

1) Early Language Learning

As a child growing up, I was exposed to English, Japanese, and Hawaiian Pidgin as far as I can remember. As Ms. Pomerantz pointed out, I was exposed to these languages prior to my critical age period. I know there were debates about whether to formally recognize Hawaiian Pidgin or even educate children in Hawaii using Hawaiian but these debates had socio-economic and geo-political issues tied to them. Nevertheless, I remember consciously switching between standard English and Hawaiian Pidgin in my head, depending on the situation at hand. Also as Ms. Pomerantz pointed out, Hawaiian Pidgin was part of my cultural identity because Hawaiian Pidgin shaped my thoughts and plays a role in the cultural identity of its people. Speaking Hawaiian Pidgin brings instant affinity with others who speak the same.

In the previous exercise, I spoke about my background in Japanese. Yes, it gave me a whole new set of language labels. Some of these labels and concepts are difficult to describe in English. One of my favorite quotes describes speaking another language as another window that opens by which to view the world. Like me, my siblings attended Japanese Language School growing up. However, unlike me, they did not study it more intensely as I did. They did not benefit from immersion in the culture as I did. I think they regret that they did not have that same opportunity. For me, it shaped the rest of my life and I have no regrets.

When I was in the 4th grade or so, my elementary school must have had a pilot program. I remember a Mandarin teacher coming in every so often to teach us Mandarin. She had us learn and memorize some greetings. That's what I remember. There were no grammatical rules. We were like sponges reciting things in Chinese. That was something I do regret. If I look back today, I wish it continued longer. It might have inspired me to learn Chinese later in life. It would have opened yet another window.

I definitely vote for learning a second language in the early school years. To me, music is the same way. I wish I had taken up a musical instrument. I think diversifying thought patterns in the brain in this way, helps develop critical thinking skills and understand abstract concepts. It helps to fill the gaps in our thought processes and behavior.

2) Motivation for Learning English as a Newcomer

a. I think John McWhorter cautiously touched on one motivating factor – the universality of English. He talked about how there are many colleges in China that teach in English. English is used worldwide. A Dutch co-worker of mine told me he was thinking of bringing his American wife with him back to the Netherlands someday to live permanently. I told him that meant he would have to look after her all the time (the language barrier) because she doesn't speak Dutch. He said everyone speaks English there. It's true. I visited there a couple of years ago and had no problem.

b. McWhorter also talked about the fun of it. This ties in with the idea that learning another language expands your memory bank from which to pull language labels. In a way, it is challenging, motivating, and exciting to communicate in another language. Not only does it open another window to view the world but it opens another world, itself.

c. I think some people want to learn English for economic gain, employment opportunities, or prestige. A colleague of mine at Keio University climbed the ranks of Japan Airlines after earning an MBA from Stanford University and became one of the top five leaders in the company. I think English fluency is a valuable skill and much respected in many countries.