

THE VALUE OF FRENCH

by JOAN NETTEN

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The economy, jobs, and the education system, are major topics of conversation these days. Emphasis is being placed on the “education equals jobs” equation, despite the fact that the equation is not quite as simple as presented. Much has been said of the role which Science, Mathematics and Technology play in our lives and the need to increase the proportion of the curriculum devoted to these areas. There’s an underlying assumption that skills in these areas will ensure employment for our children. This view is, however, an oversimplification of a much more complex problem. Employment cannot really be ensured for any high school graduate, or group of graduates, possessing certain skills. The precise skills that will be required in the market place in five or ten year’s time cannot be predicted with any great degree of accuracy. Furthermore, there is quite simply no way of knowing what career opportunities will present themselves to a particular graduate as he or she enters the job market. This uncertainty raises important questions about the aims of public schooling. What experiences should we ensure all our children have, and what skills should we ensure they possess, in order to interact successfully with whatever vicissitudes they will encounter in their lives.

It is possible to argue that exposure to a wide variety of subject areas in the elementary and secondary school is the most effective preparation for post-secondary education and subsequent employment. Certainly, an understanding of our human nature is as essential to success in life as the ability to manipulate a computer. It is these considerations that require us to reflect carefully about the totality of the curriculum to which our children are exposed. To do this effectively we must look beneath the obvious subject divisions. Benefits of instruction in any academic area may be greater than we realize. This is particularly so for second language study. Science and Mathematics, for example, teach problem solving and hypothesis-testing skills. Recent developments in cognitive psychology have shown that these same skills are also enhanced by studying a second language.

What is the role of French in the curriculum? Are there benefits to studying French throughout the school years? Given the current unstable political situation in Canada, is the study of French really relevant to education for the year 2001 and beyond? Much more so than we might at first think.

More and more it can be seen that our world is becoming a global village. Knowledge of one language is unlikely to be enough for many of our children. Economic growth is related to the number of languages in which business can be conducted. English is not the only language of communication and multi-lingualism is an advantage in doing business. Anyone who travels out of the province, and particularly North America, is struck by the multicultural nature of the world. The Japanese speak the languages of the countries they deal with, and the European countries are rapidly expanding and improving their second language programs. Canadian businesspeople are already indicating they want employees who can understand, speak and write effectively in the languages in which business is conducted. To be effective participants of the 21st century, our children need the opportunity to learn a second language.

In Newfoundland, because of its status as a province in Canada, the most useful second language for all students to study is French. However, second language study does not need to be restricted to the study of French. Students in schools are already becoming familiar with the existence of many other languages through the numbers of foreign students who are learning English as a second language. Schools elsewhere regularly offer instruction in German and Italian, among other languages, and interest in Spanish is rapidly increasing in North America as trade with Mexico expands. Learning any second language makes the learning of a third or a fourth language easier, no matter what the second language is or at what age it’s learned. When we realize that most countries will probably have free trade by the year 2000, the need for such an ability becomes increasingly apparent.

Not only is a second language useful in business, but the study of another language develops mental capacities which tie in with the technological age. Business managers say that when they are looking for someone to run a computer centre or oversee a project, they will often select language majors because they are able to manipulate systems of thought. The ability to perceive patterns, solve problems, and grasp meaning from a limited number of clues, are skills which are required for technological advancement. These skills are enhanced by second language study.

Students of a second language have also been shown to have increased creativity. The need to solve problems of how to express a thought in another language increases divergent thinking skills. Monolinguals tend to be somewhat rigid in their perceptions of the world and its problems. Those who have studied a second language tend to think more originally, to see new and different patterns in their world, and thus develop innovative ways of solving problems. They are more likely to be flexible thinkers. This is why they are often sought after in business, politics, and to initiate technological advancement.

In addition, a second language is learned by making guesses, or hypotheses, about how the language works. These guesses are then tested, and confirmed, rejected or modified. This practice increases considerably the learner's ability to develop and evaluate hypotheses.

A more personal advantage of second language study is the ability to resist stereotyping, both intellectually and personally. Students of a second language are better able to develop strategies for assessing human behavior, separating it from language and cultural stereotypes. They are also better able to appreciate their own individuality and thus resist excessive pressure to conform.

Perhaps most important in a world where the fast pace of change makes it difficult to predict the future are the psychological advantages. Studying French increases coping skills. Second language learners develop strategies to overcome feelings of insecurity when faced with the unknown or the ambiguous. Furthermore, they are encouraged to take risks with language and thus risk-taking behaviors are encouraged. Repeated success in communicating despite difficulties also increases self-confidence.

In addition, those who study a second language, such as French, learn to communicate with other people and participate in another culture. This accomplishment in itself is exciting and stimulating. Not only can this skill contribute to successful business opportunities, but to an enriched lifestyle, increased personal friendships, and a fuller participation in many facets of life. There are further social advantages. Not only does the second language learner become more aware of the many cultures in our world, but also more tolerant of different view-

points. However, what is even more important, the second language learner is more able to perceive the essential similarities in human nature. This increased awareness of people, and of the characteristics of our human nature, contributes to increased interpersonal communication skills, an advantage in all aspects of life.

Learning French can also contribute to the enhancement of English language ability. Vocabulary is increased, and more attention is paid to the nuances of language, increasing the possibilities of effective and accurate communication in English.

It is to be noted, of course, that these advantages of second language study do not accrue to learners after two or three years of studying French. Some degree of fluency in the second language is required to benefit from the intellectual, psychological, and personal advantages. However, students who continue studying French from the elementary school to the end of high school do have the opportunity to develop fluency in the language and thus partake of all the benefits of second language study.

Whatever career path may be open to our students, whatever job opportunities, they must always operate in a human environment. At a more philosophical level, an understanding of the human condition is essential in order to direct and master scientific and technological advances. This reality of our existence should not be brushed aside by a too superficial view of what constitutes an appropriate curriculum for students of the province. The ability to understand and communicate with others and to cope with changing circumstances are required skills for successful living. Students should be encouraged to study subjects which enhance these skills just as much as those which focus on problem-solving and hypothesis-testing. By studying French, they can combine benefits of both.

Joan Netten is a Professor at the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

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