

Benefits of Learning a Foreign Language

The Benefits of Learning a Foreign Language

Over the past twenty years much research has been conducted which documents the benefits of knowing how to communicate in more than one language. Kathleen Marcos, in her article entitled, "Second Language Learning: Everyone Can Benefit," describes the personal, cognitive, academic, and societal benefits of second language learning. She cites several research studies that underscore the cognitive, academic, and societal benefits for students who learn a foreign language.

Cognitive Benefits - Children in foreign language programs have tended to demonstrate greater cognitive development, creativity, and divergent thinking than monolingual children. Several studies show that people who are competent in more than one language outscore those who are speakers of only one language on tests of verbal and nonverbal intelligence (Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker, 1974; Hakuta, 1986; Weatherford, 1986).

Other studies suggest that students who are learning another language show greater creativity at solving complex problems than their monolingual peers (Bamford and Mizokawa, 1991).

Recent research indicates that "the length of time students study a foreign language relates directly and positively to higher levels of cognitive and metacognitive processing" (Rosenbusch, 1995).

Academic Benefits - Studies also show that learning another language enhances the academic skills of students by increasing their abilities in reading, writing, and mathematics. In a 1994 report on the impact of magnet schools in the Kansas City Public Schools, it showed that students in the foreign language magnet schools had boosted achievement significantly (Eaton, 1994). It reported that students in the language magnet's first kindergarten, starting in the program in 1988, had surpassed national averages in all subjects by the time they reached fifth grade. And the foreign language students performed especially well in mathematics.

Similar studies with students in intensive second language programs show these students scoring as well as or better than their monolingual peers on standardized achievement tests in basic skills. In the Cincinnati Public Schools, 2,901 learners in grades K-8 are enrolled in the district's foreign language magnet schools. In 1994, the California Achievement Test was administered to all learners in grades K-8 and 10. A higher percentage of learners in the foreign language magnet schools was at or above the national norm in comparison with non-magnet learners in reading, language, and mathematics.

Children in Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia who were enrolled in the district's foreign language partial immersion program achieved higher test scores in English language arts than did their non-immersion peers.

The K-8 French and Spanish immersion schools in the Columbus, Ohio City School District are two of the top four elementary schools whose students pass all five sections of the state proficiency tests in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and citizenship.

Students who complete a long sequence of foreign language learning increase their academic skills in other subject areas.

In "Foreign Language Study and SAT-Verbal Scores," the authors found that learners who study a foreign language improve their scores on the verbal sections of standardized exams such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT)

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and that scores continue to climb with each additional year of language study (College Entrance Examination Board, 1992; Cooper, 1987).

Societal Benefits - People who communicate in at least two languages are an asset to the communities in which they live and work. Increasing numbers of jobs now require people who are capable of interacting with people who speak languages other than English and can adapt to a wide range of cultural backgrounds. In addition, the ability to communicate in a foreign language contributes to a student's overall achievement of personal and professional career goals.

Four out of five new jobs in the United States are created as a result of foreign trade.

Each year 200,000 Americans lose out on jobs with business because they do not know another language (The Tongue Tied American).

According to the Kiplinger Washington Editors (1996), the Hispanic share of the work force will increase by 25 percent by 2010. The Asian share will increase by 50 percent. Minorities will keep moving up the corporate ladder in the next 15 years. Managers who know how to deal with a diverse work force will have an advantage.

The telecommunications industry has provided us with the opportunity to communicate on a worldwide basis. To keep pace with this new global marketplace, our educational system must provide learners with the interactive linguistic and cultural skills for the day-to-day situations of employment both at home and around the world.

In summary, echoing the recommendations set forth in *Strength Through Wisdom*, the 1979 national study on foreign language and international studies commissioned by the President of the United States, the United States must have quality foreign language programs in our schools so that all students will graduate with the ability to interact linguistically and culturally with people from many countries. Students who are competent in at least two languages will dramatically increase the US capabilities in diplomacy, in world trade, and in human understanding.

In addition to the multiple benefits described above, students who learn a foreign language have the unique opportunity to understand the nature of themselves as young men and women and their relationship to the world about them. Such realization leads to a different approach to learning and growing and extends far beyond the language classroom. Perhaps the broadest and most important function of all foreign language study is to provide a more liberating educational experience for students -- the vocationally oriented as well as the college bound, the poor, as well as the middle-class and the rich. As students are given the opportunity to learn a foreign language, they have the unique opportunity to understand the nature of themselves as young men and women and their relationship to the world about them, benefits which all of our students will need and will carry with them far beyond the language classroom.

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