

Why Designers Should Study Foreign Languages

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The National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), the accrediting agency for about 240 art and design programs in the United States, is the organization that sets many of the standards to which U.S. degree programs in design are supposed to adhere.¹ NASAD maintains, for example, that undergraduate graphic design students should be able to understand design from “a variety of perspectives,” including “linguistics [and] communication and information theory,” and that they should be able to “describe and respond to the audiences and contexts which communication solutions must address, including recognition of the physical, cognitive, cultural, and social human factors that shape design decisions.”² NASAD also mandates that all art and design undergraduate programs must strive to develop students’ capacity “to identify and solve problems within a variety of physical, technological, social, and cultural contexts,” and help students acquire an increased understanding of “a broad range of cultures and history.”³ NASAD further expects graduate art and design students to learn to “solve contemporary problems in all aspects of the visual arts, and to explore and address new questions and issues.”⁴

None of these mandates is surprising or controversial. Ultimately, all that they suggest is that it is desirable to produce students who are not only technically competent and artistically creative, but who also are able to articulate and solve problems, to think critically about language and the act of communication, and to recognize and attend to social and cultural factors that affect design. However, although these are skills that most design programs in the country probably would acknowledge as desirable, design coursework does not always include in-depth discussion of linguistics, communication and information theory, sociology, or anthropology. Nor does NASAD mandate outside coursework in these subjects for either undergraduate or graduate students in design. General education requirements and electives may address some of these subjects; for example, most universities and colleges now require students to take at least one “multicultural” or “diversity” course that is supposed to explore the notion of cultural difference. And certainly students at larger universities have access to (though they do not necessarily take) specialized courses in linguistics and intercultural communication, although such course offerings often are not available at smaller colleges or in specialized art and design schools.

1 Occasionally NASAD works in collaboration with professional organizations in design; for example, the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) and NASAD collaborated on the writing of the degree objectives for graphic design curricula.

2 *National Association of Schools of Art and Design Handbook 2003-2004* (Reston, VA: NASAD, 2003), 91.

3 *NASAD Handbook*, 73.

4 *NASAD Handbook*, 114.

Design students who take a large number of studio courses—and most do—therefore may have very little time in their schedules for classes that are specifically intended to develop cultural awareness or to directly address language and communication.⁵

Fortunately, however—through the relatively painless step of instituting a foreign language requirement for all design students—educators and accrediting agencies such as NASAD can ensure that students will engage in a form of learning that will make them more knowledgeable about language, more creative in their thinking, and more culturally sensitive. Although some design educators no doubt will protest that their curricula are so jam-packed that they couldn't possibly add more required courses to their programs, let me explain that I am not suggesting that students must become good readers or conversant speakers of another language. These are indisputably valuable skills for designers (or anyone else), but the investment of time and energy required to achieve this level of proficiency probably is *not* the best use of most design students' time in school. Rather, as language educators have frequently argued, "there are permanent values to be gained from foreign language training that lie beyond the retention of specific material and within the grasp [even] of those students who will never have the opportunity to become proficient in language skills."⁶ Three of these "permanent values" seem particularly relevant to design education: (1) the ability to think critically about language and communication systems generally, as well as about English specifically; (2) the opportunity to break out of the cognitive patterns or mindsets that English (or any native tongue) imposes on monolingual speakers, thereby increasing students' capacity for innovative and creative thought; and (3) the potential to decrease students' ethnocentrism to a healthier level by teaching them enough about the thought patterns and values of other cultures that they can appreciate the fact that, really and truly, not everyone sees the world the same way they do.⁷

1 Given that a number of design theorists have lamented a contemporary tendency among designers to "*mistake symbols for what they symbolize*" to think of the vehicles of meaning (whether pictures or words) as "transparent,"⁸ and to be fearful or dismissive of language and text, it seems that the design professions would be well-served to produce students who are savvy about language, and refute William Drenttel's exclamation that many designers "don't know how language works at all!"⁹ Fortunately, foreign language study is a readily available means of making students more reflective and critical about language and communication. In fact, as foreign language professor Robert Fradkin has contended, realistically speaking, "[Foreign] Language learning is... for most college students the only opportunity to find out about language in general, to acquire knowledge that, ideally, will make them better communicators in speech and writing and

5 These subjects often are included in design curricula and syllabi, but relatively few design instructors have extensive formal training in these fields of study themselves, so they may not always be the best-qualified persons to teach these subjects to their students.

6 Carolyn A. Durham, "Language as Culture," *The French Review* LIV:2 (December 1980): 219-224.

7 There are, of course, many more than three reasons to study foreign languages; Alan C. Frantz in his essay "Seventeen Values of Foreign Language Study," *ADFL Bulletin* 28:1 (Fall 1996): 44-49 (available online at "Seventeen Values of Foreign Language Study" (www.ade.org/adfl/bulletin/v28n1/281044.htm) [accessed March 3, 2003]) describes some of the most frequently used justifications for foreign language study and provides a good bibliography of writings on the subject, mostly from the perspective of foreign language instructors.

8 Michael J. Shannon, "Toward a Rationale for Public Design Education," *Design Issues* VII:1 (Fall 1990): 35.

9 William Drenttel, "The Written Word: Designer as Educator, Agent, and Provocateur," *Communication Arts* (March/April 1993); reprinted in *Design Issues: How Graphic Design Informs Society*, edited by D. K. Holland (New York: Allworth Press, 2001): 67-71.

perhaps clearer thinkers.”¹⁰ The reason foreign language study is so effective at fulfilling these aims is that it allows students “to arrive at a certain distance from the way our own language organizes our experience,” which, in turn, affords them perspective on the ways that symbolic systems are embodied in language.¹¹ And, as language professors Julius Moravcsik and Alphonse Juilland have contended, “The study of languages accomplishes one of the ideal aims of a liberal education: it reveals those fascinating and problematic aspects of everyday experience which are taken for granted by the unreflective.”¹²

For example, when as an unworldly, middle-class Midwestern teenager I began to study Spanish in high school, I was completely flabbergasted to learn that Spanish speakers had no word for “like” (as in “I like that chair”). How could a language not have a word that meant “like”? It seemed very strange to me that in the construction *me gusta la silla* (“the chair pleases me”)—the closest equivalent in Spanish to “I like the chair”—it was the object rather than the person that served as the subject of the sentence, and that in effect was the active agent. If I say in Spanish that a chair doesn’t please me, it seems as if it is the *chair’s* fault, whereas by saying in English “I don’t like that chair,” the fault appears to be my own (perhaps my tastes are too sophisticated or too vulgar to appreciate the chair). This different way of assigning agency (or blame) was troubling to me at the time, I think, because it challenged my fundamental belief—no doubt largely shaped by the English language itself—that only live creatures can do things such as *like* and *please* because only creatures with brains have wills of their own. But although it’s hard for an English-speaker to understand, this seemingly fundamental distinction between “live” and “inert” entities is not one that is maintained in all cultures, and in Spanish, the *me gusta* construction is part of a broader practice of speaking of inert objects (or rather, those objects that English speakers would consider inert) as “alive,” in that they are gendered masculine or feminine and spoken of using the same pronoun and possessive forms that are used for people. Thus, if a Spanish speaker were watching an appraisal of an eighteenth-century chair on *Antiques Roadshow* and were to comment that *ella tiene las piernas hermosas*—literally, “she has beautiful legs”—it would not be clear whether the speaker meant the chair or the appraiser. The bedrock distinction between live and inert things that is maintained in English is not present linguistically in Spanish and, as a result, in Spanish the world seems a far more animate (and anthropomorphic) place.

It is difficult to imagine that this kind of linguistic difference does not have implications—even if only subtle ones—for the ways in which people from different cultural groups think about objects and concepts. Thus understanding the way that seemingly boring things such as pronouns and syntax shape the way humans conceptualize their world—in other words, understanding how language

10 Robert Fradkin, “Watch Your Metalanguage,” *ADFL Bulletin*, 25:2 (Winter 1994): 30-36; 34.

11 Jean A. Perkins, “The Value of Foreign Language Study,” *ADFL Bulletin* 20:1 (Sept. 1988): 24-25.

12 Julius Moravcsik and Alphonse Juilland, “The Place of Foreign Languages in a Curriculum for Liberal Education,” *ADFL Bulletin* 8:4 (May 1977): 10.

“speaks” us, as well as how we speak it—should be very useful to a designer. I imagine that if I were to design a product for use in another country, my training in Spanish would make me more likely to ask astute questions about how widgets were thought of and spoken of there (masculine or feminine or neuter? live or inert? etc.) and as a result, I might pick up some information that would be valuable to me in my conceptualization of the project. In addition, I think that studying Spanish (or any other language) provides some useful perspective on how one might tweak English to make it work better as a mode of communication. ¡What a great idea, for example, to signal at the *beginning* of a sentence whether it will be a question or an exclamation! ¿Why not do it in English, too? Or following the example of Spanish’s useful neutral singular possessive *su*—which means either “his” or “her” or “its”—why not come up with a new word to replace the awkward “his/her” construction that many people use today in English in order to avoid the grammatically incorrect plural “their” and the sexist singular masculine possessive “his” (thereby realigning the English language to accord more closely with contemporary gender politics)? These are the kinds of questions that monolingual students are unlikely to ponder. Without learning how other people speak and write and read and think, it is hard even to become conscious of what the inadequacies and possibilities of English are, much less to critique them.

Although even a semester or two of Spanish—which, relatively speaking, is quite similar to English in terms of alphabet, syntax, and vocabulary—could teach a design student a great deal about language and culture, an even more eye-opening form of education is taking a language that has very little in common with English. When I took a trimester of Japanese my senior year of college, for example, I was bowled over by even the simple fact that there are three different writing systems in Japanese—*kanji* (Chinese ideographic characters), *hiragana* (a syllabary that originally was created for use by women, but which now is used in combination with *kanji* for nearly all mundane forms of writing), and *katakana*, a more angular set of characters that refers to exactly the same sounds as *hiragana*, but which is used in its place in some scientific and official documents, as well as to phonetically “spell” foreign words. The implications of this tripartite system are still astonishing to me; namely, that the differences between native and foreign words, informal and formal documents, and (at least in the past) feminine and masculine sensibilities (and levels of education) are important enough that they must be maintained by using three totally different sets of characters. Katie Salen has noted that Western designers often have marked national, cultural, and racial difference through their choice of typefaces—and if nothing else, foreign words are usually italicized in English—but compared to the distinctions that written Japanese maintains between categories, the examples Salen points out seem almost subtle.¹³ In addition—at least in the past—Japanese

13 Katie Salen, “Surrogate Multiplicities: In Search of the Visual Voice-Over” in *Graphic Design & Reading: Explorations of an Uneasy Relationship*, edited by Gunnar Swanson (New York: Allworth Press, 2000): 75-89.

writing systems clearly denoted one's class or level of education, because those who were not well educated, if they wrote at all, wrote phonetically using the *hiragana* syllabary, while those who were well-educated wrote using the ideographic *kanji*. And as anyone who has taken even a semester of Japanese or Chinese realizes, it takes many years of study to learn enough characters to be able to read even a newspaper.

Learning about the kinds of distinctions that are formalized through Japanese writing systems, I believe, makes one appreciate much more consciously the ways in which English and its written forms shape writers' and readers' perceptions about class, nationality, gender, and the like. I think that for many monolingual English-speaking designers, studying even one term of Japanese would be of immense value, in that it would allow them to think afresh about the ways they could—or already do—communicate in English. The possibilities of the alphabet and of pictographs, rebuses, typefaces, and handwriting styles all seem much clearer and richer after one has had the experience of reflecting upon how written language works in a different culture.¹⁴

2 In addition to gaining valuable insight into the way language works, students who study foreign languages can increase their potential for innovative thinking. This is because reading, writing, and speaking in another language usually involves operating within an alien universe characterized by unfamiliar distinctions in modes, voices, tenses, genders, levels of formality, declensions, writing systems, syntax, etc., which forces learners to acquire not only a new vocabulary, but also a new way of categorizing and relating things, people, and ideas. As a participant on the IDFORUM@YORKU.CA discussion list recently put it, "Language is the tool by which human knowledge, experiences, and approaches are stored and transmitted... [so] the language which defines the problem or situation has to have a direct effect on the approach to the situation."¹⁵

An example of the way that language can condition people's thinking—often without their conscious awareness of it—was given to me recently by a colleague in ceramics, who told me how surprised he was to learn that the substance he knows simply as "slip" (liquid clay) is, in Japanese, denoted by a term (*keshō-tsuchi*) that translates literally as "cosmetic clay."¹⁶ Similarly, the Japanese verb meaning "to make up" or "to apply makeup" (*keshō wo suru*) is used in the ceramics world to mean "to apply slip."¹⁷ This terminology was revealing to my colleague because it suggested a whole host of connotations that are not present in the English word "slip"—such as beautification, femininity, deception, superficiality, and/or the masking of imperfections—and he felt that these associations did indeed condition the ways in which Japanese potters thought about and used slip (hence his feeling of enlightenment when he discov-

14 In her excellent book *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), Tamara Plakins Thornton discusses some of the ways in which Anglo-American handwriting styles historically have marked distinctions between social classes and sexes; however, handwriting is not now (nor has it ever been) a subject of aesthetic criticism in this country to the extent that calligraphy has been in Japan.

15 Manish Joshi, "Re: Design and Language," message posted Wednesday, May 21, 2003 at 6:48 AM CDT to the IDFORUM@YORKU.CA (Industrial Design Forum) listserv, which is sponsored by York University in Canada.

16 My thanks to Harris Deller for providing this anecdote and for putting me in touch with a number of helpful bilingual ceramists, including John Neely (see below).

17 In Japanese, *keshō* is the term for "makeup" or "cosmetic" (*keshōhin* are cosmetic products such as powder, lipstick, and perfume). I am grateful to ceramist John Neely for explaining the usage of these Japanese terms, and for providing a number of similar examples. He notes that *keshō o kakeru* (approximate translation: "covering with makeup") "is perhaps the most common expression for applying slip," and that "the technique of using red iron oxide or an iron bearing glaze applied just to the rim of a pot is called *kuchibeni*, which usually refers to lipstick... it is written with two Chinese characters that mean 'mouth red.'" Personal correspondence with author, July 30 and August 10-11, 2003.

ered what the Japanese term actually meant). As this example points out, the words people use for materials, ideas, and processes can limit or color their uses of them, without their even being aware of it, because language sometimes provides no other words for—and thus no alternate ways of thinking about—a given thing or idea. Unless we learn a word in another language that challenges our own language’s construction of reality, it is virtually impossible for us to realize how preconditioned our own way of thinking was.

Thus even if design students learn only a basic vocabulary in another language—and/or a specialized vocabulary applicable to their area of practice—I firmly believe that having even those few alternate terms (and ways of thinking) at their disposal would significantly boost their ability to think creatively and innovatively—or at least to approach problems from outside the constraints of English ways of thinking about the world. As French professor Carolyn A. Durham has written, one of the benefits of foreign language study is that students learn that “meanings do not coincide in two languages, even for cognates, and they come to understand how arbitrary linguistic symbols are. They realize that words refer to cultural phenomena, unrelated to objective reality or to a natural order.”¹⁸ Learning a smattering of even just one language really does open up new possibilities for approaching and formulating both problems and solutions. For example, by learning the Japanese word for slip, my colleague acquired a deeper understanding of the logic of Japanese ceramics. And presumably a Japanese ceramist—accustomed to thinking of slip primarily as a cosmetic device—might find the less overdetermined English word “slip” a rather liberating way of describing one of the fundamental materials of his/her craft.

3 In addition to raising their awareness of language and potentially helping them to “think outside the box,” foreign language study has yet another very valuable use even for those design students who never attain competency. In short, foreign language study can make people more culturally sensitive and less ethnocentric. Given that foreign language instructors now almost universally agree that the best way to teach language is to pair instruction in vocabulary and grammar with a discussion of the culture of the language’s speakers, foreign language study has become an excellent way of learning about the history and values of people from other cultural backgrounds, as well as a point of departure for reflecting on one’s own culture’s history and values. As one language instructor has astutely stated, “Monolingual Americans tend to assume that all peoples are very much the same, and that all cultures can be understood in the context of the English language. Breaking out of this linguistic prison makes students very much more suspicious of seemingly simple comparisons that rely on a single language for expression. They become sensitive to differences in ways that monolingualists can never achieve. Learning a foreign language places

18 Durham, “Language as Culture,” 222.

them in the very shoes of the other culture, forces them to follow its patterns rather than their own, and enables them to understand and express concepts that are truly foreign to their own experience.”¹⁹

I experienced an “Aha!” moment of this sort in the high school Spanish class I mentioned earlier. I was surprised to learn that Spanish marked class/rank/age distinctions not only through the presence or absence of honorific titles such as *Señor* or *Profesora*, but also by distinguishing between a “formal you” (the word *usted*, abbreviated with a capital letter as *Ud.*, used for addressing someone respectfully and formally) and a “familiar you” (the lowercase *tú*, used primarily for addressing family members, friends, children, and perceived social inferiors). Believing, as I’d been taught, that all people were created equal—and being pretty much oblivious to the notion of class distinction due to the white, middle-class homogeneity of my hometown—I was outraged by the fact that I would have to choose even my pronouns and possessives based on the rank of the person I was addressing (which meant that I would actually have to *decide* what kind of relationship I had to the person and what our relative ranks were before even saying something as simple as “How are you?” or “I like your new hairstyle”). In other words, the relative ranks and the nature of the relationship between speaker and addressee colors a speaker’s choice of words much more profoundly in Spanish than it does in English which, for all practical purposes, dropped the distinction between the informal/familiar “thou” and the formal/polite “ye” centuries ago.²⁰

Knowing about the pervasiveness of rank/familiarity distinctions in the Spanish language may seem far removed from the kind of expertise that a designer needs, but it does point out that even in these increasingly informal times, in some cultures rank or social position still really does matter—it permeates nearly every sentence people speak—and that does have ramifications for the design of, say, dining room tables and office furniture. Knowing what I do about Spanish and English, I would be willing to bet that it is more important in Spanish-speaking countries than it is in English-speaking ones to maintain sex and rank distinctions through things such as desk size and chair size (i.e., the boss having a bigger desk than the employees or the father sitting in an armchair at the dining table while the other family members sit in side chairs). I do not know if my guess is correct, but the point is that acquiring even basic reading, writing, and speaking skills in another language can alert an attentive student to the distinctions that are important in that culture—distinctions that a designer might not otherwise be aware existed, because they might not be ones that are expressed (or that are even expressible) in the designer’s own language. By gaining “a glimpse of a rich world for which there is no English equivalent,”²¹ design students—whether or not they ever acquire true proficiency—can become more cognizant of the existence of cultural difference, a desideratum that is currently preached by NASAD, but that is (like

19 Perkins, “The Value of Foreign Language Study,” 25.

20 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd edition, s. v. “thou” (www.dictionary.oed.com; accessed July 10, 2003).

21 Durham, “Language as Culture,” 222.

22 NASAD currently mandates foreign language study only for graduate students in the fields of art history and design history. No foreign language requirements exist for design practice programs at either the undergraduate or graduate levels. The closest thing to a language requirement for designers is the wording of the description of the research-oriented MA or MS in design or design studies, which requires that students be “competent in the use of languages and technologies appropriate to their field of study.” However, this phrasing allows the institution granting the degree to decide if language study is necessary. (Similarly, section XV.G. of the *NASAD Handbook* clearly states that language requirements “are determined by the institution based on the objectives of the program.”)

linguistics and communication theory) not directly addressed in curricular requirements.²²

The ability to think critically about language—and about the worldviews that languages necessarily impose upon their speakers—is, I think, only possible once one has learned enough of another language to be able to look at English from the outside. Thus I believe that both graduate and undergraduate students in design—especially those in graphic design, product design, and information design—should be required to take at least one year’s worth of rigorous college-level language instruction, ideally in a language that uses a writing system other than the Latin alphabet, since the less like English their second language is, the more likely they will be to experience a profoundly different way of speaking and thinking (I can say without hesitation that none of the five European languages I’ve studied taught me as much about the nature of writing systems, communication, and cultural difference as my one trimester of Japanese did).²³ Given the many benefits of foreign language study, design educators’ all-too-common resistance to—or deafening silence about—requiring it of their students is not only unfortunate, but also self-defeating. In a profession such as design, in which the ability to think critically, creatively, and globally is so valuable, educators, accrediting agencies, and practitioners should all encourage language study as an effective and expedient way of providing design students with knowledge about, and critical perspectives on, both language and culture.

23 Thus German, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Dutch, etc. would *not* be highly recommended, whereas most Asian languages and among the widely taught European languages—Greek and Russian would be. In addition, some of the Scandinavian languages, such as Norwegian and Finnish, which have very different cases and modes from English, also would be fine choices, even though they do make use of variants of the Latin alphabet. Realistically, though—for the sake of course availability—requiring any foreign language would be better than requiring none; however, design programs (and NASAD) could still strongly *recommend* that design students study a language that uses a different writing system than English does.