

*Sustainable Language Learning: Changing the Multicultural Classroom*

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Abstract

This study examined how effective linguistic methodologies in a multicultural classroom influenced *sustainable language learning*. It was found a “one-size-fits-all” approach to multicultural learners lacks the obligatory approach needed for a viable language curriculum to be absorbed. Standard teaching epistemologies meet the needs of a heterogeneous language community of learners while suppressing a bicultural student’s ability to problem solve in future viable real-life dialectal situations. A panoramic study of the concepts of cultures and social dynamics were explored. An examination of cultural differences and the similarities of language learning in a multicultural milieu were assessed. This study tested a set of hypotheses related to the interactive influences of three paradigms associated with *sustainable language learning*: politics, education, and societal influences. The empirical results from 68 European students who studied abroad, found the direct influence of language learning aligned with various characteristics associated with their culture. The findings point to the importance of every day interactions with other cultures as a factor impacting *sustainable language learning*. In addition, a solid educational foundation was evident and determined to be a necessity for *sustainable language learning*. This study found the need for a paradigm shift in language analysis and bilingualism; hence, a diverse pedagogical method of language acquisition would warrant *sustainable language learning* needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century multicultural classrooms. This study was consistent in assuming teachers need to understand the effective linguistic methodologies needed in a multicultural community of language learners.

**Keywords:** multicultural classrooms, language acquisition, cultural differences, cultural immersion, sustainable language learning

## Introduction

Since the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, foreign language has evolved and dominance of specific languages has become more ubiquitous than others. The English language has flourished over the years and has not only become the second language spoken in countries around the world, but also become the official language used at international conferences, collaborative events, and various international organizations such as the United Nations, European Nations, and the International Olympic Committee.

Language acquisition in countries considered linguistically privileged is due in part by demands associated with language learning as communicative competence (Council of Europe, 1997). Recent inquiries have investigated the importance of language learning and the bearings of bilingualism. More important, language learning inspires the long-term relationship between society and scholarship. The knowledge and expertise of professionals who have recognized the diversification of awareness associated with bilingualism differs. Likewise, the emergence of the perspective second language differs throughout the world.

In the United States, the National Curriculum outlines how standards for *Foreign Language Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, which include participating in the community of the language learned. However, most students fail to use the learned language once credit is earned or the foreign language requirement is consummated (National Standards, 1999). In most cases, the opportunity for American native students to participate in multilingual conversations is rare and as a result, the foreign language is not *sustained* or compulsory.

Integrated objectives in the curricula of most school systems, afford the opportunity for students to learn a second language minus learning about the culture associated with the language. Expending the language in an intercultural setting, or in its native country, tests the impact of *sustainable language learning*. Because English is viewed as a powerful asset for global expansion, countries considered linguistically privileged not only learn English but also use the language and facilitate communicative competence using English. According to Rado (1991), when the curricula concept that language learning is constructed on cognitive and linguistic readiness, student interests in language learning is considered and tested.

Studies investigate why “mother-tongue speakers” of English do not find it necessary to learn another language, maintain the language, or expand linguistically by learning and *sustaining* a second language (Demont-Heinrich, 2010). Nonetheless, this assumption defined *sustainable language learning* and to report how students learned a foreign language, traveled abroad to the native country associated with the language, and remained communicatively competent without remediation. This panoramic study incorporated political, educational, and societal influences associated with language learning. The ethos and the social dynamics impacting the cultural differences vary but the similarities of language learning in a multicultural milieu were discovered. A comprehensive picture of the international dimension of education, particularly language learning, was assessed. Clearly, the experiences associated with intensive language learning and cultural immersion remains the underlying influence associated with *sustainable language learning*.

*Sustainable language learning* is not found in countries promoting foreign language learning as an obligatory approach. Lynch (1989) found “the major function of the school and its curriculum is to enable students to think, talk, discuss, judge, relate, and act in a reasoned way” (p. 35). A curriculum standard for a “viable” language curriculum engages the learner in a real-life exchange and interaction with other people associated with the language. In opposition, a heterogeneous language community of learners suppresses the language learner’s ability to problem-solve in viable real-life dialectal situations. This study focused on the impact of communicating the second language in a cultural situation, or cultural immersion, and assessed how learning the language influenced communicative language competence.

## **Background**

School systems and curriculum policy implementation for language learning, vary throughout the world. In fact, some cultures employ social behaviors to influence cultural immersion. These components consistently and simultaneously align with cultural values and academic achievement toward language learning. A study conducted by Flippo (2013), found “85% of German youngsters between the ages of three and six attend voluntary community and church-supported kindergartens” (p. 1). In most German schools, a foreign language is introduced in the third year of elementary school. An education destination is selected based on a student’s ability and placement is assessment based. German students are tested intermittently for placement and program satisfaction/completion.

The French have a similar approach to education. Students enter school as early as two years and enter college as early as 15. At the secondary level, the French have a more rigorous approach to language education and numerous studies conducted by the French support this idea. The French-Canadians conducted a study, as cited in Moreno (2012), and found “bilingual students out performed monolingual students of the same socioeconomic status in almost all cognitive tests” (p. 112). French college students partake in an oral examination twice a week in math, physics, French, and a foreign language (English). This approach supports the importance of using critical thinking skills in conjunction with blending a bilingual education into the school systems.

Based on the approach used by the Dutch, education is mandatory and children enter school by the age of 6. The Dutch’s primary education system aligns with the British’s curriculum approach or the International Baccalaureate approach to learning (Phillips & Pound, 2003). Students test at the end of the eighth year when this test determines the path of the student’s secondary education level. The Dutch schools incorporate English and other surrounding countries languages but the most commonly second language of choice is English.

Although all three approaches to language learning differ, the facilitation and approach to learning a second language remains important. After World War II, students were encouraged to study abroad. This concept became popular after the United Nations vowed to improve the relationships between cultures by revealing common principles and policies of respective countries (Holburn, 1943, p. 2). Because this union commenced, a surge of exchange programs emerged. These programs offered students the opportunity to experience cultural immersion while studying in a foreign country. Most of these programs require the participant to study

the language of the host country and to gain a better understanding the host country's culture, language, and general political stance prior to immersion.

The requirements for each program vary based on the programs origination or home country. Some programs require one year of the language of the host country whereas others require a minimum of three years studying the foreign language of choice. Most European countries introduce a second language to students at a very young age with the purpose of "maintaining the students' proficiency in the mother tongue while adding proficiency in English" (Paulston, 1988, p. 555). With English being one of the most common second languages to learn, countries promoting the opportunity to study abroad, offer English as a choice for foreign language studies.

While this study's defines *sustainable language learning*, based on the data collected, each culture's approach to education differs. Multicultural classrooms impact the learning process for language acquisition and sustainable foreign language learning and previous studies have demarcated the importance of preserving the "mother tongue and native culture while simultaneously striving to promote a European identity" or European "citizenship" while learning a second language (McGrath & Ramler, 2002, p. 3). This study is not intended to compare the approach used for general education in the three cultures associated with this study, but rather examination the similarities of language learning resulting in *sustainable language learning*.

## **Methods**

This study used an evaluation approach to assess the effectiveness of language learning and how *sustainable language learning* is defined and reached (Robson, 2002). The learners in question were native language speakers of French, German, and Dutch. Because the language learning in these three European cultures have a targeted outcome, an examination of the cultural differences and the similarities of language learning between these multicultural milieus were assessed.

Written responses to specific open-ended questions were designed for this study; however, a corroboration of the results was used to study the same phenomenon experienced by the participants from different European backgrounds (Johnson & Christenson, 2004). There were two major limitations for this study: the pupil's ability to understand what is being asked through a digital survey and my inability to probe responses.

The limitations were reduced based on the design of the questions. The questions were designed to obtain different perspectives, regarding the same issue, from members of different European cultures. A triangulated approach was used. This approach permitted the data from one issue to be comprised with multiple and varying perspectives needed to answer the research inquires (McFee, 1992).

The sample of this study included 68 students from Germany, France, and the Netherlands. The sample was based on a convenience sample and all participants who volunteered were used based on the approach outlined by Creswell (1998); a convenience sample incorporates all available participants experiencing the same phenomenon. With a multitude of technological resources available today the

participant pool was established by posting an invitation for participation via multiple social media sites. An on-line link invited participants who met the criteria for this study and a disclosure was provided regarding this study.

This study tested a set of hypotheses related to the interactive influences of three paradigms associated with *sustainable language learning*: politics, education, and societal influences. The concepts of the various cultures and social dynamics of each country, including the similarities of language learning and the process of language acquisition, were explored. Tomasello (1992) found children learn by cultural routines which “scaffold the initial language acquisition of the child” (p. 70); hence, the influences of each government’s pragmatic rules and sociocultural influences associated with learning a foreign language were included and examined. The components of this study were operationalized to address specific learning outcomes and the impact of cultural immersion when learning a second language.

This study had three main aims:

- To establish how students perceived his or her native countries approach to learning a second language
- To find how students reacted to language learning outcomes
- To assess if the student gained intercultural competence while immersed in the host country’s culture

The survey used in this research contained questions regarding the student’s background, the age of foreign language acquisition, native educational system’s approach to language learning, experience learning a second language, and foreign culture immersion and language implementation.

Since the acquisition of language learning was tested and based on intercultural immersion and communicative competencies, the triangulated approach provided the most effective insight within the constraints of this study.

## **Data Analysis**

This study tested a set of hypotheses related to the interactive influences of three paradigms associated with *sustainable language learning*: politics, education, and societal influences. The empirical results from 68 European students who studied abroad, found the direct influence of language learning aligned with various characteristics associated with their culture. The findings point to the importance of everyday interactions with other cultures as a factor impacting *sustainable language learning*. Of the participants, 53% were female and 47% were male. The age range of the participants was 18 to 26.

### *Multiple language acquisition*

Of the participants surveyed, 100% spoke German, which was not the native language of all of the participants. Fifty percent of the students were fluent in French, while only 22% of the students were fluent in Dutch.

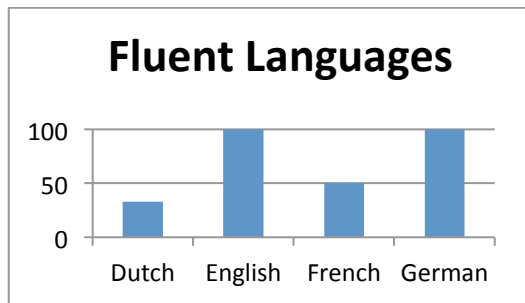


Figure 1. Languages spoken by Participants

### *Reason for study*

This project found the standard teaching epistemologies met the needs for learning a second language; coincidentally, it was found the learning was *sustainable*. Because this study focused on learning English and sustaining the ability to communicate in English, the age in which English was learned was examined. The age of the participants when they first were exposed to learning English ranged from six to 14.

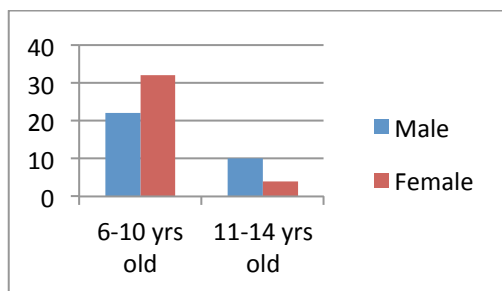


Figure 2. Age range for learning English

The outcome of this question found 54 of the participants learned English from six to 10. Of the 54 participants, 22 males (32%) and 32 females (47%) were taught English. The remaining participants learned English from 11 – 14. Of those participants, 10 were male (15%) while 4 were females (6%).

### *Educational approach*

It was found each student described a solid educational foundation for learning English as a second language. This data was obtained through open-ended responses provided by the participants:

Q5: Describe the language program or approach used in your education system to teach English.

Here are examples from the responses:

- Dutch: “simple lessons based on standard education program for class”
- German: “in school, we often worked with our English workbook which contents many tasks like...presenting a short dialogue”

French: “visuals, cd’s and songs...vocabulary tests and dialogues in class”

Q6: Did your education program test your English skills? If so, how as it measured?

Dutch: “a final exam included a dialogue with our teacher”

German: “Many tests, verbal and written, where we were tested in English only”

French: “vocabulary tests, measured by content, grammar and form of expression”

### *Influential paradigms*

This question found education influenced second language learning. Eighty three percent of the participants believe education was the most influential factor for learning English. While this question found additional information related to this inquiry, educational influences were ranked as the number one influential factor while societal influences ranked as the second influential factor. None of the participants were influenced by political influences leading to learning English as a second language. Although learning English as a second language was not influenced by political influences in the early years of the participants, when the participants were preparing to travel and study abroad, the political influences were dominant.

Dutch: “being prepared to speak in the host country was one of the requirements along with understanding the host country’s political make-up”

German: “our education system is influenced by policies which have been in practice for a long time...we are taught early and expected to practice what we learned later on”

French: “I believe I learned to speak English from a social aspect but our education system believes all students should be multilingual...”

### *Cultural immersion*

More important, the findings from this research point to the importance of everyday interactions with other cultures as a factor impacting *sustainable language learning*. Each participant provided insight to her or her experiences in an English speaking classroom while studying abroad. These findings indicate the importance of cultural immersion.

Dutch: “As an exchange student...I had no problem communicating. I found most students in the American school (my English Literature class), were not familiar with grammar and spelling. At my age, we mostly wrote long texts instead of learning vocabulary or grammar”

German: In Germany, people have to write a lot more free essays with a minimum of 200 words. While in America, I chose Spanish as a foreign language and the teacher focused on vocabulary...she would say the word and the class word repeat it. I didn’t like that...

French: “I was in American for 10 months and my English improved most from simply talking to native speakers every day”

### *Communicative competence*

Additionally, this study found most of the participants struggled with the meanings of words because of slang and other dialects not explained while learning English. Most of the students indicated they were taught British English, which is different from American English. However, the interaction with native English speakers improved the participant's ability to communicate over time.

- Dutch: "of course the English is different...we use colloquial language when speaking with a native speaker...it's completely different English...however, talking to the natives allowed me to adapt my language and understand everything"
- German: "you lose your accent faster and learn slang/colloquial English or just everyday English whereas in Germany you learn formal language which often doesn't help when you're actually talking to people instead of just writing things down"
- French: I recognized that there is an actual difference between the British and American English...when coming back to France, it was a lot easier for me to speak fluently and write essays since my vocabulary was bigger"

### *Sustainable language learning*

The findings point to the importance of everyday interactions with other cultures as a factor impacting *sustainable language learning*. This study found a solid educational foundation was evident and was determined to be a necessity for *sustainable language learning*. The participants were asked to describe the influential factors associated with second language communicative competence.

- Dutch: "if I don't speak English everyday...it's hard for me to practice and become an experienced English talker...School gave me some basics, but I need to talk everyday/week to become fluent"
- German: "talking to native speaker/being surrounded by English speaking people 24/7. Also watching movies and being online improved my English"
- French: "we are around English everyday...as a kid, it started with the lyrics of American songs..."

### **Discussion**

This study set out to investigate the influences associated with *sustainable language learning*. The results found the participants were introduced to English at different ages, different approaches, and different testing methods. The most influential factor associated with *sustainable language learning* was the everyday interaction using English with other English speakers. Mostly, each participant found educational approaches and epistemologies to be the most important influential factor for learning a second language. This finding is reflected in the responses found from the survey data. Overall, these participants did not fully utilize speaking in English until culture immersion took place. Once each of the participants were immersed into a culture where English was the only language, real-life dialect occurred. This project provided



evidence and outlined specific learning outcomes related to language learning. Nonetheless, *sustainable language learning* was achieved when engaging the learner into viable dialectal situations. In today's multilingual language communities, learners suppress the ability to problem solve and utilize language acquisition. Memorization of a language does not provide the opportunity of real-life communication using the learned second language.

In American schools, too many multiple choice assessments are being used and as a result the ability to think and problem solving is suppressed. This study found regurgitation of the language results in sustainable language learning. During the language learning process, students should practice a second language through essay writing or other means of assessment practices. Standard teaching epistemologies are not meeting the needs of a heterogeneous language community of learners. As hypothesized, a paradigm shift in language learning is necessary and is required for *sustainable language learning* to occur. The findings from this study have generated useful results.

The most influential factors associated with *sustainable language learning* was the age the language learner when exposed to a foreign language, the approach of the educational system in regard to language learning, but more important, the cultural immersion and language implementation that took place during the second language process. The findings of this study found supporting data and evidence necessary for *sustainable language learning* to transpire.

## **Conclusion**

This study found the need for a paradigm shift in language analysis and bilingualism; hence, a diverse pedagogical method of language acquisition would warrant *sustainable language learning* needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century multicultural and bilingual classrooms. More significantly, this study was consistent in assuming teachers need to understand the effective linguistic methodologies needed in a multicultural community of language learners.

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