

French Exchange Stimulates Curiosity about Others

A Parent's View

When French Teacher Donna Czarnecki recently contacted me for my thoughts about our children's educational experiences with French during high school, I was happy to oblige. My husband and I both feel that their four-year experiences learning French at Lyons Township High School in La Grange, IL (following two years of French in middle school) proved extremely beneficial not only during secondary school, but have continued to be of tremendous benefit to our daughters as they enter into early adulthood.

First, we believe strongly that a child who learns a foreign language during the formative adolescent years provides her brain with exactly the right stimuli to allow it to develop to the fullest. So not only can learning French, in this instance, be a curious, stimulating experience for the student, but it also helps the brain to function fully. And it's fun! Learning the fundamentals of how a foreign language is constructed, is one essential part of the education. Add to it the enjoyment of discovering a new culture: literature, history, food, music, art... for many students this may be the first time they have the chance to find out that the world is indeed a very big place, made up of interesting people who share many common values but who go about their living their lives in ways different from us.

I can use my family to illustrate this. I traveled to France for four weeks during the summer between my sophomore and junior years in high school, as part of a study group led by my French teacher. Later, I spent my junior year in college as part of the joint study abroad program led by the Universities of Michigan and Wisconsin, in Aix-en-Provence, returning home with the intent of returning again, following graduation. (I ended up in Istanbul, instead; but it was my early introduction to French and foreign cultures, as well as my field of study, that prompted this.) My husband, Carl, never formally studied French prior to spending a year in Paris in his mid-twenties, but returned home with a functioning knowledge of the language and a love of French culture and the French. So we raised our children with this love of language and culture that has been so rewarding for us all.

Lucy, our youngest, was fortunate to be a part of the LTHS French exchange program in her junior year of high school, which allowed her to travel to Lyon, France for two weeks with Mme. Czarnecki. The following year, those students from Lyon with whom our children had lived, traveled to Chicago to be part of the second half of the exchange, and they stayed in our homes, went to school with the American students and had the chance to learn about us, our culture and city. Kate, our oldest, would have traveled to France for the similar program in 2002; but sadly, the trip was cancelled due to the 9/11 tragedy. However, Kate and our family reaped tremendous benefits from that exchange program. Kate, however, missing her chance to travel abroad with her high school classmates, went to Australia after her undergraduate college education. She lived there for several months

and traveled widely. She also had caught the “international bug” from her years of studying French in school. Maybe this is the time to share that neither of our children (at least currently!) is planning a career in French or even foreign language. But they both possess a curiosity about the world and its people, and an ease with cultures other than their own. Carl and I are convinced this is a direct result of their study of French in secondary school, a uniquely pivotal time in a child’s maturation process.

Where do I start to describe the benefits I see from the study of French and French culture, and from the organized exchange program with the participating French lycée, which was available to Lucy? Of course, there are the recognizable benefits of improved use of the French language through constant and regular speech with French natives, and a heightened understanding of French culture from immersion in it for those few intensive weeks. Lucy ate French home-cooking with her new family in their surroundings; got to know her new “siblings;” commuted to school every day with Hugo, her French counterpart; socialized with him and his friends; listened to French music; visited much of Lyon with her new French family and other parts of the surrounding area with her classmates. In short, she got a “bird’s eye view” of French life from the perspective of the French people. That, in and of itself, is huge.

But to my husband and me, the biggest and most transformative *indirect* reward from the study of the French language and its culture, for adolescents in particular, is this: it is the gift of being removed from one’s comfort zone, whether or not that is in the classroom with other students who share a similar curiosity, or, for those fortunate enough, the actual travel, separated from family for perhaps the first time in the student’s life, to another place on the globe. In Lucy’s case, it was the opportunity to leave the known behind and discover the magnitude of the world, the novelty and sometimes frightening aspect of a world we don’t easily recognize; and then to discover that we are all independent beings who can think, accept what we believe is good, and fashion our own ideas and values from these new experiences. Then, over time, our children can begin to structure full lives for themselves, independent of (but hopefully not separated from) their nuclear families.

So, in addition to discovering the beauty of the French language and the always beguiling complexities of French culture is this truly eye-opening learning experience to be gained: The world is made up of a myriad of cultures and persons who sometimes do and sometimes do not think or act like us. This is what makes our world so infinitely intriguing, for those who use their curiosity to learn about it.

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