



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

Why Learn Languages? Languages Build Intercultural Competencies

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



Research shows that second-language learners who learn about the target culture demonstrate more positive attitudes toward the language, its speakers, and its culture (O'Brien et al., 2017). Ultimately, learning languages may reduce cultural prejudices and stereotypes, and encourage learners to develop respect for other cultures via enhanced critical awareness of the self and others, thus potentially easing antagonism between conflicting sides.

Languages Build Cultural Awareness

A study conducted with British students learning German and German students learning English showed that learning a second language promotes cultural understanding and develops curiosity and openness to other cultures. Results indicated that second-language learners who learn about the target culture demonstrate more positive attitudes and sensitivity to other cultures (Peiser, 2015).



Languages Build Intercultural Competencies

Students who learn about the cultures of the second or additional languages that they are learning gain insights into other cultural perspectives. In an article on the importance of world languages and intercultural competence, Doehla (2015) argues this point:

Students who learn other languages also gain insights into other cultural perspectives, and intercultural competency, which is defined as the ability to communicate in culturally appropriate ways, while showing appreciation and understanding of others, and maintaining a spirit of openness and respect for others. To attain to a high level of intercultural competency, students require enough time to not only acquire another language to sufficient proficiency, but also time to explore, explain, investigate, and reflect upon the perceptions of other cultural groups, their values and their beliefs.

A study conducted with Taiwanese ESL students showed that their interactions with students from other countries (including Canada) increased their intercultural competence. Students engaged in several classroom activities showed a decrease in cultural stereotypes and prejudices toward other cultures by the end of the lessons (Chen & Yang, 2016).

In a study relying on a computer-supported collaborative learning community, teachers and students were invited to engage in intercultural communication from different domains and countries (China, Denmark, Indonesia, Malaysia, Netherlands, Thailand, and Vietnam). Research showed that the project promoted the development of language awareness and intercultural competence as students from different backgrounds shared common understandings and offered suggestions on how to solve various social and cultural problems (Yang, 2013).

Bibliography

- Chen, J. J., & Yang, S. C. (2014). Promoting cross-cultural understanding and language use in research-oriented Internet-mediated intercultural exchange. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 29(2), 262-288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2014.937441>
- Doehla, D. (2015, March 7). The importance of world languages and intercultural competence. Marin County, CA: Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/importance-world-languages-and-intercultural-competence>
- O'Brien, M. G., Bajt, A., Lee, J. E., Lisanik, M., Pletnyova, A., & Reyes, S. (2017, March). *Literature review on the impact of second-language learning*. Ottawa, ON: CASLT. <https://www.caslt.org/files/pd/resources/research/Lit-review-Impact-L2-Learning.pdf>
- Peiser, G. (2015). Overcoming barriers: Engaging younger students in an online intercultural exchange. *Intercultural Education*, 26(5), 361-376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2015.1091238>
- Yang, Y.-F. (2013). Exploring students' language awareness through intercultural communication in computer-supported collaborative learning. *Educational Technology and Society*, 16(2), 325-342.