

# Rationale for Studying a Second Language



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One day a mother mouse was taking her children for a walk. As the unsuspecting family rounded the corner of a building, they suddenly found themselves confronting the twitching whiskers of a hungry cat delighted to find such a tantalizing and unprotected delicacy within striking distance. Surveying the dangerous situation instantly, the quick-witted and learned mother raised herself to her greatest height, drew in a huge breath of air, and barked, 'Wuff! Wuff!' at the top of her voice. As the startled cat disappeared down the street, she turned to her darlings and said knowingly, 'See how it pays to know a second language.'<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the story of the quick-thinking mouse is simplistic, but it conveys an important message. In today's globalized world, mice are meeting cats, who are meeting dogs, who are meeting wolves. . . and so it goes. There is increased contact between all peoples of the world, whether it be in the economic sphere, the political world, or in the daily tasks of one's personal life. Fortunately, in most situations, a person is not in danger of being eaten by a menacing stranger, but the situation could be just as serious. A family is vacationing in Mexico when the youngest son is injured while riding a bike. The family rushes him to the hospital, but English is not spoken at the local hospital. Luckily the eighth grade daughter has taken several years of Spanish at school, and is able to facilitate communication between the doctors and the family. Or perhaps a small Asian child has lost her mother and is wandering around lost at a New York airport. Luckily a stranger passes by, notices the fear in the child's eyes, attempts to use the Chinese and Japanese that he has learned in the business world, and helps reunite the frightened family. It could be as simple as giving directions to a confused tourist. There are an infinite number of situations in which a person might be called upon to make use of their foreign language skills. But one thing is clear, the use of foreign languages is no longer only for those who plan to go to college and pursue prestigious careers.

There are many obvious benefits to studying a second language. In the modern world, increased contact with different cultures is an obvious reason. America is one of the most diverse countries in the world. Immigrants and tourists pour into the country. Though there are certainly concentrations of foreigners in the big cities, small towns are becoming more international as well. The trend in the past was for immigrants to learn English and assimilate into mainstream culture, but this trend is

weakening as many no longer become proficient in English. In addition to the flux of non-English speakers into the United States, Americans are now traveling abroad in record numbers, thanks to the ease and cheapness of travel. Foreign language skills not only aid in communication, but also in the understanding and acceptance of foreign cultures. All of these factors present situations in which the knowledge of a second language can prove invaluable. By speaking a foreign language, you become an "ambassador" helping to shape the opinions that others will have of our country and culture. . . a crucial role in our increasingly interdependent world. In addition to travel, other leisure activities are affected by the knowledge of a second language. A person who speaks a second language can read the literature of that language, watch movies or TV of another culture, listen to music in another language. It is clear that foreign language skills can greatly improve one's quality of life.

Another obvious reason for learning a second language is the range of benefits in the business/economic world. International corporations have come to dominate the world economy, and have thus created a demand for bilingual workers. The possession of a second language can increase the opportunities for a worker. The worker may receive a higher base salary, may enter a job at a higher position, or have more choices in the country in which they work. Bilingual employees can not only communicate with foreign clients, but can also aid in communication between the different branches of an international company. Language skills can clearly make a person more marketable.

Marketability is not the only asset that a person gains by learning a second language. Foreign language skills can also prove valuable in areas such as government, politics, or national security. National security, for example, is currently a large concern in the post-September 11 world. In the recent and several previous terrorist acts, the need for speakers of a foreign language has come to light. According to a report in *The Baltimore Sun*, there was "vital information" available before the 1993 attacks against the World Trade Center, but the information was not translated in time. The same newspaper reported that FBI agents were "stumped by a highly unusual local language and never found anyone with proper security clearance who could translate".<sup>2</sup> There is a clear need for the training of more personnel in second languages.

But let me get to the real reason for the present article. Politics, business, national security, foreign travel. . . this is the stuff of the adult world. I intend to explain why it is important to educate our children in foreign languages. Children are capable of learning a second language regardless of sex, race, IQ level, and even other academic strengths or weaknesses.<sup>3</sup> And through the teaching of foreign languages, children gain not only the ability to speak another language, but there are gains in many other arenas as well. We use a broad range of strategies and approaches to teach foreign languages. Aside from typical textbook learning, students watch movies in other languages, listen to tapes of other languages, work in role-playing activities, read literature of other cultures, learn about the arts of other cultures, and learn history and geography of other parts of the world. Foreign languages are taught in such an interdisciplinary manner, the benefits of teaching are far-reaching.<sup>4</sup>

There are also many impressive statistics showing the correlation between an increase in a student's achievement and foreign language education. "Children who have studied a foreign language show greater cognitive development in such areas as mental flexibility, creativity, divergent thinking, and higher order thinking skills."<sup>5</sup> Studies show that foreign language study is linked to high levels of creativity and increased problem-solving skills. Students who have studied a foreign language perform up to a full year higher in English vocabulary.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these improvements, students who have studied foreign languages also score higher on standardized testing, including the SATs and ACTs. This has been proven repeatedly in various studies: "The Louisiana Report," studies by Landry, and Kessler and Quinn.<sup>7</sup> It would be a waste to not educate a student in a subject area that can so greatly enrich their education.

Foreign language study must begin at a young age. This is not something that we can put off until later years of schooling. Studies show that when young children learn a language, they use the same brain circuits for both their native and second languages. This capacity seems to disappear around the age of seven or eight, and adult learners have to rely on special brain circuits to learn a second language, putting the adults at a severe disadvantage. The brain of a child is said to be most receptive until the ages of 10-12.<sup>8</sup> Why don't we start foreign language education before then? A firm foundation is necessary to build upon to be truly effective in the teaching of a foreign language.

To build the necessary foundation for language proficiency, we must have regular foreign language classes. Students need to hear, speak, read, or write in the second language every day. I know that many parents have heard themselves say it: "Practice makes perfect." If we provide our students with the proper instruction, and give them sufficient time to study and practice a foreign language, we will be giving them so much more than proficiency in Spanish, French, or German. The benefits of a second language are so far-reaching, so obvious, and so important. It would be a true shame if we did not give this to our students. When communities consider scheduling and budgeting for the school year, they should take these realities into account. Educating a child in a foreign language could prove to be more valuable than any of us might imagine.

## Notes

- 1 Chastain, Kenneth, *Developing Second-Language Skills: Theory to Practice*, Chapter 1, pp. 3-13, Rand-McNally, 1976.
- 2 Morrison, Sally, "9/11 Brings U.S. Defense Language Needs into Focus", in *ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics*, Online Newsletter, December 2001. Found at [http://kcardenas.pageout.net/page.dyn/student/course/notes\\_frame?url\\_link=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cal.org%2Fericll%2Flanglink%2Fdeccurrent2.html&course\\_id=81482](http://kcardenas.pageout.net/page.dyn/student/course/notes_frame?url_link=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cal.org%2Fericll%2Flanglink%2Fdeccurrent2.html&course_id=81482).
- 3 "What does Research Report about Foreign Languages?" Found at [http%3A%2F%2Fwww.pageout.net%2Fuser%2Fwww%2Fk%2Fc%2Fkcardenas%2FML%2520420%2520Less%25201%2520Rationale%2520II.ht&course\\_id=81482](http://kcardenas.pageout.net/page.dyn/student/course/notes_frame?url_link=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.pageout.net%2Fuser%2Fwww%2Fk%2Fc%2Fkcardenas%2FML%2520420%2520Less%25201%2520Rationale%2520II.ht&course_id=81482)
- 4 Strickland, Larry and Wolfgang Hirsch, eds. "The State of Foreign Languages in Washington State: Section 1 Benefits of Foreign Language Training." [www.k12.wa.us/WaLang/whitepaper.asp](http://www.k12.wa.us/WaLang/whitepaper.asp)
- 5 "What does Research Report about Foreign Languages?"
- 6 Strickland
- 7 "What does Research Report about Foreign Languages?"
- 8 *Ibid.*