

## **Multilingualism: “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!”**

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I have always had the blessing to be surrounded by many languages. I grew up in the suburbs of the great American melting-pot city of Chicago. I heard not only English at home, but Polish, the language of my ancestors. The next door neighbors spoke Japanese; my best friend’s family, the Grimms, spoke German. Across the street, I baby-sat the little girls whose parents were from Austria. My friends, mostly second and third-generation Americans, were speaking a plethora of other languages. For example, the DiSalvos spoke Italian, and the Hareas spoke Greek. We were American kids, but we also identified with the places where our roots were deeply planted. We listened to ethnic music, and we ate ethnic food. When I turned sixteen, I had the birthday song sung to me in seven different languages!

I was given a wonderful opportunity to begin foreign language study while still in junior high school. Throughout high school, I continued learning French, taking a French Advanced Placement class my senior year. It was in French class that I not only learned a language, but learned about French art and literature. I was exposed to foreign language cinema, opera, and music. My French teacher was highly imaginative and inspired. She knew how to rope us teenagers into enthusiastically learning not only French irregular verbs, but also songs by ABBA and Christmas carols. Through her teaching I read Victor Hugo and knew enough about the French Impressionist period to blow the socks off any fine arts aficionado.

There is a story that my high school French teacher used to tell: A mother mouse was attempting to cross the barn floor with her two small children in tow. Suddenly, a cat appeared and threatened to pounce on the little family. The mother mouse held her ground and began to bark ferociously like a dog. “WOOF! WOOF! WOOF!” The startled cat ran off. “Now do you see, my children,” the mother mouse explained, “the advantages of learning a second language?”

Like the children in the tale told my French teacher, I, too, understand the advantages of acquiring other languages. Learning French and, later, Spanish has equipped me with innumerable professional and personal opportunities. For my chosen career, I became a physical therapist. I did an internship near Cajun and Creole country and was able to put my patients at ease with simple language courtesies, which later turned into spirited French conversations. I spent most of my life living in the American West which necessitated the urge to begin another language study, Spanish. I took classes at the local college in medical Spanish. In two short years, I became the Spanish-speaking physical therapist of Grand Junction, Colorado. All of this was made so much easier by the earlier study of French, another one of the Romance languages.

Now, living in the State of Maine, my opportunities to use French occur on a daily basis. I can watch French-Canadian television programs and listen to French radio. I sing “Oh, Canada” in

French at college hockey games. (We play both the American and Canadian national anthems here.) I even have gone to contra dances, which are a version of the French country dancing of the Canadian Maritime Provinces.

I have been fortunate to travel to France twice. I realized during my first visit that a map of Paris was burned into my mind by those early years of studying French. I was able to get around easily, converse with native speakers, and thoroughly enjoy my visit. I was invited into people's homes in Normandy along the D-day Beaches.

I have had countless opportunities to meet, help and enjoy people from all over the world. I have worked with new immigrants from Viet Nam, a former French colony, and Spaniards from Barcelona. I have laughed with crazy college students from Belgium on the floor of the Grand Canyon, aided an African family from Senegal, and participated in a Haitian Relief Project on behalf of my church. Some of my dearest friends were met through funny twists of speaking a foreign language.

A world of new possibilities opened when I discovered learning a second and then a third language. I heartily encourage people of any age to participate in learning foreign languages and cultures. Certainly, there are benefits for one's career, but as Dr. Seuss said: "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" And imagine the people you will meet!