Learning Chinese Important for Future

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Bob Brown for

China looms larger in the future of the United States and the rest of the world than any other country. If you don’t think so, ask a Chinese teenager. He will be happy to visit with you about it. In English. English is a requirement in China’s schools, and students there now receive at least seven years of instruction in our language. It is estimated that in just a few years, China will be the world’s largest English-speaking country.

I had the exciting opportunity to teach at Nankai University in China during spring semester of 2006. When teaching a class in public administration made up primarily of career public employees, mostly in their 30s and 40s, I needed an interpreter. My lectures to the traditional college seniors in my class on American political culture required no translation. A teacher can tell by observing students whether they understand. The younger students got it. Their questions and comments in English, and their test scores, proved it.

Only a tiny fraction of 1 percent of Americans can speak to Chinese in their language, and a constant refrain from American students is, “Why should we learn a foreign language, when everyone speaks English?” Maybe communicating in someone else’s language is not important, but the Chinese are clearly betting that it is.

This year, for the first time in Montana, instruction in Mandarin Chinese has been introduced into our state’s public schools. Because there are no certified teachers of Chinese in Montana, the instruction is being provided from the Confucius Institute in the Mansfield Center at the University of Montana by two young teachers from China. About 150 Montana high school students are now enrolled in the Mandarin language program, about one third of them for dual high school-university credit. Instruction is over the Internet to high schools in Billings, Bozeman and Helena, and face-to-face in the high schools in Missoula.

The program’s expansion, however, will be severely constrained by the unavailability of Chinese language teachers. Almost none of the students currently studying the Mandarin language in the Montana University System plan to be teachers, as diplomacy and business are stronger lures. Business is popular because entrepreneurs understand the rapidly emerging economic significance of China. Thirty years ago, China had a GDP that was hardly measurable. Incredibly, in the last decade it has vaulted ahead of Great Britain, France and Germany, and is now breathing down the neck of Japan as the world’s second-largest economy.

You know who still No. 1 is, and still by a wide margin, but China has the world’s largest foreign reserves and is now second only to Canada as our top trading partner. Nearly as dramatic as the international statistics, data compiled by the Montana Department of Commerce Montana exports to China increased by 40.6 percent from
2007 to 2008. Without question, China is our competitor, but China has also become our indispensable trading partner.

Our relationship with China can be a long and beneficial one if we get our economic house in order. One of the crucial steps necessary for us to do that is to be able to communicate with the Chinese on equal terms. That means learning to speak their language as they are learning to speak ours.

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