

International Finance Expert



Name: **Matthew S. Morrison**
Profession: **International finance**
Number of years in this line of work: **18**
Native language: **English**

1) What languages do you know?

Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, French (in descending order of fluency). How did you learn? I learned Spanish in high school [inspirational teacher!!] and college. I took intensive Portuguese and French classes in college and was able to achieve conversational ability relatively quickly, though these languages have become rusty. Although I took a couple of Russian classes, I have mainly learned my Russian from my wife and her family.

2) What is your profession?

I work for International Finance Corporation (IFC), a part of the World Bank Group, focused on development in emerging markets by lending to and investing in private sector companies. I am currently in charge of IFC's loan syndication activities for Asia.

3) Describe a "typical" day for someone working in international finance. What is your typical work?

My work involves communicating with banks and colleagues on financing structure and deal financing. Since I do not speak any Asian languages, right now I mainly use English and Cantonese which are helpful in getting around in Hong Kong, most of the business I do is in Latin America, and often used both Spanish and Portuguese in phone conversations, and I am currently studying Mandarin Chinese in the next year, given the focus in this part of the world.

4) What do you enjoy about it?

I enjoy the mix of quantitative/deal structuring skills that are required for my work, including negotiation, etc. I like that fact that what IFC does is more than about making money; it's about economic development through investment in the private sector in developing countries to reduce poverty. While we certainly want our loans and investments to be profitable, each project has certain additional criteria to show that our financing is supporting economically and environmentally and socially sustainable projects.

5) Do you think in more than one language? Under what circumstances?

When I used to use Spanish a lot, I found that I did often think (and even dream) in Spanish and can carry on conversations (and recently, a business meeting with a Spanish client). Rarely now, I find that it takes me a little while to get past the point of having to hesitate.

6) What do you think helped you the most in mastering the foreign/second language?

I started studying Spanish when I was in high school, which even though I was past the age when your brain starts to lose its ability to assimilate languages, I think the fact that I was young and had a lot of time to spend on it was the most important thing. The later in life you start learning a new language, I do think the most important thing is to try to immerse yourself in the language, force yourself to use it so you can't cop out, and don't be intimidated or afraid of making a fool of yourself. I did this with Russian to my in-laws and we all have had a good laugh, but they always appreciate the effort.

7) What opportunities have knowing another language provided in your career? Other than otherwise?

Knowing Spanish (and Portuguese) was critical in helping me land my first job in international finance with other graduating MBA students, and the language skills, along with the international business knowledge, were key. Obviously, knowing a language is only part of it, you also have to know your field of expertise. Knowing another language can provide a major advantage.

8) If you had the time to learn another language now, what language would you choose?

I would like to study Mandarin Chinese; living in Asia it becomes clear that Mandarin is the most important language to know.

I would like to study Mandarin Chinese, living in Asia it becomes clear that Mandarin is the future given China's size and growing role in the world's economy and politics. Many are studying Mandarin, and there are many Mandarin immersion programs in schools. We are trying to give our son as much exposure to Mandarin as possible, as we think this will be a valuable skill in the future.

9) How do you think your life would have turned out if you had never learned a second language?

Quite differently. Both my career and my personal life have been shaped by an interest in other cultures. This interest naturally led to an interest in foreign languages. I can't imagine my life being different if I had not pursued this interest.

10) In your opinion, are there more career opportunities for people who speak multiple languages?

In certain fields, absolutely.

11) What do you think you would be doing if you weren't in international business?

I'm not sure, but it would certainly be something with an international focus.

12) What advice would you give to somebody who wants to have a job that requires multiple languages they should learn?

I would advise people to learn languages but also study finance and economics and to pursue a career in finance working with developing countries, it is key to know one or more languages in the developing world: Spanish, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Russian, and Mandarin Chinese.

13) Anything else you'd like to add?

I recently heard a joke:

Q: What do you call someone who speaks two languages?

A: Bilingual.

Q: What do you call someone who speaks three languages?

A: Trilingual.

Q: What do you call someone who speaks only one language?

A: American."

Deserved or not, Americans have the reputation of being inwardly focused and not looking at things outside our borders -- this includes a lack of recognition of the value of learning a second language. Understandable, since people who travel abroad can often get by speaking English, but in a global world, there is often a lack of sensitivity toward other cultures and ways of doing things. The implementation of language immersion programs in elementary schools is an encouraging sign that this generation grows up with greater exposure to foreign languages and other cultures, which will help improve how Americans are viewed around the world.