



The Importance of Foreign Language Study

The November 2004 edition of Phi Delta Kappa's educational journal focused on the importance of International education in their article, "Improving Students' Capacity in Foreign Language" written by Myriam Met, director of the National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland. How nice it is to realize that Hilldale School's foreign language program, which begins in Kindergarten, surpasses the vast majority of elementary schools in the nation!

Met points out that about 6% of the world's population speak English as their primary language and that about 25% can speak at least basic English. Flip the numbers around and one realizes that 75% of the world's population do not understand English. With such numbers and the current international trend to use English as the world-wide language of communication, is learning a foreign language still important for English-speaking students in the United States? The answer is emphatically yes!

The reasons cited in the past for studying a foreign language still exist. Students who learn languages use areas of their brains not ordinarily used and thereby sharpen the intellect. They learn about grammar in a way which is not usually taught in English classes; this in turn transfers to a more correct use and a better understanding of our own language. Students who learn languages develop geographic and cultural knowledge of the rest of the world and a perspective concerning Americans' place in the world, which help them in other subjects, such as history and politics. They learn to have empathy and understanding for others who may be "different" from themselves, both abroad and at home. They feel more at ease in traveling outside our country. And they become more self-confident as they develop proficiency in a skill which is initially "foreign" to them.

Myriam Met points out several other important reasons for learning a language, which are perhaps more tangible to older students. Students who are required to study a foreign language have often been told that they might eventually use such skills as a translator or while simply traveling or conducting business overseas. However, as the United States shifts from a manufacturing to a service economy, more business is being done internationally than ever before. While the fact that English is being spoken more and more by people in other countries eases the need for knowing foreign languages, speaking to someone in his or her "native tongue," or at least showing an interest in the culture by using some foreign phrases, builds trust and thereby increases business and business profits. If businesses wish to succeed internationally, they must establish this sense of trust, and they tend to hire people who have knowledge of the target countries' languages. Society is changing so rapidly that it is not easy to predict the future careers of today's students.

However, it is clear that those who are monolingual are gambling that they can be successful only with proficiency in English. Those who become multilingual are at least leaving options open for themselves and even improving their chances of being hired, receiving a greater salary, and being retained by the company. Perhaps even more important is the fact that the national security of the United States is contingent upon thousands, if not millions, of people being able to fluently speak a foreign language. The military has always used foreign language speakers overseas in a variety of operations. However, with today's climate of hostility by some nations toward Americans, the need for good intelligence has skyrocketed. Even if government agencies are able to gather intelligence data, it is useless unless there are people who are sufficiently proficient in the languages to inter



pret the information. While there is no way to predict which languages may be essential in the forthcoming generations, research has shown that students who learn one foreign language can more easily be cross-trained in another language than a person who is monolingual.



Mets supports her assertions of the need for foreign language study by pointing to the research of Penny Armstrong and Jerry Rodgers, as summarized in their article “Basic Skills Revisited: The Effect of Foreign Language on Reading, Math and Language Arts.” Their research, and that of others, documents that “1) There are no negative effects on test scores when a school takes time out of the regular day for foreign language instruction; 2) On standardized achievement tests young language learners often outperform their peers who are not studying a foreign language; and 3) Even when there is no difference in academic achievement between students studying a language and those who are not, the former learn more, simply because they gain foreign language skills in additions to everything else the comparison groups also learns.” In other words, *why not* learn a language if it is probably helpful and certainly does not harm the student?

Sadly, only about 33% of elementary schools offer a foreign language to their students. This percentage does not mean that one out of every three elementary students studies a foreign language. In fact, since it is often optional rather than mandatory, the percentage of elementary students who actually study a foreign language is significantly smaller. Most of those only receive lessons about once a week for less than an hour and do not begin until about fifth grade or later, when it is no longer as easy for a student to learn a language. Research has documented that multiple opportunities to hear the target language each week and more total instructional minutes are necessary for a student to “truly learn and acquire” a new language. Studies have also shown that if a child does not reach a fair proficiency by around the age of 11-12 years, he or she will not be able to have a native accent and natural fluency and will have trouble “thinking” in the target language.

The good news is that *all* Hilldale students study Spanish starting in Kindergarten. Hilldale’s program builds on the best practices revealed in studies of successful foreign language programs. All students take Spanish twice a week in two 45-minute sessions. This time is at least 50% higher than the national average for those who do take a foreign language! We also make sure that the students are having extensive dialog with the teacher, thus facilitating a natural acquisition of the language. Our program offers continuity in the year to year curriculum and aims to develop an intermediate proficiency by the time they exit eighth grade.

As our school population grows, we plan to expand the foreign language program to include other languages, as well. These will be offered in Middle School and optionally after school. They will support and extend our commitment to developing students who understand the important concept of world citizenship – the idea that we must be knowledgeable of other countries and peoples, that we must be tolerant of the differences so that all people in the ever-more-interconnected world can thrive and get along, and that we must each do our part in making the whole world a better place.

