Many Languages One World, Promoting Multilingualism: The French Language Winners

Knowledge of other languages and cultures has always been important, but in a globalized world, knowledge of other languages has become even more essential. According to Adams and Carfagna, "language is a critical instrument that shapes one's view of the world. Understanding the meaning of the words other people use yields perhaps the most insight into cultural differences" (174). And yet, the U.S. suffers from a foreign language deficit that impacts our economic and national security, as well as our ability to be effective global citizens.

In comparison to much of the world, the U.S. lags behind in terms of foreign language skills, with only one in four Americans reporting that they consider themselves capable of holding a conversation in another language. On the other hand, in Europe, 56% of adults consider themselves capable of holding a conversation in another language, 28% in two additional languages, and 11% in three additional languages.

Multilingualism as a Global Competency

According to Merriam-Webster, multilingualism has been defined as "using or able to use several languages especially with equal fluency." Multilingualism has long been a core value of the European Union (EU), which has expanded its definition to explicitly include "an individual's ability to communicate in several different languages, the co-existence of different language communities in one geographical/political area, and an organisation's policy choice to operate in more than one language." It is this core value that has driven the EU policy of plurilingualism, often referred to as "mother tongue plus two."

The United Nations has embraced the concept of multilingualism, affirming the communicative importance of multilingualism among the UN member nations and its importance in building tolerance, leading to increased engagement and better outcomes.

It has also highlighted the importance of its six official languages as essential to "clear and concise communication on issues of global importance," and in June 2015, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed a Coordinator for Multilingualism, charged with the "implementation of multilingualism Secretariat-wide."


Many Languages One World (MLOW)

Motivation has been defined as "the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors" and is generally considered the most powerful predictor of a successful foreign language learning outcome. Motivation is often discussed, formally and informally, by foreign language educators, in terms of motivating students to begin the study of a foreign language, to work hard to get good grades, and to continue to study a specific foreign language in order to reach proficiency, or even fluency.

Foreign language teachers motivate students every day in the classroom, and organizations of foreign language educators and supporters—including the AAFT—offer contests, honor societies, etc. to recognize and to reward foreign language achievement in order to sustain motivation and enthusiasm for foreign language learning. However, in a globalized world, language skills transcend borders, and it is interesting to think about ways to recognize and reward foreign language skill as a global competency.

The United Nations, with its goal of promoting international cooperation, and which celebrated its 70th anniversary on October 24, 2015, is the quintessential international organization, and would be the ideal setting to promote, recognize, and reward foreign language skills in a globalized world and in education for global citizenship. "Many Languages One World" (MLOW), organized by the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) and by ELS Educational Services, and hosted by Adelphi University, to support multilingualism and the continued study of the six official languages of the UN, was launched in October 2013 in observance of the beginning of the 70th anniversary year of the UN.

Students who wished to participate submitted an essay on a pre-selected topic, in a language other than their native language or the language of their primary and secondary schooling. An international panel of judges selected the finalists, who were then interviewed to determine the ten winners for each of the six official languages of the UN.

The essay contest winners would be invited to attend a Global Youth Forum that included an ELS Preparatory Conference at Adelphi University and would culminate in an opportunity to present at the UN General Assembly, followed by a weekend of sightseeing in New York City.

It is interesting to note that each student had to be a full-time college or university student and be recommended...
ism generally.

In fact, an October 2015 episode of “Destination: Francophonie” examined the use and status of French at the UN, featuring comments by Michaëlle Jean, Secretary-General of the Francophonie, and by Omar Hilale, Chair of the Groupe des ambassadeurs francophones à l’Onu, on the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity at the UN.

French is spoken by over 200 million around the world, and the Francophonie includes 80 members, making French a global language. In addition, at least 2 million speak French here in the U.S., including both heritage speakers and recent immigrants, making French a U.S. language. As an official language of the United Nations and a working language of the European Union and many other international organizations, French is an international language.

The ten French language winners were from eight countries: Germany, Kazakhstan, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa, Spain, Tunisia, the UK, and the U.S. As the student winner from Mexico was unable to attend, that left nine. The students represented a variety of disciplines, including translation and interpreting, French language, and law.

Each group was assigned one of the principles of the UN Academic Impact for their presentations, and the French language group was assigned principle #3, “a commitment to educational opportunity for all people regardless of gender, race, religion or ethnicity.”

The students arrived on the campus of Adelphi University, spent their first evening getting acquainted at an on-campus barbecue and being greeted by Berlitz CEO Mark Harris and other dignitaries. The next day was devoted to the preparation and rehearsal of their UN presentations one of the ten principles of the UN Academic Impact. The following day, June 27, the students gave their presentations at the General Assembly and enjoyed a luncheon with UN dignitaries. The rest of the weekend was devoted to NYC sightseeing, with departure on Sunday.

MLOW 2015 followed a similar process, and was announced in November 2014, with the essay topic on the UN post-2015 global sustainable development agenda. In addition, in observance of the 70th anniversary year of the UN, 70 winners were chosen to participate in the Global Youth Forum and to present on one of the proposed UN post-2015 global development agenda at the UN on July 25, 2015. However, in 2015, the students had additional time to prepare their presentations.

Each language group was assigned one of the goals of the current draft of the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and the French language group was assigned Goal #16—“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.”

The 12 French language winners represented eight countries: Brazil, China, Moldova, Peru, Russia; Slovakia, Spain, Tanzania, and the U.S. Students represented a variety of disciplines, including law, architecture, engineering, French language and literature, and levels ranging from undergraduate to doctoral students.

Although there was some variation in the French language skills of the winners, all had excellent skills, and some had near-native fluency. In addition, many spoke additional languages, and virtually all spoke some English. Beyond their language skills and international mindedness, however, it was their camaraderie and their ability to develop friendships across cultures that was the most remarkable.

Conclusions

“Many Languages One World” has operationalized the concept of multilingualism as a global competency, based on the UN core value of multilingualism, in a creative manner, within a partnership of government, academia, and private enterprise—the UN, Adelphi University, and ELS Educational Services, Inc.—the language enterprise partnership as defined by Rivers. It would be wonderful to see additional “language enterprise” collaborations at all levels that would recognize and reward the foreign language skills of our students.

In Europe, virtually all students study one or more foreign languages, yet in the U.S., that is far from the case, with only 18.5% per cent of K-12 public school students studying a foreign language. In order to empower U.S. students to become effective global citizens and to remain competitive in the global marketplace, access to foreign language education needs to be increased. According to Languages for All?, “it’s time to shift the discussion from Why should we learn a second language? to Why aren’t we learning languages?”

The MLOW winners are true examples of excellence across the disciplines and a reminder of the importance of foreign language skills in a wide range of careers, including and transcending foreign language education and language services.

Future Directions

A community has been formed—of student participants and winners, their friends, their families, their recommending professors, and of all who participated as essay readers, interviewers, facilitators, staff, etc. It is a diverse community in many ways, but unified in terms of its commitment to multilingualism as a means to communicate across cultures and its commitment to a better world.

As each of these young people shares his/her personal journey, the impact of the MLOW experience will remain part of each one’s personal and intellectual experience, as has already been evidenced by local communities and mini-reunions of MLOW participants, by friendships and travel, and by social media.

As expressed by Berlitz CEO Mark Harris, in his remarks at the conclusion of the 2015 MLOW UN presentations, “I would like to challenge these young people and their predecessors from last year to form a confrérie, to form MLOW Global Community, but I challenge you to keep this sense of fraternité, d’égalité, and as our last friend said, liberté, and stay together because the harmony and the communication across cultures and across nations, and using language and otherwise, is what’s necessary to save this world and save this earth.”

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References


Destination Francophonie #122. 3 Oct.