

Linking Languages to Literacy

Questions and perceptions

Learning a second language has only recently become a regular part of the school curriculum for most children. This has prompted a number of questions and concerns. Here are some responses to commonly asked questions.

Achieving literacy is difficult so isn't it better to focus on English rather than on other languages?

Learning another language can enhance literacy in English. Through the study of another language students have the opportunity to compare how the two languages work and so gain a better understanding of English as a language system.

Furthermore, in an age of new technologies, multimedia and increasing global connections, it is important for children to know how to manage communication and knowledge transfer across languages and cultures. The study of a language in addition to English supports the development of these skills.

English is the only learning area where literacy can really be addressed.

Literacy is developed in all areas of the curriculum. As such, all teachers are responsible for supporting the literacy development of their students. However, because literacy is about language, the study of another language can enhance literacy, language and communication skills.

How can learning a second language help English literacy?

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that learning a second language can enhance English literacy. Some of the ways are listed below:

- By comparing features of their first language with those of another language learners are better able to understand the structure of English.
- Language learners develop and enhance their skills and strategies for decoding and making meaning from words and this transfers to English.
- Learners develop flexibility and competence in dealing with language concepts.
- A second language can provide a new beginning and success for learners who have struggled with English. This has been shown to be beneficial both in terms of English language development and for the self-esteem of learners.

Languages are only for academically able students so less able students shouldn't have to do them.

It is quite normal for people to speak more than one language. The assumption that only academically able students should learn another language is based on a tradition of associating language study with the classics. This historical practice has nothing to do with the ability of people to acquire language because we know that this ability is not linked to particular intelligence.

If English is already a second language should a child study a third?

Most people in the world speak more than one language. None of the studies of multilingual acquisition demonstrates negative effects from learning more than two languages. In fact, it seems the more languages you learn the more able you are to learn language. Added to this are the advantages of being able to experience the cultures and ideas of different people through their language.

For English as a Second Language students, learning a third language can be a positive experience because their skills in that language are comparable to the skills of their classmates. It also provides these students with further opportunities to consider English as a language system.

Will studying another language be confusing for children?

Successful second language learners transfer their knowledge about language from one language to another. By using cross-linguistic strategies, learning and literacy in both languages are enhanced. It is when learners try to keep language separate, by not recognizing the connections that all languages have, there is the possibility of confusion.

What is the point in studying another language when English is now the international language?*

An important part of being literate in the 21st century is to be able to manage communication and knowledge transfer across languages and cultures. To understand the cultures of other people it is essential to understand how their language works.

*[*Most people in the world don't speak English and many speak more than one language.]*

Literacy in the 21st Century

21st century children need a different literacy from that of their parents. Being able to read books and write with pen and paper does not have the same place it had previously. The practices that parents often associate with literacy are only a part of what their children encounter in this age of information technology and global connectedness. Children today not only use a wide range of language conventions that didn't exist when their parents were growing up; they are in fact, creating them through new technologies.

This is expressed in a recent definition of literacy as:

Literacy is the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print, and multimedia.

Literate Futures; Luke, Freebody & Land, 2000: 20 ©The State of Queensland Department of Education

The Languages and Literacy Partnership

Learning a language means learning about language and what it means to be literate. Research tells us that the experience of learning a second language not only improves our knowledge of how languages work but also enhances our thinking skills. What we learn to do in one language helps us with any other language we might encounter. This means that our first language and other languages work in partnership to strengthen and enrich our repertoire of literacy practices.

Through learning languages other than English we have the opportunity to appreciate better that literacy in English is also about culture and about distinctive ways of thinking and being.

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