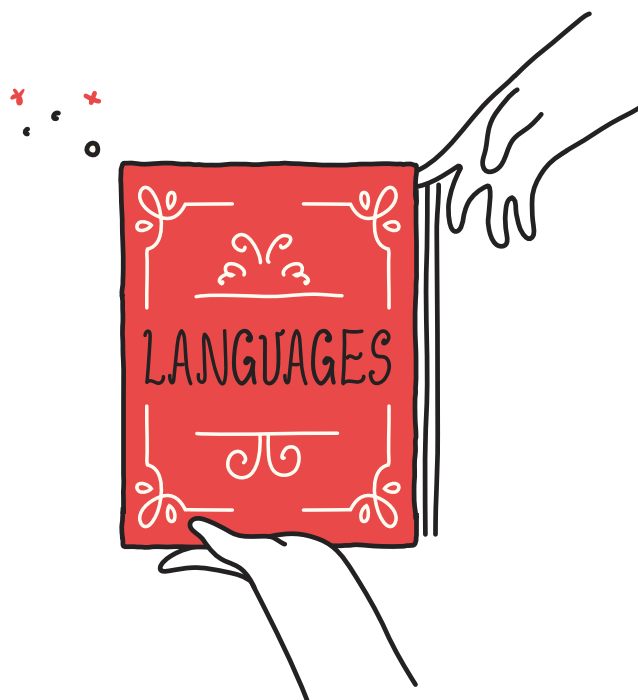
Conclusion

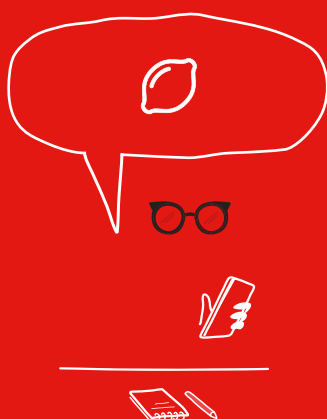
The linguistic dominance of English and the rise of new technologies do not threaten our interest in “secondary” languages. If anything, the opposite is true.

The tools for learning languages have changed and diversified. The number of speakers of a language in the world is no longer a determining factor in the choice of languages learned. Practical or professional criteria are complemented and even overshadowed by personal variables, such as an interest in a cultural heritage, the charm of an accent, a desire to better understand the world or to open up to others. We tend now to speak not of necessity but of desire, or for fulfillment.

English dominates, but its rise does not imply a disengagement from other languages. Learning a foreign language, which for the time being is most often English, but whatever it may be, stimulates our curiosity and our ability to learn other languages. Emulation is stronger than competition.

As for technological progress and its very useful automatic translation tools, this introduces us to other languages, and develops knowledge, curiosity and motivation. A wealth of language resources is already available, it now needs to be adapted to individual requirements and to our very human capacities for concentration, motivation and memorization. Our progress in enhancing the learning experience will benefit learners across all fields, and will serve all languages.





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