

Regional

We no longer live in a one-language world

An old joke goes that a person who speaks several languages is called a European while someone who speaks only one is an American. Stereotypes aside, there are professors who are working to make such jokes about Americans' lack of language abilities obsolete. One of them is Joao Sedycias, professor and chair of the department of foreign languages and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Sedycias was born in Petrolina, State of Pernambuco, Brazil. He received his bachelor's degree in Spanish, two master's degrees – one in Spanish and another in English – and his doctorate in comparative literature from the State University of New York in Buffalo. He is fluent in three languages and has knowledge of another five.

For someone who teaches at an American university, the question is obvious: Why should Americans learn other languages?

"Because of the simple fact that the world economy is no longer compartmentalized into separate national economies. It is globalized," said Sedycias. "We have seen the presence of countries like China, India, Brazil, and Russia, and it is important for Americans to have the knowledge to be able to speak with the rest of the world."

One of the typical mental barriers among Americans is the belief that it is hard to learn a foreign language. To that excuse, Sedycias

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

said that he replies, "If there is a will, there is a way.

"I think that the acquisition of a language has a lot to do with what prompts the person to learn the language," he added. "If there is a connection, whether it is artistic, cultural or business, then you have an incentive and it becomes much easier for that person to acquire that language."

Sedycias said that he believes that the best way to learn a language is by using it. "I myself believe in a communicative method, a method in which you imbue the student in a context in which they have to use the language," he said.

Languages are very fluid, changing all the time. They even borrow words from one another. "If we take a look at Latin, it was exactly this give and take that produced so many languages, that produced Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, Gallego, French, Italian, Romanian, Reto-Roman and this is happening with English as well," he said. "It is a fascinating process, and I want very much for our students to be a part of that experience and to use that to their advantage professionally, culturally, and as they grow

as individuals."

Born in Brazil, his native language is Portuguese, but he said that he has chosen to teach Spanish for its beauty and long literary tradition.

As for English, he said that one of the reasons why it became so popular worldwide is its simplicity of syntax and grammar when compared with many other languages. Yet, English produces very complex works of literature, as can be seen in the works of Shakespeare, as well as contemporary American writers.

"On the other hand, I had a friend of mine from New York point out the difference between a language and a dialect," Sedycias said "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy. So behind English's presence in the world there is obviously the presence of the U.S. as a world power, as an economic power, and before the U.S., obviously England. So perhaps if you didn't have these two very powerful countries maybe the position that English occupies in the world may have been different today."

Sedycias added that the almost universal access people have to the Internet influences how languages are learned and used. "I see this in students in Brazil learning English. They would come to class with these expressions that there would be no way that they would learn if it were not for the Internet.

Slang terms, sometimes very colloquial English that I know went beyond what was being taught in the classroom. Likewise students in the U.S. learning Spanish, French, German, Chinese, Russian, Arabic, they have a chance to be exposed and deal with native speakers where 30, 40 years ago they simply didn't have that opportunity," he said.

When people ask Sedycias which languages they should learn, he said that he has a very straightforward answer. "Learn the language that excites your imagination, learn the language that you have interest in," he tells them. "If you are a professional and you know that you are going to be working in that part of the world or with that group of people, then learn that language. If there is a motivation, the learning of the language becomes very pleasurable, it becomes something pleasant, and then it becomes almost fun. So I suggest that independent of what language you decide to learn, make sure you come to SIUE and learn that language with us."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Dr. Joao Sedycias