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Early Language Experience

I think it's important that children should learn a second language in their early schooling years. It's much easier to pick up multiple languages in that time than learning as an adult. Having a second language expands a person's breadth of knowledge. This opens many opportunities to connect with people from different cultures. Having a wider bandwidth of both knowledge and culture allows the individual to navigate life in multiple lanes, rather than just one. Knowing another language also provides insight into words, phrases, ideas, and expressions that may not exist in the primary language.

Learning a second language was meaningful to me, but I did not appreciate the opportunity as a child. I learned Cantonese growing up because my grandparents spoke the language. At the time, I felt shame knowing Chinese because I wanted to fit in at school and appear more "American." My grandparents taught me that I'm "Chinese American" and that I should be proud. I rejected that notion, and chose to stick with one language: English. This is a regret and a mistake that I made in my life that I can't take back. I did try to learn the Chinese language again as an adult, but I failed to retain or keep up.

Today, I know a fragmented amount of Cantonese and Mandarin that would help me communicate, "I am hungry," and "Where is the bathroom?" These are things I couldn't forget because I heavily used those phrases as a child. I can listen to Cantonese very well. I just can't speak, read, or write. I'm grateful I am able to listen and understand mostly everything that Cantonese speakers say. I think about my younger brothers who didn't grow up the same way I did. They didn't really know my grandparents before they passed away. Because they're gone, there is no way I could've had a real conversation with them and learn about their history.

I found the language useful when I traveled to Hong Kong. It also helped me with some writing jobs I got as an adult. However, I wished that I knew better Cantonese and Mandarin so I could communicate my ideas better. Working in the writers room at an entertainment company in China would've been easier if I was fluent. I shouldn't have quit Chinese languages. My father and grandparents told me that knowing Chinese would improve my job prospects. I didn't believe them when I was a child. Now I know they were right.

Motivating factors that I think people might have that encourages them to learn English:

- 1) Improved social standing amongst peers. Knowing English would expand friendships and potential colleagues with other English speakers. In my experience in the entertainment industry, many foreigners want to learn English so they can be actors and directors in Hollywood. Which brings me to my next factor...
- 2) Increased job opportunities. It goes both ways. A speaker of another language would find learning English useful to get more jobs in English speaking countries. An English speaker would find learning another language useful to get more job opportunities in other countries.
- 3) Expansion of knowledge, because many publications from the world's brightest minds are written in English. Knowing the English language would enable more access to books, newspaper articles, poetry, films, etc. Using a translation app would be limiting, as nuance and expression could be lost in translation.