

Why do you all study English? Well, of course you have no choice since it is required for the college entrance exam. In the U.S. all students who want to attend a university must complete a minimum of 2 years of a world language in high school, but most famous universities prefer three years. And why is this required? Because it teaches a new skill to students and a different language can open a person's mind to new ideas and perspectives. We can learn about other cultures without having to use someone else's translation since we cannot directly understand the other language.

But what can this language study do to improve your life? For me my language studies changed me and changed the direction of my life. Let me tell you how...

When I was young I was extremely shy. I studied very hard, but didn't often speak out or tell my ideas in school. Another problem was that my health was poor. I had to miss many months of school while I was in the hospital or when I needed to stay at home in bed. In fact I missed nearly all of junior 2 and half of my senior 1 year. This made me even more shy. I thought that I could never be a success in life because I had too many problems.

But one day when I was in senior 1 I heard a young woman speak about her experience as an exchange student in Germany. I became very excited by the idea of doing the same thing. You might imagine how surprised my parents were when I told them that I wanted to be an exchange student! I had excellent grades in school, including French class, so I asked for permission to apply. Since I had never been away from home before they didn't know if I would really do it. Also they were worried about my health and how to pay for the program, but they let me apply.

That year there were only 3 students who could go to France from California, but eventually I was lucky to be selected. Then I was blessed to have people donate money to help me pay for the exchange. The experience changed me and changed my life. In fact before I left I had never been outside the state of California, had never been in a taxi, on a train or plane or been away from my home. My friends asked me if I were afraid, but I didn't even think about it. It had been too hard just to have the chance to go.

The trip to France was very long because we didn't go there directly. Our exchange group dropped off students in Germany and Holland before we three students finally got to Paris. Then I took a train to a small town in the west of the country. Finally my host family drove me more than an hour through the countryside to reach our home. They lived in a big house near a village of 40 people. It was very different from my life in Los Angeles. My host family had a cow so that we had milk, cream and could make our own butter. We had some sheep and a big garden for vegetables. My home in California was a very dry place, always brown in summer. I lived in the suburbs of Los Angeles, the second largest city in the U.S. In my new home it rained frequently and everything was beautifully green!

The first days were difficult because my oral French was not very good in spite of my good grades. Many times I could only say "I like it" or "thank you very much". I also learned that I had to think before saying anything. This taught me a lesson that I have always tried to remember – If I think before I speak I can often avoid saying stupid or mean things.

Each day my host sister helped me to learn more words and grammar. I repeated my lessons and studied. When we watched tv everything was in French. When we played games the same thing was true. One night I dreamed in French. It was amazing! I realized that I was making progress. Sometimes I just sat and listened – without making the effort. It seemed impossible.

Because I had spent so much time at home in California being sick, I was happy to be outside every day in France. We walked in the woods and rode bicycles down dirt roads. The food my host mom made was delicious and my health was good. Of course I missed my family in California, but life was good in France.

When I arrived home my first comment to my parents was “I want to go back”. They were surprised but said we would see. I was a different girl that year in high school. I felt that if I could live with another family in a foreign country and survive that I could do almost anything. I even took classes that were not common for girls – such as higher level physics, chemistry and math. Once again my family was surprised that I would be so independent – especially when I was often the only girl in my class. Some friends of my parents said that such difficult classes would be too hard for me because I was not strong and ...because I was a girl!

My grades and test scores gave me many options for the university, but I could only afford a local school. Still I saved money from a job that I had while attending the university to reach my goal of going back to France. Once more I got sick, but in spite of everything I was able to go back to France in my junior year. This time I lived in a dormitory in a very different part of the country. Many of the foreign students complained about the

classes, the weather and the teachers. French universities were different than the ones in our home countries. Also they complained that French students were not always friendly to foreigners. But I considered each day a gift, and something that had been very difficult to earn. In fact with time I made French friends, two of whom are still among my closest friends – even though we only see each other every two years. And even after all these years I still keep in touch with my first host family brother and sisters, though we all now have grown or nearly grown children.

These two exchange opportunities changed the direction of my life. I intended to study science, but eventually chose to get a degree in French. When I graduated from the university I went to work for the California State University Office of International Programs, helping California students to study in another country. I traveled all over the state and to some of the foreign universities. But in my mind I had another goal – to become a teacher. I wanted to share with young people what a second or third or fourth language could mean.

What I wanted to share is the meaning of a new language. It opens doors to the world. While at the university I also learned Spanish and some German. I even learned basic Swedish and Finnish in order to spend time visiting friends in Finland. And with each language I can learn a little faster – except for Chinese which is much more difficult!!

In 2004 I was teaching at Saugus High School in Santa Clarita, California. Over the previous 10 years I had organized summer exchange trips for some of my students, traveling to France with them every two years during the summer. I wanted my students to have the chance I did, and gladly paid

for my own travel and expenses so that they could have the chance to go. They lived with host families and made great progress with their oral language and their comprehension of a different culture.

But then one day our principal, Bill Bolde, asked me to help organize an exchange program with a high school in China. China? I knew very little about the country other than what I had read in the newspaper or in books. I went home to discuss it with my husband. He thought it was a great idea. Once again I had no idea how that decision would change my life and the life of our family and friends!

Here today I am in Xi'an for the 10th time. Our exchange has brought together over 100 students and many host families in two countries. I now know how to speak a little Chinese, and my husband and I have hosted 7 Chinese teachers in our home for many months at a time. (Some of them are teachers at this school!) But the exchange has also enriched our lives. We have once again seen that in general people from the entire world want the same things – a good life for their children, peace and enough money to live comfortably.

And when I look back all those years to one choice that I made – the idea to be an exchange student – I realize that it not only changed my life, but it has helped me to change the lives of many other students and families. Today among my best friends are some truly wonderful Chinese people. Now when I come to Xi'an I feel at home.

Last summer we welcomed 25 Gaoxin students to our first English Immersion summer camp. Some may be in this room. We taught them about American culture, but they taught us about themselves. They visited Disneyland and Universal Studios; they learned to play baseball and celebrated many American holidays. But for most of them the best part of the experience was living with a host family.

In December the 8th annual group of students from Gaoxin No. 1 High School left for home after spending 5 months studying at our high school and living with great families. One of the host fathers wrote me a letter just after the group left. I want to share part of what he wrote because it explains why an exchange is so important to our world.

"Thanks so much for allowing us to be given the privilege to be ambassadors representing the U.S. to China and "parents" of Vicky, Lee and Kunbo for the last 7 months. We had a great experience. As I said on stage the other night, it is truly amazing seeing our world through the eyes of a child that has been raised in a completely different culture. To see the kids leave now on two different occasions with tears in their eyes, we know we have made an impact on their lives.

What a difference the world would be if hundreds of thousands of parents opened up their homes to kids of all nations.... planting seeds of kindness, care and mutual respect. This will definitely bear fruit for them as future leaders of the world. Just imagine if a foreign exchange student rose to a position of governmental power in China..... What impact would the time spent in the U.S. with normal, everyday people have? How differently would they view America? How differently would we view China?

You've started something incredible....in which dividends will be many. It is like the song we sang in Sunday school so many times, "It only takes a spark, to start a fire glowing....."

Studying a language is that spark. It can open the world to you. You are lucky to have excellent teachers at this school. Be sure that you learn all that you can. One of these days you may have the chance to spend time with foreigners, to share your culture with them and to learn about theirs. I believe that with better understanding between cultures and all of us have a better chance for a better tomorrow for the entire world.