



the power of language

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Hawai'i is a melting pot of races, ethnicities, and cultures that's reflected in our cuisine, traditions, and languages. At least 130 languages are spoken in Hawai'i. Being bilingual or multilingual helps bridge the communication gap and emphasizes the human connection with people from different countries.



Theres Grüter, Ph.D.

to imagine that technology will ever allow you to talk story with someone if you don't share their language."

Multicultural and multilingual

Living in Hawai'i provides a unique, diverse experience. About 25% of residents speak a language other than English at home.

"And that's not counting Pidgin, or what linguists call Hawai'i Creole English, which is considered a language in its own right," says Grüter. "So, if you can switch back and forth between Pidgin and English, you have every right to call yourself bilingual."

The Hawai'i Department of Education encourages high school students to learn other languages through its Seal of Biliteracy program. The award is given to graduating seniors proficient in the state's two official languages, English and Hawaiian, or one of the official languages and one additional language.

"This includes not just languages that are typically taught in high school like Spanish, Latin, or Mandarin Chinese, but also all the languages that many families in Hawai'i speak at home, such as Tagalog, Vietnamese, Cantonese, and Chuukese," says Grüter.

The goal is to help students and families recognize that being able to speak and write in more than one language is an asset. Once students pass proficiency tests, a Seal of Biliteracy will appear on their high school transcript.

"It showcases skills that are attractive to future employers and college admissions offices," she says.

Learning a new language

It's never too late to learn a new language. If you're interested, consider your motivation for learning. Whether you enjoy watching TV shows from a particular country or plan to travel, Grüter says the more you narrow in on your motivation to learn a new language, "the more energy you'll find to persist, enjoy the journey, and find success."

She also reminds us that learning a language takes time, effort, practice, and patience. And being bilingual or multilingual doesn't necessarily mean being fluent. It's about being able to communicate effectively.

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"We often make the mistake of measuring ourselves against people who are native speakers of a language. The key to successful language learning is not to set unrealistic goals," says Grüter. "If you can make peace with the idea that it's OK to have an accent and make the occasional mistake, you'll start to enjoy the benefits of living a multilingual life." 



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