

French: A Practical Language in Sports and in Law

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I was fortunate to study French for four years in high school and one additional year in college. What began as a rather tedious exercise in deciphering grammar, conjugating verbs, and memorizing endless vocabulary lists gradually, almost imperceptibly, evolved in a wonderful recognition that a "foreign" language was no longer any such thing. At some ill-defined point, French had become familiar, if not useful.

The utility of foreign language study manifests itself when one least expects it. For me, it did not require a desperate need to find a bathroom in Paris to convince me that my study of French was something more than an intellectual exercise. Three anecdotes will serve to make the point.

First: During the summer following my freshman year of college, I worked as a camp counselor in New Hampshire. Many of the campers came from Quebec. Others came from France. Most spoke English as a second language. Some did not. I was asked to coach the camp soccer team which, as fate would have it, was largely populated by the non-English-speaking French kids. Although my knowledge of soccer was somewhat less than my knowledge of French, I was at least able to communicate with the players in my charge, thereby averting a complete debacle. The players themselves seemed relieved to be addressed in their native tongue, and they played with gusto. Had I not studied French, the soccer team might have devolved into chaos.

Second: After college and law school, I was hired as a young attorney at a law firm concentrating its practice in workers' compensation. In one memorable case, I was assisting the senior partner in a hearing on behalf of a Haitian immigrant who had injured his back while working. The company was disputing the claim. At the hearing, a translator had misinterpreted a critical piece of testimony from our client. I interrupted the hearing, which required a bit of audacity, a trait not especially ingrained in me at the time. "That's not what the witness said, Your Honor!" I announced for the record, praying that I was right. The official translator (no doubt highly paid) was embarrassed when it became apparent that the testimony more closely mirrored the comments that I had understood. The witness provided further clarification on a critical point; the arbitrator ruled in favor of our client. Had I not studied French, a critical point (and possibly the case) would have been lost.

Third: While officiating a college football game between the University of Minnesota and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, I found myself in "bayou country." I was the head linesman in the game, which put me in charge of the chain crew. The gentleman holding the down marker was a Cajun who, I learned once the game was underway, spoke little English. My instructions to him were met with a blank stare. Raising my voice did not solve the problem! Halfway through the second quarter, having tried everything else, I decided to switch to French. What could it hurt? After my first "*Venez . . . maintenant . . . vite!*" it was like throwing a switch. His eyes brightened. He responded immediately. As the game progressed, my Cajun crew member became attentive, helpful and responsive. All it took was for someone to address him in the language with which he was most comfortable. Had I not studied French, the down marker might have been in the wrong spot or reflected the wrong down at a critical point in the game.

A list of the advantages of foreign language study often reads like a litany of clichés: to promote international understanding, to foster communication in a shrinking world, to assist with foreign travel, to improve one's vocabulary in English... All true. But none of these truisms strikes at the heart of the matter. None of them adequately describes the elation one feels upon communicating with a previously silent young athlete; or the professional satisfaction that comes with winning a case, at least in part, by catching an error in translation of a witness's testimony; or the giddy sense of satisfaction that accompanies the knowledge that the downs in a football game are not just "one, two, three, four" but "*un, deux, trois, quatre.*"

The true value of foreign language study cannot be predicted or prescribed. It will appear when one least expects it.