

# Language and culture enrollment surges at ASU as students seek global career skills

By Thit Thit T Win, ASU News  
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As a registered nurse at Mayo Clinic in Arizona, being able to speak Spanish gives Ashley Caretto a major advantage when it comes to communicating with some of her patients and their families.

"Speaking Spanish has given me many opportunities that I may not have had otherwise," said Caretto, who graduated from Arizona State University in 2009 with two degrees: nursing and Spanish.

She is far from alone in seeing that value. More than 2,000 students enrolled in entry-level language courses in ASU's [School of International Letters and Cultures](#) this spring — a 52% jump from spring 2025.

The growth comes at a time when language enrollment at U.S. colleges has dropped nearly 30% over the past decade, according to the [Modern Language Association](#). At ASU, students are moving in the opposite direction, and overwhelmingly by choice: A survey of more than 1,300 language and culture students found that 82% are taking a course because they want to — far outpacing the 44% who cited a requirement.

The surge extends beyond introductory courses. In the last two months alone, 104 students added a minor in one of the school's language and culture programs, an 11% increase, with students coming from engineering, business, health, law, public service and communication.

"More and more students are realizing the power language and cultural studies have to shift our perspectives, which helps when attempting to solve complex issues," said Steven Flanagan, associate teaching professor of Spanish and director of Spanish second language acquisition.

## From the classroom to a career

Data backs up what students are sensing.

A [2019 survey by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages](#) found that nine out of 10 employers rely on bilingual employees, and [research by Preply](#) shows bilingual employees earn 5–20% more than their monolingual peers.

Employers increasingly value the intercultural competencies that come with language study — skills that open doors in fields from technology and international business to diplomacy and law.

"Because language and culture can explore any topic in any field, the value it provides students is immense," Flanagan said. "Pairing language study with another major is a great way to explore new avenues in the same field while setting yourself apart from peers competing for the same positions."

The school's alumni are putting that value to work across industries. Graduates have gone on to serve as senior attorneys at IBM and Santander Bank, work in the U.S. Foreign Service and State Department, and serve as anchors and producers at CBS News and 12 News.

Others hold executive roles at brands like Jazwares, conduct postdoctoral research at Academia Sinica in Taiwan and work in the gaming industry in Japan.

"Our alumni frequently tell us that their time in our programs opened unexpected doors and provided experiences that have been both transformative and life-changing," said Sara Beaudrie, director of the School of International Letters and Cultures. "We are thrilled to see so many current students recognizing this value and choosing to make it part of their academic journeys at ASU."

## What's fueling the growth

Part of the momentum comes from policy changes that have made introductory language and culture courses more accessible to [Barrett, The Honors College](#) students and easier to integrate into general studies pathways, allowing students to fulfill requirements while completing a minor or concurrent major.

But faculty say the shift runs deeper than policy.

Mariana Bahtchevanova, principal lecturer of French and coordinator of lower-division French courses, said the multilingual advantage goes beyond the resume.

"Our students stand out as professionals for their ability to connect across cultures, perspectives and differences," Bahtchevanova said. "Their multilingual advantage lies in how they think — with nuance, adaptability and a strong awareness of context that enhances their collaboration, communication and leadership in an increasingly interconnected, and at times divided, world."

Students across the school's programs echo that motivation:

"I work around people from Germany every day, so I wanted to be able to converse with the interns we often get from there," one German student wrote in a recent survey.

An Italian student saw it from another angle: "I enjoy learning about literature and am enjoying being exposed to other writers and their perception of the world."

A French student put it simply: "I don't need this credit for my degree, but I firmly believe that all people should strive to be bilingual."

One Russian student who had already fulfilled the course requirement reenrolled simply because the class was too good to pass up, according to the same survey.

ASU faculty are also rising to the challenge to make language classes — especially upper-level courses — engaging.

Hope Anderson, a clinical assistant professor of Spanish, has revamped the curriculum of her Applied Spanish Linguistics course to be more hands-on.

"The struggle in content classes such as linguistics is usually how to make them engaging without putting an undue burden on the students," Hope said. "Based on feedback that I've gotten from my colleagues in the past — and having been that student put on the spot in discussion classes — I knew I needed to shake things up for the benefit of my students."

She created active-participation activities such as an escape room, a card game, a shopping exercise and art projects — all in Spanish and geared toward facilitating discussions.

So far, she's seen positive results — and even had one non-enrolled student try to attend.

"A group of the students started bringing their friend to my class this semester because it was so much fun, and when I realized he was just going to keep coming until I said something, I had to tell him that only students enrolled in my class could attend," Anderson said. "I'd never seen that happen before, someone trying to just come to a class they weren't enrolled in because it was fun."

## **What's ahead**

The school offers [more than 20 languages](#) across in-person, online and iCourse formats, along with more than 150 in-depth culture courses.

[New courses](#) this semester include:

Humans vs. AI: Who Analyzes Text Faster and Smarter?

Murder Most Ancient: Blood, Justice, Revenge

Tasting Culture: A French American Journey

Culture, Engagement and Future of Global Citizenship

Looking ahead, the school is expanding with a global citizenship degree and an American Sign Language minor planned for fall 2026. Additional programs in development include degrees in AI and global language intelligence; global languages and health; and sport, society and the human experience.

For Caretto, who has taken her language skills from Mayo Clinic to travel nursing across the country and a health care tour in Cuba, the message to current students is simple.

“Don't give up,” she said. “Learning a second language and being fluent is beneficial. You never know what opportunities will present.”

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Fourth-year Spanish linguistics major Grae Shoup (center) gets information about the Council for Arabic and Islamic Studies at an open house for the School of International Languages and Cultures on March 26 at Durham Hall on the Tempe campus. The school has seen a 52% jump in enrollment in entry-level language courses in the past year. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



# What do you love about your language

- Culture-agnostic
- Mama is a global vocab
- the connections I made/make around the world
- Sounding badass.
- Meeting new & familiar people
- Love everything about them!
- Would like more upper level options! 😊

• I love the people in my ASL class! ♥

♥ Prof. Patterson 201 ASL is the best! < I AGREE!

That part!

• I love

• I love it allows me



ASU Instructor Umar Sulayman leads a 15-minute Arabic class during an open house event for the School of International Languages and Cultures.



Place cards that represent some of the language and culture courses taught in the School of International Languages and Cultures were on display during the school's open house on March 26.





First-year engineering students Stephen Peterson (left) and Victor Israel Maldonado-Mendoza practice Italian dialogue during a 15-minute intro class during an open house event for the School of International Languages and Cultures.