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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Primer Hay Que Aprender Español. Ranhou Zai Xue Zhongwen.

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF
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A quiz: If a person who speaks three languages is trilingual, and one who speaks four languages is quadrilingual, what is someone called who speaks no foreign languages at all?

Answer: an American.

Yet these days, we're seeing Americans engaged in a headlong and ambitious rush to learn Chinese — or, more precisely, to get their kids to learn Chinese. Everywhere I turn, people are asking me the best way for their children to learn Chinese.

Partly that's because Chinese classes have replaced violin classes as the latest in competitive parenting, and partly because my wife and I speak Chinese and I have tortured our three kids by trying to raise them bilingual. Chinese is still far less common in schools or universities than Spanish or French, but it is surging and has the "cool factor" behind it — so public and private schools alike are hastening to add Chinese to the curriculum.

In New York City alone, about 80 schools offer Chinese, with some programs beginning in kindergarten. And let's be frank: If your child hasn't started Mandarin classes by third grade, he or she will never amount to anything.

Just kidding. In fact, I think the rush to Chinese is missing something closer to home: the paramount importance for our children of learning Spanish.



Damon Winter/The New York Times
Nicholas D. Kristof

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Look, I'm a fervent believer in more American kids learning Chinese. But the language that will be essential for Americans and has far more day-to-day applications is Spanish. Every child in the United States should learn Spanish, beginning in elementary school; Chinese makes a terrific addition to Spanish, but not a substitute.

Spanish may not be as prestigious as Mandarin, but it's an everyday presence in the United States — and will become even more so. Hispanics made up 16 percent of America's population in 2009, but that is forecast to surge to 29 percent by 2050, according to estimates by the Pew Research Center.

As the United States increasingly integrates economically with Latin America, Spanish will become more crucial in our lives. More Americans will take vacations in Latin

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America, do business in Spanish, and eventually move south to retire in countries where the cost of living is far cheaper.

We're already seeing growing numbers of Americans retire in Costa Rica, drawn by weather and lifestyle as well as low costs and good health care. We'll also see more and more little bits of Florida that just happen to be located in Mexico, Panama or Dominican Republic.

Another reason to bet on Spanish is that Latin America is, finally, getting its act together. Of all regions of the world, it was arguably Latin America that rode the recent economic crisis most comfortably. That means that Spanish study does more than facilitate piña coladas on the beach at Cozumel. It'll be a language of business opportunity in the coming decades. We need to turn our competitive minds not only east, but also south.

Moreover, Spanish is easy enough that kids really can emerge from high school with a very useful command of the language that they will retain for life, while Mandarin takes about four times as long to make the same progress. Chinese has negligible grammar — no singular or plural, no verb conjugations, no pesky masculine and feminine nouns — but there are thousands of characters to memorize as well as the landmines of any tonal language.

The standard way to ask somebody a question in Chinese is “qing wen,” with the “wen” in a falling tone. That means roughly: May I ask something? But ask the same “qing wen” with the “wen” first falling and then rising, and it means roughly: May I have a kiss?

That's probably why trade relations are so strained between our countries. Our negotiators think they're asking questions about tariffs, and the Chinese respond indignantly that kissing would be inappropriate. Leaving both sides confused.

In effect, Chinese is typically a career. Spanish is a practical add-on to your daily life, meshing with whatever career you choose. If you become a mechanic, you'll be able to communicate better with some customers. If you're the president, you'll campaign more effectively in Texas and Florida.

China will probably be the world's largest economy within our children's lifetimes and a monumental force in every dimension of life. Studying Chinese gives you insight into one of the world's great civilizations and creates a wealth of opportunities — plus, it'll be a godsend if you're ever called upon to pronounce a name like, say, Qin Qiuxue.

So, by all means, have your kids dive into the glamorous world of Mandarin. But don't forget the language that will likely be far more important in their lives: el idioma más importante es Español!

(In case you were wondering, that headline says: First learn Spanish. Then study Chinese.)

I invite you to visit my blog, [On the Ground](#). Please also join me on [Facebook](#), watch my [YouTube videos](#) and follow me on [Twitter](#).

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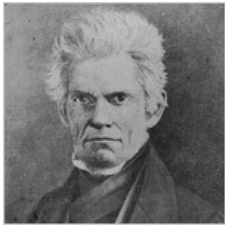


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