

Constance Dziombak argues that the benefits of language learning go way beyond simple acquisition of language

It's Not Just French!



Donnell, a third grade student of mine at Longfellow

Elementary School, an inner city school in New York's Westchester County, was emerging from anesthesia after having his appendix removed. The doctor asked him how he felt, and he replied, "*Comme ci, comme ça!*" Just the kind of response that puts a smile on the face of a French teacher who works hard to convince children, their parents and, occasionally, other teachers and administrators, that learning the rudiments of a foreign language is a worthwhile effort.

Donnell may not be yet ready to decipher Baudelaire, but, by appropriately using a French phrase he learned in school, he started experimenting with a new and different way of communicating. And, he also expanded, if only by a tiny bit, his cultural universe.

In the post-9/11 era, the teaching of foreign languages in American public schools, long viewed by many as a bothersome requirement of almost no practical value, has been re-evaluated. This past January, President Bush launched the National Security Foreign

Language Initiative, which focuses on expanding and developing programs to teach “critical need” foreign languages such as Arabic, Chinese, and Russian, in addition to such traditional languages as Spanish and French. Foreign language study is not only viewed as an essential component of U.S. national security strategy, but it is also now considered vital to the development and strengthening of America’s place in the global economy. This foreign language initiative is intended to expand foreign language education in the United States from kindergarten through university, with a special emphasis on starting foreign language study in the elementary schools.

For the last twenty-four years, besides teaching English as a Second Language, I have taught French and Italian at the high school and middle school levels. This year, for the first time, I am teaching French to elementary school students. Despite severe time constraints (one or two 30-minute periods per week, depending upon the grades), my classes manage to cover the two New York State foreign language standards (**1** Communication Skills—Students will be able to use a language other than English for communication, and **2** Cultural Understanding — Students will develop cross-cultural skills and understanding). In the past few months, however, I have found that my teaching has exceeded the boundaries set by these standards. Certainly, I have taught my students to “communicate” with simple phrases such as “*Ça va?*” (How are you?) and, “*Puis-je aller à la toilette?*” (May I go to the bathroom?). We have also explored cultural topics such as French cuisine, Mardi Gras, etc. However, the most rewarding part of the lesson is when we go beyond the standards, and “it’s not just French.”

By studying French, my students have been introduced to new ways of thinking about language, communication, and thought. They feel intellectually empowered when they manage to decipher the meaning of French cognates such as “*le tigre*” and “*l’hôpital*.” My students are fascinated by the Latin roots that French and English words share and beam with excitement when, for example, they connect the French word for one hundred, “cent” with the English words “cent,” “century,” and “centipede.” Moreover, teachers have remarked that my French lessons are helping to develop their students’ listening skills since the students must listen more attentively because I am speaking to them in a language other than English.

Teaching a foreign language can have unexpected bonuses. Once we were playing a number review game, and I asked a student to write the number sentence,

“*Trois et cinq font huit*” (three and five equals eight), but she was able to translate only two of the numbers and wrote $3 + \underline{\quad} = 8$ on the chalkboard. When I pointed out to her that since she knew two of the numbers in French, it would be easy to guess the third, she immediately came up with the missing number 5 and wrote it in the blank space. The classroom teacher, who in recent weeks had been intensively drilling her fourth graders in math, jumped up and hugged me, excited that our student had just “solved for x” and “discovered algebra!”

One of the most interesting aspects of teaching French this year is that I never know where a lesson may take us. For example, I didn’t anticipate that a class on the famous sites of Paris would lead to a

discussion of the characters and themes of the Hunchback of Notre Dame. It was, of course, the Disney cartoon version, but we talked about the author, Victor Hugo, and his aim to raise social consciousness of the treatment of the poor and handicapped. There isn’t much time for a discussion like this during the regular classroom routine, which thanks to the No Child Left Behind testing requirements, is primarily devoted to preparing for New York State standardized tests. The French lesson is a welcome break from the test prepping which starts at the beginning of our school year!

My students will tell you that they are learning more than just the French language. When asked what the benefits of studying a foreign language are, many will give usual replies such as, “If you go to a foreign country you will be able to get around,” or, “You can get a better job.” I am delighted when I hear others say, “Studying French makes me feel smarter,” or “Studying French gives me self-confidence. If I can learn French, I can learn anything.” In fact, one of the classroom teachers told me that a student, who had little self-confidence and poor reading skills in English, started to volunteer to read aloud in class after she started to achieve success in French class.

Most of my students think studying French is fun. Their enthusiasm is refreshing and heartening. In the hallway, they actually try to speak to me in French. I can’t remember this happening when I taught Italian and French at the middle school or high school. The adage “the younger the better” is probably true. Right now, I am tutoring a high school student who is preparing for the New York State French Regents Exam. Michael is an intelligent boy, but has fallen behind in French. Somewhere down the line, Michael got turned off from French and tuned out. Perhaps if he had started studying French in elementary school with the enthusiasm of the kids I am teaching now, he would not be struggling to pass the state exam. Michael admitted that he wished he could have started studying French in elementary school.

It is gratifying to see that students like Donnell are incorporating French into their daily lives. Many other students have told me that they try to teach their family members the French they’ve learned in class. I doubt that these same children go home and discuss the math problems they’ve completed in school.

As an educator, my most important achievement is that I am opening up the minds of my students, many of whom are considered “at risk,” helping to make them global citizens, and at the same time developing their higher-level thinking skills and knowledge of language, communication, and culture. I am teaching these children more than a foreign language — it’s not just French! **X**

Dr. Constance Dziombak is an ESOL/French teacher in the Mount Vernon City School District, Mount Vernon, New York. She has extensive experience in TESOL and has taught kindergarten through graduate school. Dr. Dziombak has recently been awarded the New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers Novgorod Cultural Scholarship and will conduct English teacher training workshops in Russia this summer. Dr. Dziombak has spent previous summers abroad volunteer teaching in Cambodia, Belarus, Poland, and China.