

SOAPBOX

The romance of languages – literally

Being multilingual has helped me in my job – and my love life



BY JONATHAN KWOK

LIKE many youngsters, I hated my Chinese (Mandarin) lessons in school, not least for having to memorise strings of antiquated words that had no impact on my daily life.

After all, it wasn't as if girls would be impressed by my vast knowledge of Confucian sayings.

What did not help was that my parents were language Nazis, who had me learn three languages and a dialect growing up. So in addition to the chore of my Chinese classes, I was forced to master my dialect – Cantonese – as well as Malay as a third language.

I was enrolled at the Ministry of Education's Language Centre to study Malay, and many of the conversations in my home and with my extended relatives were carried out in Cantonese to force me to pick it up.

I wasn't terribly excited.

Since a mastery of English would be enough to enable me to thrive in Singapore, why learn other languages?

So, disgruntled, I muddled through these languages, feeling like I was wasting my time, even nearly flunking out of Mandarin and Malay.

Ten years on, though, the wisdom of my parents is finally beginning to

hit me – though for reasons other than making the grades.

Workplace advantages of knowing extra languages are well documented. On the job, I have had to conduct several interviews in Mandarin, and have found people more willing to open up when I can communicate with them in their mother tongue.

Some of my friends, too, have landed jobs or internships in France or Germany because of their mastery of the required languages.

Most unexpectedly but pleasantly, knowing extra languages has bolstered my love life.

Yes, my command of Malay has come in handy when wooing and communicating with my girlfriend. It has also helped to impress her friends and relatives.

Who could have known I would end up dating a Malaysian?

But those long dreary hours at the language centre with Cikgu ("teacher" in Malay) are finally reaping benefits – big time.

My girlfriend speaks good English, but we tend to code-switch to Malay when we do not want others to understand us.

Visiting her hometown in Sarawak was also made much easier for me because of my basic ability to communicate and move around in a place where almost nobody speaks English.

If even my limited command of these languages has opened these unexpected doors, I wonder if I could have achieved more had I

been more diligent years ago.

Yes, learning multiple languages is tough. However, science has shown that we pick up languages best in our youth.

After that, the opportunities are endless. Who knows, you may land a French job.

Better yet, a French girlfriend.

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