As they introduced themselves at the start of the latest Salzburg Global Seminar session, Springboard for Talent: Language Learning and Integration in a Globalized World, it was clear that the 50 Fellows gathered for the five-day program spoke many languages and understood the value of doing so. But why is learning a language so important?

This was the one of the questions facing the opening panel as they “set the scene” and considered language learning and language policy through the varying lenses of recognizing its economic value, resolving ethnolinguistic conflicts, enhancing transnational and transcultural understanding, and strengthening cultural resilience for migrant populations (both forced and otherwise).

While the value of learning languages may be apparent to those gathered in Salzburg, convincing policymakers, communities, parents, and even the learners themselves of that value can remain a challenge in many contexts.

To address that challenge, following inputs from the panelists, the Fellows gathered in small groups to establish their first “headlines” that will help to frame the Salzburg Statement, to be co-written throughout the week and published on February 21 – International Mother Language Day.

To gain the support of communities, families and learners in recognizing the value of language learning, “start early” was the key piece of advice.

Schools should be encouraged to accommodate linguistic diversity, and establish reciprocities among different language speakers to encourage both formal and informal language learning. Increasing linguistic diversity of teachers would help in this regard.

At the policy level, recognizing that state education system language policies can be destructive and distracting, Fellows urged for a flexible language policy, seeing multiple languages as a resource to enhance, not a problem to be solved. As language learning is frequently about power, leading some languages (such as English) to be valued higher than others, they encouraged a de-emphasizing of English as the default second language of bilingualism.

With regards to business and economics, Fellows acknowledged that there is currently a disconnect between global trade ambitions and the provision of effective language learning, and called for the embrace of the economic benefits of linguistic diversity within companies.

Fellows were left with much food for thought for the next days’ discussions, which will consider language policy, social cohesion, the role of technology, multilingualism and economic dynamism, and addressing the Sustainable Development Goals.
Michael Nettles: “Language is both barrier and bridge to cooperation, peace and progress”

Session Co-Chair and multi-time Salzburg Global Fellow offers his opening remarks

Guten tag! Und willkommen in Salzburg. Hopefully that means “Good afternoon and welcome to Salzburg” in German. But I got it from Google Translator, so it could mean almost anything. No doubt, we will have a robust discussion on the efficacy of translation technologies this week. Until then, I will stick to my mother tongue: American English inflected with doctorate-ese.

My name is Michael Nettles, and I am the Senior Vice President of the Policy Evaluation and Research Center at Educational Testing Service, of Princeton, New Jersey, in the United States. I would like to welcome you to this year’s Salzburg Global Seminar session, Springboard for Talent: Language Learning and Integration in a Globalized World.

This is ETS’ eighth session in partnership with Salzburg Global Seminar. We have previously examined educational and social mobility gaps and how to close them; the experiences of students at the margins and the institutions that serve them; early childhood development, the use of testing and data in creating education and workplace opportunities for underserved groups; and advances in social and emotional learning, which was the topic of last year’s seminar.

This year’s session on language and language learning is organized under the heading Education for Tomorrow’s World — that is, the strategies, innovations and institutional changes that can meet societies’ future needs and help all learners flourish. It would be difficult to conceive of a lever more basic or useful than language for achieving those aims. Where people live together, nothing is possible without communication. And so I am very excited about our agenda and learning from all of you.

Setting Themes

Language, of course, is both barrier and bridge to cooperation, peace and progress. And if the urgency of appreciating this fact rises and falls with the level of turmoil in societies, then we picked the right time to talk about it.

As our colleague Joseph Lo Bianco put it in an interview published earlier this year, ”Language is fundamental. We socialize infants into talking because it is the most human of acts. Our relationships, collective identities, political systems, education and economic activities are all inconceivable without effective communication, so it’s inevitable that language is also going to be involved in conflicts.”

If anyone understands ethnolinguistic conflict in multiethnic societies, it is Joe Lo Bianco. And I am looking forward to his input in our sessions on languages and social cohesion, identity, and intercultural understanding.

From a historical standpoint, we are currently in what another of our colleagues, Hywell Coleman, describes as the third phase of international development aid and language planning since the end of the Second World War.

He says the first phase, extending from the end of the war to the mid-1970s, was defined by what Robert Phillipson called “linguistic imperialism” under the cover of Western infrastructure and macroeconomic aid to developing countries.

The second phase, from the mid-70s to the end of the 20th century, shifted to aid in support of human development. It saw doubts creep in with regard to the appropriateness of English-language learning in the context of development.

Hywell says the signal feature of the third phase is a belief that early education is most effective when conducted in the student’s native language.

As for our work over the next few days, we will be like the ancient Hebrews and consider Four Questions:

• One – How can we better communicate the complexity of research around language policy and learning?
• Two – How can more be done to help newly arrived refugees and migrants learn the host country language?
• Three – What role might disruptive technologies play in shaping future decisions about language policy?
• And Four – What research and policy gaps exist in achieving these goals? And how can these be addressed in mono and multilingual contexts?

We intend to address these questions from the perspective of the individual; the state; and market and society.

It is a lot! But who better to ask and answer these questions than this group of renowned and accomplished experts?

Multilingualism and Nationalism

I think it is fair to say that all of us here respect and value linguistic diversity, among both individuals and societies. By truly learning a language, we learn a culture, since language and culture are so intertwined. And wonderful things flow from intercultural understanding: peace, prosperity, mutual respect, well-oiled gray matter — all good things! By protecting languages used by smaller populations, we are protecting humankind’s cultural inheritance.

Conversely, we recoil at linguistic imperialism, even under the guise of magnanimity.

Yet I would submit that it is not...
always vulnerable minority populations who wish to protect their culture and autonomy in part by protecting their native language. The powerful and populous do, too. And they often wield national language policy as a cudgel to control and subjugate, frequently under the patina of nation building.

Joe Lo Bianco reminds us that in 1952, students from what was then East Pakistan were set upon and killed for demanding equal recognition of Bengali with Urdu, which had just been proclaimed to be the sole national language. The dispute provoked the long, bloody war that resulted in independence for Bangladesh.

In South Africa, the government’s announcement of compulsory Afrikaans in the teaching of math and social studies provoked the 1976 Soweto uprising, a landmark in the often violent struggle against apartheid.

Nor has the United States, arguably the most ethnically diverse society in the world, been immune. During our “Indian Wars” of the 19th Century, the eradication of native languages was among the goals of federal boarding schools for Native Americans.

To this day, there is constant tension in schools and communities throughout the United States over bilingual education. It often produces the false assertion that English is the official national language of the United States, when in fact we have no official language. As in many other societies marked by ethnic conflict, our language disputes are associated with anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner, anti-other sentiment. To many observers, this has been especially pronounced under the current administration.

An Alternative Theory

Let me be a little provocative now. I think it is obvious that the mere existence of discrimination against linguistic minorities does not prove the converse — that a multilingual society is a peaceful society in which ethnic groups cooperate with and respect one another. Going a step further, it could be argued that while linguistic minorities are often shunted into ethnic enclaves, an argument can be made that people prefer to live with their own kind, and to keep their interactions with other communities at a minimum.

A definition of multilingualism, after all, is a society in which people who speak different languages live side by side but not together.

In fact, an argument can be made that at some point, multilingualism contributes to ethnic tribalism. That has the whiff of blaming the victim, and it is not a theory that I subscribe to. But it is something to think about. Where is the tipping point at which multilingual societies become too fragmented to hold together?

I do believe that, by far, the greater threat to civil society is from ethnic and linguistic majorities seeking to impose the majority language on the linguistic minority, and to exile or abuse the minority when it suits their purpose. In fact, is part of the danger inherent in the rise of nationalist movements around the world.

But history goes in cycles. And it is possible that in the next phase of international development aid and language planning that the pendulum will swing back to once again view a lingua franca as the best path to peace within and among societies and nations. Whether that would be English, Chinese, Russian or some other language, who can say? As repetitive as history can be, it is also hard to predict.

Speaking of Lingua Franca ...

We certainly live in interesting times! Never has a single language, in this case English, been so widely spoken throughout the world. Thanks in part to this common medium, international travel, commerce and communication have never been so simple or so ubiquitous. Never has it been so easy for talented academics and researchers to attend international seminars so far from home.

And yet for all this coming together, we live under a very real threat of a nuclear war breaking out at any moment between two societies that could hardly be more different politically, culturally, economically, and linguistically. ...

Communism collapses — and Russia seizes the Crimea and goes to war against Ukraine. Autocracies tumble in the Middle East — and are replaced by the nihilists of ISIS.

Are language policies a symptom of discord? Or are they a cause? Or a cure? There is cognitive dissonance everywhere on the question. As Gabrielle Hogan-Brun notes, a lack of multilingualism among Britons costs the UK 3.5% of its GDP every year. And a British Council survey two years ago showed that almost 60% of UK adults regret that they let their school-era language skills slip. But rather than engage even more vigorously with other cultures for their own economic benefit, they vote to leave the EU and turn inward.

In the US, nearly half the states offer special recognition to bilingual K–12 graduates. But at the college level, enrollment in foreign-language courses fell by 6.7% between 2009 and 2015. One large state university system will now even allow students to count their high school computer courses toward their foreign-language requirements for admissions purposes.

In Japan, Kayoko Hashimoto tells us that more than a decade ago, the American political scientist Joseph Nye pointed out that Japan’s “weakness in languages” made it difficult for it to use its soft power to extend its influence around the world. But despite a decade of trying and despite the awesome international appeal of Japan’s cultural exports, little has changed, and the Japanese language is an official or common language in just one place: Japan. Foreign students who come to the United States to study in our colleges and universities take classes in English, the better to learn American culture and values. In Japan, they take classes … in English. Without learning the language, truly learning a culture is not possible.

Conclusion

That is the principle on which my company, ETS, is developing an interactive learning platform to help adult English-language learners understand the practical elements of English in a workplace context: what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. We are also developing an intercultural-competence module of our HEIGHten higher education outcomes assessments. It is based on the belief that intercultural competence has become an essential skill for success in the 21st century workforce.

It may all be academic, so to speak, given the march of technology. Anyone who has used Google Translator knows that it is a long way from practical utility. You may think that you are asking where the bathroom is, only to learn that you have just ordered a cucumber sandwich for your parakeet.

But it is a good bet that translation technologies will be much improved. Will they promote cross-cultural cooperation? Or will they make the hard work of learning languages a thing of the past, and thereby diminish the value of multilingualism, and promote ethnic separation?

Of course, the answer to all these questions is “yes.”

Thank you.
**HOT TOPIC: Why is language learning so important?**

**Tomás de la Rosa & Mirva Villa**

“Thanks to language acquisition that young people make sense of their world. It’s how they contribute positively to their world. For language learners themselves, it’s interesting to note that students who have a second or third language at a national level – when looking at results – perform extremely well on other standardized tests. So there’s an interesting possible correlation between language acquisition and deeper learning in science, math, and other areas.

For language learners there’s also the development of empathy, as students are in a position to consider a point of view beyond their own. As we know language is an artifact of culture, so in learning a language you are learning a culture, and understanding an alternative viewpoint to the dominant viewpoint that you may have had from birth.

It opens up access to a world of information, perspectives, opportunities, both social as well as employment-based, for young people who are able to navigate life and live in a multi-language society.”

**Mark Sparvell**

Thought Leader for Education Marketing, Microsoft, USA

“Formal language learning gives people the opportunity to find out about each other, and people need to find out about each other if they’re going to learn well together. For Learner A and Learner B to be able to help them in a classroom setting, they have to have some kind of common language. To move to a place where they understand each other’s language enough, they may need to learn that language. It’s a strategic way that a teacher can bring together the linguistic resources different of learners in a classroom.

Informal language learning, on the other hand, goes on all the time. We’re constantly picking up bits of these different communicative practices that people use. [...] The point is that when people move, either great or small distances, suddenly they’re in a new communicative context, and they will naturally and instinctively start to learn the different language resources of other people.

What happens there, is language is much more mixed and there’s a big difference between what we do informally and often what teachers do formally and I would like to see more informal use in the classroom to help learners learn formally.”

**Tony Capstick**

Lecturer in Applied Linguistics, University of Reading, UK

“I live in the UK, where there’s a lot of monolingual people who think “This is not important for me” ... For some people this is not a choice, because they’re learning a language for survival: you don’t get a job unless you can communicate, you don’t get health care, and you’re really going to have problems in a host country. These people wouldn’t even ask this question, they just do it, and they do it fast and are quite motivated.

I was really thrilled to be sharing their experience [learning in Denmark with other migrants]; I was far slower than them and they made a good job of it, and really helped them integrate because they started to read newspapers and understand the society. This question will be answered differently by different people, but I think it also opens your mind, you open up beyond your own culture, and that helps you understand others more.”

**Gabrielle Hogan-Brun**

Senior Research Fellow, School of Education, University of Bristol, UK

“Language learning is fundamental, because...it teaches us to see the world in multiple ways. I still remember the change that it made for me when I first learned a language. I have this sentence that has been stuck in my head ever since I was a child and I started learning French. I had this moment that I called “la perdita dell’ovvio” – things were not obvious any longer. Suddenly I realized that there wasn’t a complete adherence between the world and how we see it, because it can be seen in so many different ways.

I think that just by learning languages we learn to be plural and we learn to understand in different ways, and we learn to understand other people.”

**Loredana Polezzi**

Professor of Translation Studies, School of Modern Languages, Cardiff University, UK

Have an opinion on our HOT TOPIC? Tweet @SalzburgGlobal with the hashtag #SGSedu

Many of our Fellows this week speak multiple languages, but do you speak emoji? Tweet your translations to @SalzburgGlobal!