

French: An International Language and Global Independence A Personal Experience and a Parent's Viewpoint

French as the common language between an English and a Chinese speaker

I took French in high school and two years in college in the early '70's. I have not had any French classes since those days long ago. Recently, I had the opportunity to speak French through a very remote connection. My daughter needed her passport upgraded so that she could go to China for a summer class. So, I took the passport and went to the Chinese Consulate in Chicago. While waiting in a very long line, I met and chatted with the girl in front of me. As it turned out, she had been an exchange student from China to France in her high school years. My daughter had been an exchange student to France in her high school years. So, we enjoyed a wonderful conversation about exchange student adventures.

The young Chinese woman told me that her mother was coming to visit her at her new home in Chicago. She would have many long days at the apartment with no one to take her to see the city because the daughter had a new job and had to work long hours. So, I volunteered to take her mother to see some of Chicago's sights. The daughter was worried that we would have trouble communicating because her mother speaks no English. I was not worried because I speak no Chinese. We had the same disadvantage... but, we discovered that both of us speak a little French.

So, we embarked on a day of fun with our limited French. We had a wonderful day exploring the Morton Arboretum, a farmer's market, a flower shop, a grocery store, and the local neighborhood. We shopped together and cooked a cross-cultural dinner together using the French that we could remember. We would get some funny stares from those observing us, an American and a Chinese speaking French. We would often, find ourselves unable to remember the words needed to share a sentiment and would end up with puddles of giggles. It was a most rewarding day. We felt a special kinship with our common language... the foreign language we had both taken in high school so long ago.

Daughter has become globally independent

My daughter has been a foreign exchange student to the south of France. She had a wonderful adventure living in the countryside with three different French families. She learned about families' structure and how they respect the elders. She learned about how French children are raised. She learned about the struggles that French parents have with their teenagers... just like American parents. She also found that the real lives of the French do not differ really from that of the lives of Americans. Fathers and mothers worry about the same things. The students work hard in school and try to find as much down time for friends as possible. The little children play the same games. She also immersed herself in the language. She found the French language to be lovely to speak.

She has also found French useful in business situations. We have been traveling in America and been able to help French travelers find hiking trails, items to buy, and directions. She was delighted to be of help. Since she has returned to America and gone off to college, she has been able to see life in others' eyes more clearly. Since she knows that the French do things a different way... she has been able to translate that knowledge into the skill of accepting the possibility that there are many different ways to approach life... all successful... all progressive... all fulfilling... but different. She has a broader perspective on what constitutes a learning experience or a great event.

To say that studying in a foreign country has expanded her sense of character would be too simple, but true. I have found that she can look with certainty to the future with great expectation, because she has become globally independent. She would recommend the exchange program to everyone willing to give of themselves and yield to the culture. She continues to explore other cultures and is taking Chinese language in conjunction with her French in college... she will be studying in China and France next year. We are very proud of her.

Anna Whiteway