

The Added Value of Learning Another Language

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In an increasingly multicultural society, language competencies and intercultural understanding are an essential part of being a world citizen. Learning another language not only exercises the brain to perform more effectively, it provides a mental consciousness and flexibility that builds intellectual character. It is a gift from which we can all benefit, and that we can offer to our children as they learn to live and work successfully as linguistically and culturally aware citizens.



John Ralston Saul, in promoting the learning of French among Canadian students, uses a corridor analogy to illustrate this point. He says that if you are unilingual, there are doors only on one side; whereas if you speak two languages, there are doors on both sides of the corridor. With two languages, there are two ways to think, two ways to perceive the world, and two ways to express ideas. Students then see things differently. Having another perspective on life, they can easily imagine that other languages exist, that there are other ways to view the world, that there are other ways to interact with the world. This allows students to become aware of their own cultural identity and to open up to other languages and other cultures. The students' identity and their self-esteem are enhanced as they become proud, engaged global citizens. This added value is complex, but life-changing.

Learning another language, however, is not an easy path; it is complicated, but rewarding. For young people to become engaged in language learning, it is important for them to have a personal connection to the language and to see the language as relevant to their lives. For this to happen, students need to become conscious of their choice to speak and to live in two or more languages. This language learning experience needs to be validated and nurtured by family, peers, and the community. Their personal growth as two-language learners and as two-language users needs to be recognized and celebrated by everyone in their immediate environment in order for them to feel validated for having chosen this path. The school and teachers need to have students talk about their language learning experience; students—adolescents especially—need to be commended and encouraged to go further by taking responsibility for their language learning and living in both languages. To further inspire them, they need to be exposed to people who have walked the walk and can talk the talk. Their family, peers, and community can support and honour language learning by participating in cultural activities and by organizing community events.

Another way to validate the experience of second language learning is to expose students to other languages, and to encourage them to learn a third language. Second language learners are often the ones who choose to learn other languages and, consequently, their perspective on life evolves even more. Adding another language and thereby opening up to another culture is now more familiar and enticing. The corridor now becomes multifaceted and *imagining the other* becomes endless. Learning languages becomes even more a part of who they are.

In learning languages, students learn to communicate in different ways, develop their capacity to learn other languages, and explore different world views in relation to their own. For all of us, learning languages is a vehicle to becoming a global citizen with a sense of self and openness to others. It is important for all to consider the value of language learning.

What role does language learning have in your life, in the lives of your children, of your family, or of your students?

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