

**How ‘Foreign’ are Foreign Languages?
A Critical Look at India’s Current Foreign Language Policy
Through the Prism of Multilingualism**

Dr. Shruti Jain, Ph.D. (German Studies, JNU, New Delhi)
O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana, India
shruti@jgu.edu.in
+91 8930812346

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Abstract

Some fleeting moments: The Rabindranath Tagore-Straße in Berlin, the Max Mueller Marg in Delhi – Basmati Rice and Mango Lassi in German supermarkets, Kinder joy eggs and Ritter Sport in Indian departmental stores – Indian restaurants in almost every German city, the Black Forest pastry in every Indian bakery – German cars on Indian roads, Indian craftwork in German malls – German companies in India, Indian students, doctors and IT specialists in Germany, Shah Rukh Khan in Germany, Walter Kaufmann in the All India Radio – Indology in Germany, German studies in India – these and many more are only a few glimpses of spatial interlinkages between an Indian and a so called “foreign” culture today.

It is quite evident today, that the distinction between the Global and the Local is a fuzzy one. The term “foreign” language is therefore a misnomer, as it fails to reflect the interconnectedness of the world’s peoples, their languages, and their cultures. It thrives on an adversarial understanding of cultures and leads to their hierarchization. Added to this are the challenges posed by the uncritical use of digital media information that leads learners to depend on untested perceptions. Drawing attention upon a recent controversy over the inclusion of German as a Foreign language in the Indian school curriculum as opposed to the existing Three Language Formula, the present paper discusses the disadvantages of the attitude of *foreignness* towards foreign languages at various levels of Indian Education in the Age of Globalization.

Keywords: German as a foreign language in India, Globalization, multilingualism, foreignness, attitude, language education policy

1. 2014: A Controversy Erupted

I would like to begin my paper with a controversy that arose in the year 2014 when India's Sanskrit Shikshak Sangh (SSS) began a legal action in Delhi's High Court, saying the continued allowance of German in the school curriculum of the Kendriya Vidyalaya went against the national education policy. The group also described the teaching of foreign languages in Indian schools as "a Western conspiracy."ⁱ The Indian Ministry of Human

Resources and Development headed by Smriti Irani refused to renew the MOU signed between the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan and the Goethe Institute in 2011 regarding the teaching of German in the 1000 KV schools and declared it illegal. It was pointed out by the MHRD that this Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was against the Three Language Formula.ⁱⁱ Hereafter, German and all other foreign Languages have been relegated to an additional subject that will not count to the final grade of the student. This decision affected teachers in the 250 Kendriya Vidyalayas and the 50,000 studentsⁱⁱⁱ all over India who were learning German at that time. Several parents and teachers from all over India signed in petitions to reset German to its earlier status.

This also led the German Chancellor Angela Merkel to discuss the matter with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The outcome was that India and Germany signed a joint declaration of intent regarding teaching of German as a foreign language in the Kendriya Vidyalayas and the promotion of four Indian languages (Hindi, Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam) in Germany. As a long-term measure, the MHRD thought it fit to appoint in December 2014, a seventeen-member expert committee headed by Kapil Kapoor, former pro-Vice Chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University, to have a fresh look at the language policy. However, four years down the line, there is still no information available in the public domain as to whether the Committee completed its task. Though according to the Indian Express, four German Teachers from the Goethe Zentrum, Thiruvananthapuram, were sent to Germany in order to teach Hindi and Malayalam^{iv} for three weeks, there is still no confirmation whether the languages are being formally offered in German schools. And the latest news headlines stated that the CBSE was “Likely To Exclude 'Purely Foreign' Languages From Three-Language Formula” (8.10.2017, NDTV).^v

2. What is “foreign”?

What catches one’s attention in the news headline is the term “purely foreign”. In one of his papers, the German Linguist, Konrad Ehlich poses the question – What makes a language foreign? Ehlich points out that *foreign* is a notion whose meaning is relative. In fact the German expression “etwas ist mir fremd” – actually takes this into consideration. Foreignness is a relational concept – something can be foreign with respect to something or someone. In this way, the Other cannot be detached from the Self.^{vi}

Although languages conventionally are labelled as foreign by virtue of the fact that they are taught to non-native speakers in a classroom setup, there are, as Ehlich rightly puts it, different degrees of foreignness. These are, on the one hand, a consequence of formal features such as syntactical, phonological or lexical differences, and on the other hand are determined by the role languages play as markers of national identity. Furthermore, linguistic foreignness is not only used as a means of demarcation between nations, but also for drawing up borders within nations, especially to speakers of immigrant or minority languages. Ehlich argues that this misuse of linguistic foreignness to sustain national identity is in conflict with recent trends of global communication and transnational migration.^{vii} Ehlich refers to the present state of

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education in the European Union, that is traditionally embedded in the monolingual habitus that does not recognize the multilingual repertoire of the migrant students. The Indian Germanist, Anil Bhatti (Professor emeritus, Centre of German Studies, JNU) looks at the problem of cultural homogenisation and heterogenization from an Indian perspective and pleads for an identity that is based on pluri-culturalism.

Pluri-culturalism, according to Bhatti, understands difference and otherness as being basic constituents of culture, and not as being in conflict with the system. The understanding of cultures as being adversarial, on the other hand, is dealing with difference as a disruptive factor, and is relegating otherness. In this way, cultural monads are constructed and hierarchies are fixed. As Jensen, Sandrock and Franklin so aptly put it, in the context of globalization, the term foreign language is a misnomer, and the use of the term *foreign* to describe the field of second- or third-language education fails to reflect the interconnectedness of the world's peoples, their languages, and their cultures. The word *foreign* also denotes exclusion, isolation, and alienation, rather than a sense of acceptance, collaboration, and community. This realization has caused educators in many states of the USA "to shift their thinking and, as a result, to adopt the term *world languages*, renaming the discipline to reflect a world where peoples and cultures are in a constant state of movement and interaction, and where knowledge of *world languages* will enable students to think and communicate globally in their future lives as citizens and workers."^{viii}

3. Foreigners and Foreign Languages in India: How "Indian" are Indian Languages?

In the words of Comparative literature scholar Rebecca Saunders, "primary among the meanings of foreign is not belonging, a meaning that marks the negative, relative, and dependent nature of foreignness and forces us to approach it *à rebours*: to understand foreignness we must back up and investigate belonging"^{ix} Truly, a discussion about "Foreignness" is incomplete without reflections on what is considered to be the "Own". The question that needs to be addressed is then: how "Indian" are Indian Languages? In his book *Foreigners and Foreign Languages in India*, Chaudhary writes "India has always been a multiracial, multi-ethnic, multinational and multilingual country."^x

First among the foreigners came from Europe the Greeks (*yavanas*) as traders and military adventurers and returned soon leaving some of their clans behind. Then came the Persians, the Arabs and the Turks. Later came the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English and the French.

Indians too travelled to China and beyond, up to the remote islands of the Philippines in the East and to Alexandria in the West. They went as merchants, missionaries and mercenaries. They exchanged goods and thoughts. Benares, Champa, Cochin, Kakinada, Masulipatnam and Surat were metropolises comparable with others of the time such as Alexandria and Shanghai. During the Buddhist period, Takshashila and Nalanda became

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known worldwide as seats of learning. They attracted thousands of students and scholars. Rajgir, Vaishali and Sarnath had many foreigners and pilgrims.

During the Muslim rule too, India remained a centre of knowledge. Delhi, Patna, and Jaunpur were known as centres of Islamic learning. During the British Rule, between late eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, Calcutta, and then Bombay and Madras, attracted foreigners in a similar manner. These foreigners interacted with the local population as both, friends and invaders. Their contact extended to agriculture, arts and architecture, business, commerce, crafts, culture, engineering, language and literature, law, marriage, medicine, navigation, technology, war and more. And in all of these, words were lent and borrowed, languages at home and those from abroad were used.^{xi}

Barring such exclusivist exceptions (mlechha)^{xii} among the upper class brahmins, India has predominantly been inclusivist in spirit. In fact, Chaudhary claims that there is hardly an Indian Language today, that has no words of foreign origin. Tribal Languages are no exception. Even Maithili, which is spoken predominantly in plains of Bihar and Nepal, has words from many foreign languages (gaarii- Persian, baranda – Portuguese, ekspres – English, sipaahi – Turkish, draaibhar – English.)

It is evident from the aforesaid, that the essence of languages lies in their non-essence and fluidity. One needs to look at all Languages: foreign and not-foreign as a part of one's unitary repertoire from which one can draw upon depending on the situation. Perhaps one could use a musical metaphor to comprehend this phenomenon. "The ability to deal with musical material allows a musician to play freely. The musician can improvise, create variations, change styles and tonalities. Multilingualism is something similar. It allows one to function with a language repertoire in an environment where the purity of essentialized language is not privileged. All attempts to sabotage multilingual situations wish to establish homogenized languages that can negotiate between one's "own" language and "foreign" languages."^{xiii}

4. The Queer Case of Indo-German Cultural Relations

Inda and Rosaldo point out rightly that owing to the "deterritorialization of cultures"^{xiv} in the era of Globalization, the traditional link between place and languages has been severed. Culture is visibly dislodged from its particular locales. This is, however followed by a simultaneous process of reterritorialization. Confirming these processes, are myriads of diasporic communities all over the world today. In Germany alone live about 1,69,000 people of Indian origin (2017 figures) including both German and Indian Passport holders. The Indian diaspora mainly comprises of professionals, technocrats, businessmen/traders and nurses. There has been an increase in the last few years in the number of qualified Indian professionals in the fields of IT, banking, finance, etc. There are a number of Indian organizations and associations active on the business/cultural front, cementing ties between India and Germany at the people-to-people level.^{xv}

However, the cultural interpenetrations between Germany and India go back to the 18th Century. One could recall the *Oriental Renaissance* of the likes of the Schlegel brothers and Herder and their commitment to self-discovery via India. Sanskrit was in fact highly looked upon by the German Indologists. Max Müller, the co-founder of the Department of Indology at Oxford, translated many ancient Indian texts into English. Paul Deussen and Schopenhauer were among the many others who brought India closer to Europe. At the turn of the century, one witnesses an increasing interest among Indian modern Thinkers in engaging with Germany. Sri Aurobindo for instance, during his stay in England learnt Latin, Greek, German, Italian, French, Arithmetic and Geography.^{xvi} Iqbal came to Heidelberg specifically to learn the German language. His tutor was Emma Wegenast. He wanted to speak German well enough to successfully pass the oral examination of his doctoral dissertation at Munich University.^{xvii} Rabindranath Tagore took keen interest in German culture in his teens when he started to learn German and tried to read Goethe's Faust in the original. The bilingual edition of Goethe's Faust bearing Rabindranath's pencilmarks on the German text is still preserved in the Rabindra Sadan at Santiniketan.^{xviii} Early 20th century is also marked by the beginnings of Teaching of German around 1914 in Mumbai and in Pune by the philologist Pandurang. D. Gune. In 1957, the first "Max Mueller Bhavan" was inaugurated in Kolkata. It was then opened in 1959 in Delhi, in 1960 in Madras as well as in Bangalore, in 1962 in Pune and in 1969 in Bombay. With the aim of making German language, literature and culture accessible to Indian students, the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi opened its "Centre of German Studies" in 1971.^{xix}

Migration and mobility have to be accepted as given today. It is these factors that have led to spatial interlinkages all over the world. This, however, does not reduce diversity. In spite of the spatial exchanges, the heterogeneity and the difference surprisingly remain intact, simply because of their distinct and unique meanings in the particular cultures. Bollywood in India and Bollywood in Berlin do not mean the same to Germans and to Indians. Why are Kinder joy eggs in India packaged differently than the German *Überraschungseier*? Where did the idea of the Mango Lassi originate if not in the villages of Punjab? The Schwarzwälderkirchtorte does not taste exactly the same as the Black Forest pastry in Indian bakeries. Why is that so? Why was a street in Berlin named after Rabindranath Tagore? What was the reason behind naming the Max Mueller Marg after Max Müller? It is worth knowing under what conditions Indology in Germany and German Studies in India flourished? The increasing spatial overlapping and entanglements serve as an immediate food for thought for any learner. It is the task of the language teacher to promote what I call the spirit of investigation and self-discovery that ought to be an integral part of any cultural discourse, thereby leading to the development of the situated, context-sensitive, historically-aware multilingual subject. This alone can beat the attitude of foreignness that is based on a restricted monolingual understanding of the Self.

5. The Complex Attitude of Foreignness and its implications in Modern Foreign Language Learning (MFLL)

Robert C. Gardner defines *attitude* as “an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual’s beliefs or opinions about the referent.”^{xx} Bartram writes, however, that attitude appears more strongly connected with the environmental variables than individual attributes. According to him, environmental variables comprise of educational and sociocultural influences.^{xxi}

The attitude of foreignness is essentially a socio-cultural attitude that influences learners’ perceptions about a particular language. The attitude of foreignness is based upon the perceptions of language utility and difficulty - these perceptions, in turn exercise control over the educational factors such as teacher-student relationship, curriculum, school ethos and even institutional policies.

As suggested earlier, foreignness is also reflected in the exoticisation of languages. Although there are Indian Universities such the Jawaharlal Nehru University that are inclusivist and self-critical and therefore have a School of Languages where all languages – Indian and non-Indian are taught under one umbrella, many Indian Universities still continue to have names like School of Foreign languages (IGNOU) or English and Foreign languages University (Hyderabad). Clearly, they choose to make out of their foreign language offerings a unique selling point for the consumer who cannot think beyond the purely utilitarian or the purely exotic.

Whereas globalization has its rewards, it also brings along underlying trends of disembodied, objectified approach to language learning and commodification of languages which is facilitated by

- the constant overflowing of unfiltered and uncontrolled information (mostly opiated knowledge)
- the lack of time to process the information and
- the fear of losing one’s so-called own identity.

The overexposure of opiated knowledge about languages leads to students already having pre-conceived notions about languages, as a result of which, the human agency of a teacher is not even given a chance in some cases. A glance at the question-answer-platform *Quora* can provide information about the prevailing attitudes that exhibit the dominant tendency of segregation and hierarchization:

“Which language has more scope, French, Chinese, Japanese, German or Spanish?”^{xxii}

The perception of utility is almost always marked by a process of selection based on the extrinsic worth of the language – which unfortunately forces teachers to act as marketing agents of the languages that they teach.

Closely linked with the attitude of foreignness is the perception of difficulty. Blog titles such as “Top 7 Easiest Languages to Learn for Beginners”^{xxiii} flood the world wide web today. Even before coming to class, students and parents want to know whether German is a difficult language to learn without realising that difficulty is, as is foreignness, a relational concept. Nothing can be difficult in itself. It is the learner who can possibly ascribe difficulty or ease depending on his/her individual learning experience.

Even colleagues who teach content subjects happen to inadvertently fall prey to the attitude of foreignness towards foreign language teachers, the dominant perception being that language teachers do not teach, they conduct fun classes. The idea of language teachers being perceived as working at the base of the pyramid of educational competence was interestingly also echoed by the Applied Linguist Claire Kramsch^{xxiv} (Professor Emerita of German and Education at the University of California, Berkley) in her talk on *The Challenges of Globalization in Foreign Language Education*. She shares her experience of how a fellow professor asked her to teach the form of the language and leave the critical thinking and meaning to the realm of the content subject teachers.

6. Back to the Controversy: Glocal Challenges

Owing to the media intervention and sensationalization, the controversy of 2014 unnecessarily led to a polarisation between a so-called native language and a so-called foreign language. The media never questioned why the Sanskrit teachers went to the High Court in the first place. Was it really a western conspiracy that they were trying to uproot or was it an existential threat that the Sanskrit teachers were facing due to the modern methods being applied by their German counterparts which started to attract more students towards them? A closer look at the Article 9.18.2 of the National Education Policy of India reveals how open to interpretation the policy actually is. It states:

“Language being a highly emotive issue, no prescription will satisfy all. Maximum flexibility needs to be given to state governments and local authorities in determining the choice of languages to be taught in the schools. With the passage of time, the states have responded to local aspirations and preferences voiced by parents who would like their children to possess language and communication skills that can facilitate intra-state, intraregional as well as global mobility.”^{xxv}

Although the basic objective behind the ‘Three Language Formula’ was, and still is, national unity and easy intra-state, inter-state and international communication,^{xxvi} its implementation suffers at the grass root level. Neither is Tamil or Malayalam being taught in the Hindi speaking states as the Third Language, nor is Hindi being taught properly in many

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regional states. Added to this, is the fact that learning a foreign language as a fourth or fifth language could make studies for school-goers rather burdensome. The Indian education policy makers need to wake up to the challenges that the global and the local seem to now pose even with greater immediacy. The already existing lack of support for the promotion of the Indian languages in India has been aggravated by the increasing presence of foreign languages. The solution to the problem, however, does not lie in forcing a new trend of foreign language learning in schools into the closet, but to look at them as an asset and to allow them to flow freely and contribute to the nation's empowerment. Students need not wait till they enter university to start learning a foreign language. At the same time, it is imperative to empower the regional languages that suffer from a lack of worth in the present market driven economy.

7. Conclusion

The essence of languages lies not in their essentialization but in their fluidity. One needs to look at all languages, foreign or regional, as a part of one's unitary repertoire from which one can draw upon, depending on the situation. Perhaps, one could use a musical metaphor to comprehend this phenomenon. *"The ability to deal with musical material allows a musician to play freely. The musician can improvise, create variations, change styles and tonalities. Multilingualism is something similar."* (Bhatti, 2014: 33) The term "foreign" language is a misnomer, as it fails to reflect the interconnectedness of the world's peoples, their languages, and their cultures. It thrives on an adversarial understanding of cultures and leads to unnecessary segregation and hierarchization. The need to learn and integrate foreign languages or any other language into one's being, should primarily arise from a situated, context-sensitive, historical-awareness. It has to stem from the need of "the fulfilment of the self, that is, the drive of the learner for physical, emotional, and social equilibrium" (Kramersch, 2009: 75). The goal of the foreign language education policy in India should not be reduced to creating monoculturally restricted, information seeking disembodied language consumers. It has to wake up to both- the global and the local challenges and be steered towards building a confident youth strengthening their local roots and at the same time inviting them to come out of their comfort zones of compartmentalized national identities and take a plunge into the unknown, into the 'foreign' and still find themselves.

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ⁱ <https://www.dw.com/en/sanskrit-or-german-a-row-over-foreign-languages-in-indias-schools/a-18069963> (Last accessed on: 2.8.2019)

ⁱⁱ The First language to be studied by a child must be the mother- tongue or the regional language.

The second language –

- (i) in Hindi speaking states should be some other Modern Indian language (MIL) or English, and
- (ii) in non-Hindi speaking states should be Hindi or English.

The Third language –

- (i) in Hindi speaking states will be English or a Modern Indian Language (MIL) not studied as the Second language, and
- (ii) in non-Hindi speaking states will be English or Hindi not studied as the Second language.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.goethe.de/ins/in/en/spr/eng/dts.html> (Last accessed on: 3.08.2019)

^{iv} <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2017/nov/02/german-school-students-to-get-a-taste-of-malayalam-hindi-1689626.html> (Last accessed on: 3.08.2019)

^v <https://www.ndtv.com/education/cbse-likely-to-exclude-purely-foreign-languages-from-three-language-formula-1760109> (Last accessed on: 3.08.2019)

^{vi} It is interesting at this point to delve upon the semantics of the expression ‘foreign’. “For German fremd, English dictionaries offer the translations strange in the sense of unbekannt (‘unknown’), ungewohnt (‘unusual’); foreign in the sense of ausländisch (‘outlandish’), fremdartig (‘different’); exotic as applying to nonnative plants; and, last but not least, outside in the sense of nicht dazugehörig (‘not-belonging’). If consulted in the other direction, they also yield alien in the sense of ‘foreign’, ‘outlandish’. Alien, however, is also listed as a translation for andersartig (‘different’), zuwider (‘repugnant’) and even a nicht naturalisierten Bewohner des Landes (‘non-naturalised inhabitant of a country’, Langenscheidt, 44).” (Knapp, K./Seidlhofer, B./Widdowson, H. (Ed.) (2009): Handbook of Foreign Language Communication and Learning. Vol. 6. Walter de Gruyter: Berlin/New York. p.23f.)

vii See Ibid. p.4f.

viii Jensen, J/Sandrock, P./Franklin, J. (2007): *The Essentials of World Languages, Grades K-12. Effective Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment*. Printed in the United States of America. Copyright: ASCD publications. p. 1f.

ix Saunders, R. (Ed.) (2003): *The Concept of The Foreign. An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*. Lexington Books: Oxford. p. 19.

x Chaudhary, S. (2009): *Foreigners and Foreign Languages in India. A Sociolinguistic History*. Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd.: New Delhi. p.3. Chaudhary describes the Indian culture as “an admixture” of six types:

- a. The Negrito, immigrants from Africa,
- b. The Proto-Australoids, who came from the West,
- c. The Mongoloids, living in Assam, Chittagong Hills and the Indo-Burmese frontiers,
- d. The Mediterranean people, speaking Dravidian languages,
- e. The Alpine, Dinaric and Armenoid, mainly in Bengal, Orissa and Gujarat of today,
- f. The Nordic group, speaking the Aryan languages, as in the early Vedas.

xi Chaudhary, S. (2009): *Foreigners and Foreign Languages in India. A Sociolinguistic History*. Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd.: New Delhi. p. 4f.

xii Deriving from classical textual expositions, Wilhelm Halbfass has discussed in his book *India and Europe* India’s aryan xenology, or ways of dealing with foreigners. Probably one of the earliest brahmanical term depicting a foreigner was *mlechha* (800 B.C), i.e. someone who was not a part of the ritual, religious, social and linguistic community of the Aryans. The *Brhadaryanyaka Upanisad* enjoined the Aryans from travelling ‘to the ends of the world’. Neither should one learn *mlechha* language, nor visit their lands. In *Somadeva’s Kathasaritsagara* (eleventh century), *mleccha* refers to the Muslims. He found it advisable not to have contact with *mlecchas*. *Arthashastra*, on the other hand, upholding its pragmatism, left the issue of collaboration with *mlecchas* to the discretion of the rulers. (Ray, J. K. (Ed.) (2007): *Aspects of India’s International Relations 1700 to 2000: South Asia and the World*. Vol. X Part 6. Pearson Longman: Delhi. p. 544)

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xvi <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/sri-aurobindo-facts-355680-2016-12-05> (Last accessed: 3.08.2019)

xvii See Mir, M. (2014): *Iqbal*. I.B. Tauris: London/New York. p. 8.

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xix <https://www.goethe.de/ins/in/en/spr/mag/20844619.html> (Last accessed on: 3.04.2019)

xx Bartram, B. (2010): *Attitudes to Modern Language Learning. Insights from Comparative Education*. Continuum: London/ New York. p. 34.

xxi Ibid. 43ff. According to Bartram, Educational influences on Attitudes are:

- Teacher (Method of teaching/ use of target language/ Lesson activities)
- Textbook and curriculum
- School ethos (School exchanges/Timetabling/availability of resources)

Socio cultural influences on Attitudes are:

- the learner’s close social environment; (the role of parents, friends and peers)
- the learner’s experiences and perceptions of the target- language speakers and communities;

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-
- the perceived social status of the languages learned. (media, perceptions of utility, perceptions of difficulty)

^{xxii} <https://www.quora.com/Which-language-has-more-scope-French-Chinese-Japanese-German-or-Spanish>

(Last accessed on: 3.04.2019)

^{xxiii} <https://www.rypeapp.com/blog/easiest-languages-to-learn/> (Last accessed on 4. 08. 2019)

^{xxiv} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ye7oj4ETuF4> (Last accessed on: 3.08.2019)

^{xxv} <http://nuepa.org/new/download/NEP2016/ReportNEP.pdf>, (Last accessed on: 3.08.2019)

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