

Andrew

WR 13300

Professor Clauss

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Second Language Acquisition

Situation: As a student who has taken a second language from grade six to the present, I am a firm believer in people learning a second language. I am writing a speech for my classmates in my Writing and Rhetoric class that they should attempt to learn a second language, even though they might not see a use for it. My ultimate goal is to convince them of the importance of being bilingual and that they should make the effort to learn another language.

¿Cómo están mis compadres? Soy muy partidario de todo el gente de los Estados

Unidos aprender un idioma extranjero. Unfortunately, most of you won't understand the first couple lines of my speech asking how you are and how I am a firm believer that all people in the U.S. should learn a foreign language. According to Francois Grosjean, Ph.D. professor at Neuchâtel University in Switzerland, only a mere 20% of the U.S. population is bilingual. Compare that to the rest of the world, where Grosjean estimates that more than half of the world's population speaks two or more languages on a daily basis. Learning a second language has advantages in the business world, in the job market, in cognitive abilities, in mastering English, and in the global community in which we live. Although, I have not yet achieved fluency myself, particularly in Spanish, I still have seen and experienced the benefits of knowing, or not knowing, a second language in my own life and the lives of others around me.

Let me begin by talking with you all about the importance of knowing a second language in business. As is clear by the previously stated facts by Grosjean, the United States lags far behind other nations in the ability to speak multiple languages. This lack of multilingual abilities is detrimental in our 21st century global economy and will only become increasingly worse as the

years go on. In the words of President Barack Obama, a strong supporter for the education of a second language, “We should have every [American] child speaking more than one language” (qtd. Berdan). The two languages that Americans should focus primarily on learning are Chinese and Spanish. Chinese is the most widely spoken language in the world, followed by Spanish, and then English, a surprising fact to many Americans (“Most”). Chinese is particularly important to learn because China is already a major economic powerhouse in the global market. Additionally, Spanish is not only the second most widely spoken language in the world, but the language of our neighbors to the south is also the second most widely spoken language in the United States (Berdan). Likewise, Stacie Berdan, an award-winning author on how to succeed in the global marketplace, mentions how countries like Mexico and other Latin American countries are “growing in economic importance.” Being able to speak more than one language takes down a major barrier that has somewhat hindered economic relations in the past. In an expanding global economy with countries like China and those in Latin America becoming bigger players each year, Americas cannot afford to sit back and hope that everyone else learns English. We must adapt and learn other languages in order to not be passed economically by foreign countries on the rise.

Similarly, being bilingual is advantageous when applying for a job, whether in business or a multitude of other fields. In relation to Berdan’s points, employers in this global economy are looking for those applicants that can survive in the economy without the crutch of a translator. However, America is becoming increasingly diverse in all fields, not just in business. Employers in fields such as “business, education, health care, government, hospitality, law enforcement [and] marketing fields” often look for job candidates who have bilingual abilities (Anderson). An applicant fluent in multiple languages is regularly held in higher regard than

others who are not. Employers view these types of job seekers as people who are “smart and skilled with languages” and are more likely to pick a bilingual candidate “even if language skills have nothing to do with the job” (Butler). In my own life, I have not yet dealt with the job market or seen the firsthand advantages of being bilingual. However, my brother, Matt a college senior and new member to the job market, has quickly regretted not obtaining proficiency in another language throughout his many years of schooling. He has reaffirmed all the statements above that being bilingual gives one the upper hand in the prospective job market.

Additionally, employers considering job candidates “smart,” as Butler tells us, does not lack factual support. According to College Board in 2007, students who had taken a foreign language for four or more years scored, on average, 420 points higher on the SAT than students who had not taken a language for that period of time (qtd. Butler). In addition to better test scores, proficiency in multiple languages improves one’s cognitive skills and attention span (Butler). Also, people who can speak two languages tend to “have better listening skills and a greater understanding of their native language” (Anderson). Likewise, these enhanced cognitive abilities are evident even from a young age in bilingual children. Therese Caccavale, president of the National Network for Early Language Learning, asserts that children fluent in two or more languages develop “object permanence” faster than children who are only fluent in their native language (Abbott et al.). What object permanence means is the understanding that an object has the same purpose no matter what you call it. Here are two similar examples for you all. The first is that if a little boy sees a book, he knows what the book’s function is whether his parents call it, “a book” in English or “*un libro*” in Spanish. Similarly, if the same little boy were getting a drink of water, he would know that whether his parents call it, “a cup” or “a glass,” that the two, for all intents and purposes, are the same thing. The purpose of telling you both examples is to

show that object permanence is applicable to both bilingual and monolingual children.

Caccavale, a strong supporter of teaching foreign language from a young age, states, “Foreign language learning increases critical thinking skills, creativity, and flexibility of the mind in young children” (Abbott et al.). Her argument continues, declaring that students versed in two languages as opposed to one language excel in math due to their enhanced problem solving skill set, a result of proficiency in two or more languages. Even if students lose time in math class to study another language, they still perform better mathematically than the students who spent that allotted language time in math class (Abbott et al). There is no doubt that every one of you in this room would benefit cognitively from learning a second language if you do not know one already.

As I noted in my last point to you, Anderson states that people who can speak two languages have “a greater understanding of their native language.” To many, this statement seems contradictory. If I am learning all about another language, how could that possibly help me understand English better? Learning a second language actually indeed helps instill and improve grammar skills in native English speakers. The dual nature of learning two languages serves as “double reinforcement” for the rules of grammar, hence improving grammar abilities in both English and the foreign language (Butler). I can relate to Butler’s points in my own life as well. Freshman year of Chaminade High School English class is heavily focused on grammar. For whatever the reason may be, understanding the concept of direct and indirect object in sentence structure was beyond a mystery to me. However, when I learned about *objectos directos e indirectos* in Spanish class, the concept finally came together. Being taught the same information in a slightly different format (and language for that matter) helped me piece together a part of the English sentence structure that I might not have understood otherwise.

Lastly, we should all learn a foreign language because we live in a global community. In our classroom here alone today, out of a mere 15 students, two are originally from a foreign country. We do not live in bubble, free from other cultures and ethnicities. Anderson points out that learning another language corresponds with understanding other cultures better, thus leading to more peaceful and cooperative interactions. Surely, as students of Notre Dame, peaceful and cooperative interactions are values that we strongly embrace. I have taken Spanish classes every year from sixth to twelfth grade, and in every course, the teacher has designated a certain portion of the class to culture. Learning the language and the culture simultaneously helped me become more culturally aware and understanding towards non-Americans. As an example, because I have learned much about Mexican culture, I know that Cinco de Mayo is a nearly completely Americanized holiday. In Mexico, Cinco de Mayo is hardly anything more than just the fifth of May, not a massive celebration as American media made built it up to be. Cinco de Mayo in Mexico is, in comparison, about as notable as Flag Day in the United States; it is a nationally recognized holiday, yes, but not one that people go crazy about. However, in the United States, it is amazing how few people know this fact. Even more remarkable is the amount of people who believe it is the Mexican Independence Day, which is actually in September. While it could seem like a relatively unimportant point to bring up to some, being culturally aware is not of minuscule importance because society is becoming more global everyday. Students at Notre Dame have a great reputation of being open-minded to all types of peoples, cultures, and ethnicities, and all of us learning a second language would make that reputation even stronger.

I would like to switch gears a little bit from the benefits of learning a second language to when and how you should learn a second language. Although this ideal window is sufficiently shut for all of us in this room, the fact should be known nonetheless that the best age period to

learn a second language is when a person is as young as three years old. A major reason why learning a second language is best as a child is because children are better able to pick up on the nuances of the intonation in pronunciation the younger they are (Abbott et al.). Likewise, a child will learn the language better very simply because the child is in a period of its life where it wants to learn. The reason this time period is so good is because “between birth and adolescence, the brain is hard-wired to acquire language naturally” (“Window”). Rather than a child hearing words in another foreign language, and then translating the words to English in its mind, the child will instead hear the words and understand them as if the words were in its own native language. Also the child will learn the language better overall all because the “key to becoming proficient in another language is a long, continuous contact with the language” (Abbott et al.). Likewise the cognitive advantages mentioned earlier become rooted more deeply the longer a second language is being taught. Clearly, the best time to learn a second language is while a person is still a child.

While I realize this can sound disheartening to some knowing that we have all passed that window of prime language acquisition, learning a second language is still very possible almost no matter what age a person is. The best way to learn a language after this age is through immersion. For older students, like all of us in college, it is still very possible to learn the nuances of intonation that typically come easier to younger children. Also, there is one major advantage that you and I have that a young child doesn't; we already understand grammar in our own native language. In return, we can relatively easily transpose that to another language. Any student who is a part of an immersion program can effectively develop “oral proficiency” in that language and can “achieve functional levels of bilingualism” (Abbott et al.). For all of us in the room, being students at Notre Dame, we have the privilege of the opportunity to study abroad.

This is the best way anyone here can learn a second language. For example, my older brother, Mike a senior at Notre Dame, took Spanish from the sixth to twelfth grade, just as I have. Once arriving at Notre Dame, he decided to become a Spanish major, taking five semesters of Spanish courses before the spring of his junior year when he chose to study abroad in Santiago, Chile. After so many years of constant Spanish, Mike was only considered semi-fluent at best. He could read, write, and understand very well but lacked the ability to speak the language with true ease and proficiency like a native speaker. However, after six months living in South America, Mike was easily able to speak Spanish with any native Chilean or Spanish-speaker he encountered. Living on a day-to-day basis in constant interaction with the language, he had no other option than to obtain fluency. His experience is by far and away the norm for those students who delve completely into the language while studying abroad.

Let me now address some of the concerns that many of you likely have fluttering in the back of your mind. Many of you believe that learning a second language is simply just too hard to do at our age. However, as I showed you, immersion programs are extremely successful in getting students to learn the language fluently and are widely available to any student at Notre Dame. Also, many of you will argue that you simply do not have enough time to go out and learn another language. Yes, learning a second language is time consuming; it is impossible to deny that fact. But how is that any different from learning any other skill or subject? Does learning calculus or chemistry or U.S. history not take a lot of time as well? Learning another language is just as valuable as learning any other topic in school, if not more important due to the cognitive benefits in particular that I spoke to you about.

The overwhelming evidence supports that Americans should learn a second language. The benefits in the global economy and in the job market are crucial in having a leg up on your

fellow peers. Additionally, the cognitive benefits and enhanced grammar skills are extremely beneficial in the lives of any person who learns a second language. Lastly, being ethnically and culturally aware of non-Americans is increasingly important as the United States becomes more diverse each and every day. I'm not suggesting that the road to fluency is an easy path. Yes, to become proficient in another language will take hard work and dedication, just as any other important skill would. But I am certain that learning a foreign language will be a worthwhile investment both in the present and the future. To those of you who still do not plan to learn a second language, I wish you the best of luck. And to those of you who *do* plan to learn a second language, *¡buena suerte a todos!*

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