

I have read that learning a language foreign to us is beneficial for the mind. That is probably a plenty good enough reason to give it a try. There are other benefits, too, especially to Americans who—in contrast to most of the rest of the world’s population, know only English. It seems to be a natural reaction for people to have the notion that individuals who do not understand what we say are somehow lacking in intelligence and ability. Of course, that is not true. But it is an eye opener for some of our citizens when they realize that understanding and speaking English are not indicators of a person’s abilities. While Americans may not be inferior as far as actual intelligence is concerned, we are certainly far less able to navigate the non-English world. And, that can be a problem.

It isn’t so much that we can’t get along in other countries with our English. Our language is widely used in much of the world. But, it is difficult to understand that we aren’t all that special, that others’ abilities to communicate far exceed our own, because most people in non-English speaking countries are competent in their own languages and also can get along quite well using ours.

That is one reason that some of the internet-accessible programs that teach languages are good for us and are becoming very popular. In our family are people learning Swedish, German, and Irish. There are many other languages available, as well.

Learning new languages is best done, of course, when a person is young. Children pick them up quickly and usually have much less difficulty with sounds that are uncommon in their own language. There are nearly always discernible accents when one hears a non-English language spoken by an American who learned it as an adult. And, that works both ways, of course. Runo learned English after he came to the United States when he was in his mid-twenties, and his remaining Swedish accent is, many have said, what makes his speech charming and fun to hear. It also is responsible for a family story.

My mother had a cat that Runo had taught to jump through his arms. In the beginning, he held his hands at floor level, but, as Kitty learned, he gradually encouraged higher jumps, until he could stand straight, and the cat would make a huge leap to jump up and through the circle of his arms.

This was interesting to two little boys in the family. So, of course, they tried it. They held their arms properly, said “Jump,” and the cat just looked at them. After trying several times with no

success, they looked at each other, and it was as if the light came on. They held their arms in position again, placed the cat, and said, "Yump!" The cat jumped.

Runo can say the "j" sound, but it doesn't come naturally, and I told him to forget it. The "y" is typically Scandinavian and is perfectly proper in this community.

I know that when I speak Swedish—not nearly as fluently as Runo speaks English—I have a lot of sounds that are not correct. But, I can make myself understood most of the time. And, over the years, corresponding with a friend in Sweden, I have gained vocabulary, something that is quite necessary, as all languages change over time, and often, rather quickly. New words are added, sometimes borrowed from other languages, and familiar words may take on new meanings or shades of meaning.

Honing our language skills, whether in our native tongue or in new-to-us languages, is a never-ending task, but one that defines us as rational and thoughtful humans. Words that once were slang may have become mainstream, others have disappeared from the language, and often, how we speak identifies us to others, telling them how old we are, where we grew up, how much interest and ability we have in our own language, what kind of work we do, and what we believe.

We explore the languages we know every morning at breakfast, while we solve the Wordle puzzle, plus two of the same kind in Swedish and one in Norwegian. They are quick, fun, and, just maybe, are good for our language health. And, we have a language course in Spanish that we hope will broaden our skills as we try to learn even a little about that language that is the native tongue to so many of our fellow Americans.