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2021 Short-Term E-Exchange Program – Research Submission

Student Attitudes Towards Second Language Learning

Exploring varying student attitudes towards the value of second language learning in monolingual and bilingual education systems

Emily Hilliar

Illawarra Sports High School

Classroom Teacher - English

E-Exchange participant during 2021 with:

Danielle Babin-Sather, Ḗcole Comrose Composite High School, Alberta, Canada

# Introduction

As part of the International [E-Exchange Program](https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/careers-at-education/scholarships-and-programs/international-teacher-exchange/short-term-e-exchange-program), a virtual exchange was completed between New South Wales and overseas counterparts. This exchange provided an opportunity for short-term one-on-one partnerships between educators with similar interests or fields. This action research report on the shared focus area was completed following the 6-week program.

International education is emerging as an area of specialisation in my career. The E-Exchange program has provided opportunity to delve further into this area and to deepen my understanding of the importance of globalising education in order to make it more relevant to today’s students.

# Focus Area / Research Question

Whilst there are many similarities between the Australian and Canadian contexts, one clear difference quickly emerged – language. Australia is – at least in terms of governmental policy - a monolingual society (English), whilst Canada is bilingual (English and French). This position on language affects myriad aspects of society, not least of which is education and schooling; the Canadian approach to language learning is more direct and consistent whilst the Australia approach is far more fluid.

This interest area was especially relevant to my research partner and I, as she teaches both English and French whilst I teach only English. We questioned then what benefits and difficulties may arise from this and most importantly what students’ attitudes were. This is the research area we explored – varying student attitudes towards the value of second language learning.

# Signficant Learnings / Findings

As our focus area was on student attitude it was critical that we utilised student voice. In order to do this a questionnaire was administered to students across several grades in both the Australian and the Canadian school contexts. Questions asked included:

* What additional skills or benefits do you think second-language learning provides?
* If you could learn any language, which would it be and why?
* Overall, do you think knowing a second language is beneficial?
* Do you think second-language learning should be mandatory? Why/why not?

Student responses were varied in terms of which language they felt should be learnt (with an obvious bias towards French in the Canadian context), however some commonalities and correlations emerged, the foremost of which was that today’s students across both educational settings see a high level of value in second-language learning. The most common reasoning for this was for employment opportunities, the ability to travel abroad, and to understand and communicate with a broader range of people. Many students also linked speaking a second language with showing respect to others.

The biggest difference emerged in terms of implementation of second-language learning and therefore actual ability speaking a second language. Whilst the Canadian students had formalised second-language instruction over several years as part of their schooling, the Australian students had little-to-no formalised or cohesive instruction; those who had experienced any language learning indicated that it was cursory and led to no long-term retainment. The majority of Australian students who speak a second language fluently learnt through familial connections.

# Conclusion / Recommendations & Sharing

Students in both the Australian and the Canadian contexts expressed a high level of perceived value and willingness in regard to second-language learning, reflecting their understanding of their place in an increasingly globalised world.

This project has outlined the need to reconsider how second-language learning is implemented in Australia. In order to be more effective, second-language learning needs to be streamlined and prioritised in Australian schools; longevity and consistency are key in developing language proficiency, as evidenced by the Canadian approach. Keeping this understanding of student need and desire for second-language learning at the forefront of our pedagogy can enable us as educators to better prepare our students for the globalised world in which they will live, learn and work.