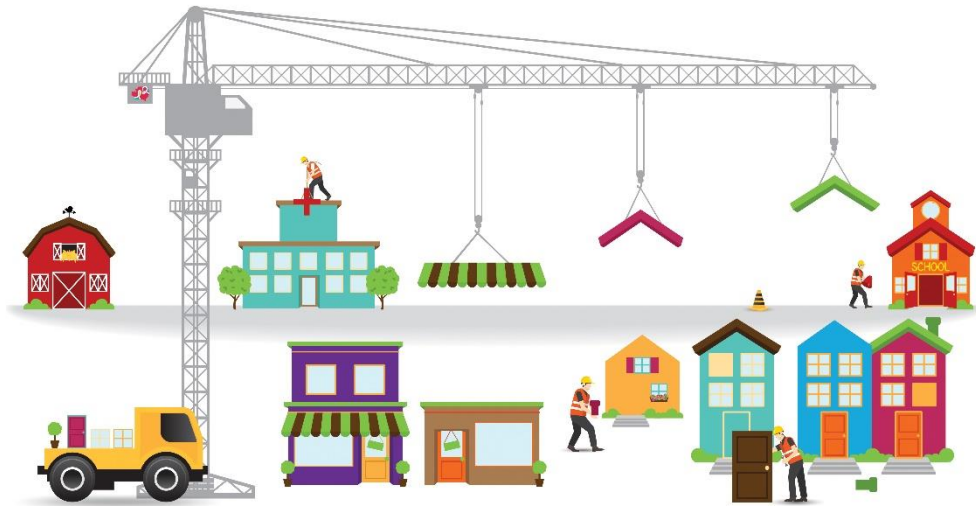




Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers  
Association canadienne des professeurs de langues secondes

# Why Learn Languages? Languages Build Societies

*Second-language learning is beneficial on many levels, but to what extent? Let's look at the fourth article in the series, based on the [Literature Review on the Impact of Second-Language Learning \(2017\)](#), for the societal impacts of L2 learning.*



## Languages Build Understanding

Language learners show enhanced understanding of diversity in their communities and in the wider world. Second-language learners tend to be active and engaged global citizens. This means that they contribute to making our world a better place by making themselves more conversant in it.

A review of the relevant research suggests that learning a second language encourages cosmopolitanism, a global sense of place, the recognition of others, and openness toward diverse cultural experiences. Research has also shown that service learning fosters a sense of civic duty, developing responsibility in young citizens toward new members of society. It also promotes respect for linguistic, cultural, and racial diversity (O'Brien et al., 2017).

In a study of early French immersion students in Vancouver and newly arrived immigrants in a francophone school in Montreal, researchers noted a general increase in language awareness. These learners spoke languages other than English and French. They were provided with learning



experiences that focused on developing an understanding and appreciation of linguistic diversity by sharing their family languages. They also compared their learned vocabulary in several languages. Such discussions about the relative equality of diverse languages and their speakers were more likely to develop in the language-learning environment. Cultural understanding of language diversity and equity among members of all communities was found to be higher in multilingual compared to monolingual learners (Dagenais, Walsh, Armand, & Maraillet, 2008).

A study of English second language (ESL) learners in a Swedish school in Finland explored the ability of 13- to 15-year-olds to move away from cultural norms and develop respect for difference and diversity. Through a learning process that integrated various elements of language and culture, most students began to notice aspects of their way of life that they had previously taken for granted. They realized that their own traditional behaviours might appear strange to others. The study indicated that language classrooms can help students learn to accept others and respect diversity (Forsman, 2010).

## Languages Build Relationships

Communication is the basis of any relationship. Knowing a foreign language is the key to building relationships with people who do not speak your own language. Research shows that people in cross-cultural relationships actually report higher relationship satisfaction than monolinguals (Van Mol & de Valk, 2016).

Another study investigated perceptions of global identities in intercultural communication. ESL students at an international university in Hong Kong identified with a wider global community beyond their local/national identities. They were more capable of relating to people of different backgrounds as a result of sharing opinions on a number of cultural and global issues in the language classroom (Sung, 2016).

A project using the European Language Portfolio was carried out across 10 countries by the European Centre for Modern Languages in Dublin, Ireland. Challenges were posed related to the development of learner autonomy, intercultural competence, and plurilingualism. Participants were asked to design their own projects in a second language. These language activities had a positive impact on their self-reliance, understanding of diversity, and awareness of similarities and differences between cultures (Little, 2012).

Research also shows that learning a foreign language opens doors to the outside world. People who speak more than one language have much more choice of vacation destinations, for example, because they are confident that they will be able to communicate with locals, which in turn leads them to expand their horizons (Wagers, n.d.). Essentially, as Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once put it, “the limits of your language are the limits of your world.”

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