

Building Empathy through Bilingualism - another benefit to learning French

Emma Piayda, Vice-President, CPF Alberta Branch

Kate Peters, Director, CPF National

Introduction

As parents, we choose second-language education for the long-term social, cultural and economic benefits. As societies become globalized, there is another tangible advantage to language learning: Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). This increasingly essential skill represents the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively in intercultural contexts (Suchankova, 2014). Learning French as a Second Language at an early age provides critical exposure to understanding others' perspectives (Fan, Liberman, Keysar, & Kinzler, 2015) and develops empathy which contributes to ICC. Developing intercultural skills is incredibly valuable in a world that requires our children to interact with those who are culturally and linguistically different from them.

What is Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)?

ICC is the ability to draw on “culturally sensitive knowledge, a motivated mindset and a skillset” (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, 2003) to relate effectively and appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts. Qualities such as empathy, motivation, positive attitudes towards other cultures, and active listening (Arasaratnam-Smith & Doerfel, 2005) have been identified as contributors of ICC. Second-language learning helps to acquire these skills more effectively than if they are taught in theory, and offers the possibility to practice them.

Why is Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) Important for my Child?

Globalization has increased the demand for a multilingual and diverse workforce capable of effectively interacting with people of varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. International companies are actively seeking out employees who have an intercultural mindset. Human mobility of the 21st century and the increased use of technology to collaborate globally have made intercultural professional and personal connections a part of how we live (Elena, 2014). Equipping our children with the ability to navigate intercultural situations is essential in the workplace, and also to affront global issues. As Radomir Chodera puts it - “nothing develops human tolerance and sensitivity more than learning a foreign language” (Suchankova, 2014).

How could my child develop ICC?

Choosing an immersion or core French as a Second Language program for your child is an important first step towards developing ICC. Teachers are beginning to move beyond grammar and oral competency to help learners acquire ICC skills such as empathy and an openness to other cultures. The intercultural approach to language education “shouldn’t be so much native speaker competence, but rather an intercultural communicative competence” (Bryam, 1997). Teachers accomplish this by talking about Francophone cultures, identifying cultural differences and providing opportunities to practice negotiations in different contexts and roles (Suchankova, 2014). Language education should target creating “diplomats,” capable of viewing different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding (Popescu & Lordachescu, 2015).

Conclusion

We all want our children prepared to participate in an ever-changing world. To this end, French as a Second Language education provides children with a cognitive and social edge. Language education can teach them how to view the perspective of others, avoid communication barriers, and anticipate how other cultures may act and communicate (Suchankova, 2014). These are all hidden benefits of learning French. Canada's bilingualism may come to be associated with intercultural competence and empathy; qualities the whole world can look towards.

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