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Persuasive Paper

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Building to Bilingual: Foreign Language Learning

Searching for “foreign language” on a library database will bring up over 4500 articles and scholarly papers dealing with the topic. Searching the same keywords on Google finds 22.5 million results. For a topic that is so broadly covered both in print and online, it is given very little thought by the average American student. For many of us, foreign language is learned simply because it is required. We as students fail to realize the usefulness of language in connecting with our world. Language plays such a critical part in today’s society that it is necessary to rethink the current methods of teaching foreign languages and to work on adapting students’ attitudes toward learning foreign languages.

An important change that needs to be made in teaching foreign language is starting language classes in elementary school and continuing them throughout a child’s primary and secondary school career. Although foreign language has been made a requirement for graduation in most high schools and colleges and may even be offered at the middle school level, finding it at the elementary level is unusual. This seems counterintuitive. Great emphasis is placed on learning proper English grammar and vocabulary from the day a child enters school, yet students are expected to become fluent in a second language after only a few years of instruction. I myself found that even after taking Spanish 1-5 in high school, I have not reached a level that could be called fluency.

Joseph Berger points out, “Unlike many Europeans and Asians who learn languages in primary school, most Americans do not get the chance until high school or in the grades just before—at too advanced an age to soak in quirky words and syntax with the nimbleness needed for fluency.” When students are young, the fun of learning a new language also outweighs embarrassment and worry about speaking perfectly. Mary Lynn Pearlman, a kindergarten teacher, says of her students, “They’re like sponges. In middle school they would worry about how they sound and their accent. Here, they don’t care” (qtd. in Berger). Amazingly, studying foreign language can actually enhance learning in other subjects. One source reports, “Several research studies since the 1990s have concluded that elementary pupils learning a foreign language performed better on standardized tests in math and reading than their peers who were not in such classes” (Manzo). Learning a foreign language can even help with understanding of English. Often when students learn how grammar works in a foreign language, then the same concepts in English make more sense. For all these reasons, the sooner language study is started, the more students will benefit.

Whether or not they are started in elementary school, classes should be expanded to cover the culture of the countries instead of just the grammar and vocabulary of the language. In a report from the Modern Language Association in May 2007, “moves to infuse language education with cultural content” were strongly endorsed (Bollag). Georgetown University’s foreign language program “emphasizes the differences in style that each linguistic task calls for. Learn that, the department says, and you can communicate with native [...] speakers much more knowledgeably than typical graduates” (Bollag). Instead of just learning the formal language normally taught in

textbooks, students should be learning words that could be used in an everyday conversation. With a greater knowledge of what life is really like in these cultures, students will be able to interact better with the average local citizens. This allows students to gain much more from time spent abroad. Professor Thomas J. Garza comments, “The sooner we bring in authentic texts—like literature, film, and TV, the sooner we’ll give students cultural literacy” (qtd. in Bollag). Studying materials that actually came from the culture under study makes much more sense than studying something that may have been designed entirely in the United States. Elizabeth Knutson wrote an article in which she proposes acknowledging the barriers that students may have in learning about foreign cultures based on their own cultural identity. By barriers, she means that we are used to our own American culture and may be uncomfortable or even hostile about learning something different from our norm. By acknowledging these barriers instead of ignoring or contesting them, we can reach a better understanding of the differences and similarities of the cultures (Knutson 594-95). By teaching with this focus, we as students can gain a feel for the scope of our world and our role as only one culture among many equally valid cultures. In Knutson’s words, the hope is “that [students] begin to see themselves, and not just others, as culturally *marked* [emphasis original]” (598). Learning not only vocabulary and grammar, but also culture and history of these countries can help us fully appreciate them and immerse ourselves in them.

When learning a new language, we are lucky to have many options for ways to study, practice, and engrain concepts into our minds. However, most foreign language classes are not making full use of these potential teaching tools. Even when videos are in use in classrooms, they tend to be tapes made several decades ago, dated by the clothes

and hairstyles of the actors in them. We may find this humorous, but it is hard to relate to films that contain little relevance to us today beyond the vocabulary and concepts the films are meant to teach. Shows such as “Dora the Explorer,” which teaches Spanish, and the upcoming “Ni Hao Kai Lin,” which will teach Mandarin Chinese on the Nick Jr. channel are excellently designed to teach children new languages using modern methods (Danford). However, such shows designed for older students have yet to be introduced. Watching modern films dubbed in the language of choice using subtitles if necessary could also function as listening practice for students. This would be a way to engage student’s interest in the subject by using a medium they already enjoy and are familiar with. With the advent of the iPod and other MP3 playing portable devices, audio has become the medium of choice for many people wanting to learn a foreign language. Sources report that publishers are beginning to release dictionaries and phrasebooks with included CDs of MP3 files. Available in the market are titles ranging from *Get Talking Chinese*, a book and CD package, to iSpeak, a program that includes MP3s designed for the iPod with a phrasebook, to *Dirty Japanese*, which teaches less formal, more day-to-day phraseology (Danford). This does not even begin to touch on the myriad of sources available on the Internet, such as online flash cards and complete dictionaries. With the broad spectrum of modern teaching materials available, it is foolish to hold students back in the past in the foreign language classroom.

Possibly the most important thing that students studying foreign languages have to learn is to have respect for other cultures and especially for those people from other cultures who have to learn English as a second language. Americans tend to be snobbish about language. Since English has become so common in many countries around the

world, Americans have developed the “mindset that everyone else in the world could learn English” (Berger). We as English speakers can travel almost anywhere in the world and be fairly certain that there we will be understood, or if we cannot, there will be a translator to do the necessary talking for us. This view can lead to disrespect towards those we may encounter who have difficulty with English. Amy Tan, a writer born to Chinese immigrants, relates such a case involving her mother, who had trouble with people on multiple occasions due to her broken speech. In one instance, Mrs. Tan’s stock broker failed to send a check to her on time, and would not remedy the situation for so long that she had to go in person to the office to complain. In another case, doctors unapologetically told Mrs. Tan that she would have to make an appointment to return at another time, because her CT scan had gone missing and they could give her no more information at that time. It was only when Mrs. Tan forced them to call her daughter, who spoke perfect English, that they apologized for their mistake and promised it would be resolved quickly (Tan 179-180). By studying foreign languages, we learn to empathize with those people who have to go through the struggle of mastering English. Instead of expecting others to cater to us, we can make the effort to learn new languages as a way to reach out and understand others better. Six-year-old Ryan Geary explains, “[I like to learn Spanish] because I have some Spanish friends, and they don’t speak much English” (qtd. in Berger). Another student studying Arabic in college agrees, “There are so many ways to connect with people [...] But language being a specifically human phenomenon makes so much possible” (Community College Week).

Some might have objections to the assertion that foreign language is a critical subject in need of even more focus. We could argue that it is too late for us in college to

truly learn a new language since we are beyond the easy learning curve of our childhood years. This is a case where today's technology comes into play; we have the ability to choose the form of learning that suits us best and will best enable us to retain the language as we learn. Some schools are concerned with the restructuring that would be necessary in their language programs, and would prefer to leave things as they are currently—teaching vocabulary and grammar for several years and teaching literature in the upper levels. What schools must realize is that the costs of restructuring now will be far outweighed by the resulting achievements of the students going through the programs. As one teacher working in such a restructured program stated, “You need to just start it” (Manzo). Another possible objection could be that students do not see how foreign language could be useful to them if they are not traveling in foreign countries or working in a field that specifically uses language. It need only be said that immigrants are not only found on the borders of the United States; even living in the middle of the country for the entirety of one's life, there may be an opportunity to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Even if we never have the chance to use the language in daily practice, the lessons we learn about these other cultures will affect the way we interact with and view the world. This is why the study of foreign language and cultures remains important.

Foreign language is an important tool in the world today, making it necessary to adapt methods of teaching and the attitudes of the students learning to gain the most from foreign language classes. Starting at a young age, placing focus on the culture of the countries in addition to language, and using available technology to enhance the learning experience can all lead to improved foreign language programs. Most importantly,

teaching foreign languages and cultures also leads to a broader understanding of the world and a greater respect for all people. By improving these programs and making a concerted effort to learn, the future may bring multilingual generations of students who have learned to view life through a more global perspective.

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