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The Gift of Languages and the Gifted Learner – the Role of the Gifted as Change Agents in a Multilingual World

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Abstract In a globalized and interconnected world, language skills are important to the individual and to our society, enhancing the personal and professional lives of individuals, as well as their ability to communicate effectively with other cultures both locally and globally. Beyond these individual benefits, multilingualism empowers both individuals and societies in terms of global citizenship and intercultural understanding. Language learning and language use are part of the global skills set for all. Gifted learners are likely to learn quickly and to have a successful learning outcome. In order to effectively address the need for language skills and cultural knowledge in the workplace, in our society, and as global citizens, it is essential to consider language learning for the gifted.

Keywords gifted; language learning, multilingualism, global citizenship

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1. Introduction

In a globalized and interconnected world, language skills are important to the individual and to our society, enhancing the personal and professional lives of individuals, as well as their ability to communicate effectively with other cultures both locally and globally. Beyond these individual benefits, multilingualism empowers both individuals and societies in terms of global citizenship and intercultural understanding (AMACAD, 2020). Language learning and language use are part of the global skills set for all.

However, Americans have long been considered reluctant language learners, although in reality much of the foreign language deficit in the United States results from a lack of opportunity to learn both heritage and additional languages rather than from a lack of interest, with only 15% of US public elementary schools offering a language program and only 20% of K-12 students studying another language (AMACAD, 2017; American Councils, 2017). The situation is even more dire in US colleges and universities where only 6.5% of students are enrolled in a class in a language other than English (MLA, 2023). In addition, in the US workplace, language skills are in demand across the country, including many languages and many types of jobs (ACTFL, 2019; NAE, 2017).

The challenge is to build language skills in the US by offering opportunity and access to the gift of languages to all interested learners of all ages (Jaumont & Stein-Smith, 2019). A subset of learners likely both to learn quickly in either a traditional educational institution or as an independent self-directed learner, and to find the complexity and inherent interdisciplinarity of language and languages appealing is the gifted learner (Van Tassel-Baska, MacFarlane, & Baska, 2017; Johnsen, Goree, Karnes, & Stephens, 2005).

2. A Brief Overview of Language and Languages in The United States

Language skills and cultural knowledge have been linked to personal, professional, societal, and global benefits (Jaumont, 2017). Those with language skills are better able to connect with those of other cultures through direct interpersonal communication and through the ability to directly access information, media, and entertainment onsite and online. In the US, our history has been multilingual, ranging from Native American languages already present before the European era to the nearly 1,000 languages spoken today in New York City (Perlin, 2024). At present, 70M speak a language other than English in the home, and many more may have a heritage language in their family history and personal cultural identity (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022).

However, the United States does not have a language policy or an official language. Most states do not require foreign language study for high school graduation – “A total of 11 states have foreign language graduation requirements; 16 states do not have foreign language graduation requirements; and 24 states have graduation requirements that may be fulfilled by a number of subjects—one of which is foreign languages” (American Councils, 2017, p. 6). Two areas of importance in the decision-making process in terms of studying another language for students and parents are their importance in college admissions, and in careers and employment. At the undergraduate postsecondary level, 50.7% of colleges and universities have a foreign language graduation requirement, and 24.7% have a foreign language entrance requirement (MLA, 2012). As far as the significance of languages and cultural knowledge in the U.S. workplace, there is demand for language skills not currently met (ACTFL, 2019. NAE, 2017).

Despite the prevalence and significance of multilingualism in the world and in the US, fewer than 20% of US K-12 students another language and only 6.5% of college and university students are enrolled in a class in a language other than English (American Councils, 2017; MLA, 2023).

Considering the benefits of language learning and use, and the current lack of opportunity and enrollment among US students, advocacy is needed to increase both interest and opportunity for all, including the gifted – whose abilities are likely to enhance both learning and interest (Van Tassel-Baska, MacFarlane, & Baska (2017).

3. The Benefits of Bilingualism – Language Skills and Cultural Knowledge

The learning and use of one or more additional languages have been shown to provide an array of personal, professional, cultural, and cognitive benefits (ACTFL, n.d.: ACTFL, n.d.a; ACTFL, 2019). In addition to the ability to understand and appreciate literature, media, and the arts in another language, language skills are in demand in the workplace – at all levels and in a wide variety of sectors. Interestingly, the use of additional languages on a regular basis has been proven to stave off the symptoms of dementia, and language study has been linked to improved academic outcomes and test scores (Bialystok, Craik, & Freedman, 2007; Shute, 2022; ACTFL, n.d.; ACTFL, n.d.a). In

addition to cognitive, personal, and professional benefits, multilingualism has also been linked to creativity, self-esteem and identity, and global citizenship (Kharkhurin, 2012).

Beyond these personal benefits, it is also essential to look at the broader benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism locally and globally. Within our increasingly multilingual society in which more than 70M speak a language other than English in the home, the learning and use of additional languages by all interested Americans would greatly contribute to increasing understanding and reducing segmentation within our society (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022; Jaumont, 2017). Beyond the visible benefit of being able to successfully communicate with others in their own language whether while travelling or within our own neighborhood, language skills empower us to engage more effectively as global citizens – through enhanced participation in the global conversation and through personal engagement in international and global initiatives.

Gifted learners are likely to maximize the possibilities for comparative and interdisciplinary study. Able to learn quickly and likely to find the complexity of language interesting and challenging, the gifted learner would potentially maximize the language learning experience (Van Tassel-Baska, MacFarlane, & Baska, 2017).

4. The Need for Multilingualism in the World

Multilingualism is part of the 21st century global skills set, needed in international organizations, multinational corporations, response to global crises, and global citizenship collaborations across the disciplines. Language skills are also in demand in the US workplace and in our communities (ACTFL, 2019; NAE, 2017; Jaumont, 2017).

Talented and gifted individuals exist throughout our society, including both K-16 students and adult learners. Responses and action steps may vary depending on the age, role, and geographic location of the individual. In the classroom, educators can take advantage of the talents of each learner both to motivate the learner and to accelerate learning. Learners can progress more rapidly in certain linguistic areas than others and can “make room” for languages in terms of “extra” courses or a double major/joint program without sacrificing quality and achievement. Parents can certainly encourage their children to make the most of their giftedness in acquiring an essential skill, and educators can develop language learning materials and programs to effectively address the learning styles of the gifted.

5. Multiple Intelligences, Attitude, Motivation, and Language Learning

Within the framework of Gardner’s multiple intelligences, linguistic intelligence “involves the ability to understand and use spoken and written language. This can include expressing yourself effectively through speech or the written word as well as showing a facility for learning foreign tongues” (Kelly, 2019, p. 1; Christison, 2005). Famous figures throughout history across the disciplines, including Jean-Paul Sartre, are attributed linguistic intelligence, and many classroom activities can support language learning through linguistic intelligence (Weiner, 2016; Lyons, 2019).

In addition to intelligence, attitude and motivation are among the most powerful predictors of a successful learning outcome, and differences among individuals also play a primary role (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Dornyei, 2005). “Motivation and attitude provide primary impetus to initiate learning language 2 (hereafter L2) and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process. Lack of attention to these factors can lead to inefficiencies in learning L2,” and motivation can be strengthened by “connecting language learning to students’ interests outside of class (Oroujlou & Vohedi, 2011, p. 994, 999). In terms of motivation, while online learning makes a wide variety of self-paced learning opportunities available, it is important to stay in touch with and to respond to the purpose of each individual learner in order to ensure sustainable motivation (Arvanitis, 2020).

6. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Giftedness

Over half the world population uses more than one language on a regular basis, and use of more than one language has been linked to mental acuity and to staving off dementia (Grosjean, 2010, 2020; Bialystok, Craik, & Freidman, 2007). Yet most Americans cannot hold a conversation in a language other than English, and many US K-12 students do not have the opportunity to learn additional languages (McComb, 2001; AMACAD, 2017). The world is multilingual, yet most Americans speak only English, and this lack of language skills and use impacts not only the personal and professional lives of individuals, but also our society globally and locally. Languages and language skills are a gift to all, and gifted individuals of all ages often display special talent in language learning. There are also levels of giftedness, as “giftedness is averaged to make up well less than 5% of the general population, and within that small

number, there are subclassifications: mild, moderate, high, exceptional and profound giftedness” (IGC, n.d., p. 1). The latter three types make up only a very small portion of that less than 5%. Multiple studies have examined the trajectory of giftedness across the lifespan (Shurkin, 1992).

The term “gifted” has been defined as “having great natural ability” and “talented” (Merriam-Webster, 2024), and “possessing a great deal of natural ability, which generally becomes apparent at a very young age” (APA, 2024). Gifted individuals have also been defined as “those who demonstrate an advanced ability or potential in one or more specific areas when compared to others of the same age, experience or environment and “excel in their ability to think, reason and judge” (Davidson, 2021). At the Federal level in the US, giftedness has been defined as “high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or **leadership** capacity, or in specific academic fields” (Cornell, n.d.). Characteristics of the gifted include comprehension, creative problem-solving, and ability to absorb information quickly (Davidson, 2024).

Giftedness is often measured through standardized tests. According to the APA, “giftedness in intelligence is often categorized as an IQ of two standard deviations above the mean or higher (130 for most IQ tests), obtained on an individually administered IQ test (APA, 2024). It has been estimated that 10 percent of children and young people may be gifted, and an annual report provides data on the status of gifted education in the US (NAGC, n.d.). There are also associations who represent the gifted, the largest of which is Mensa – with 150,000 members around the world within the top 2% as measured by an approved, properly administered and supervised, intelligence test. (Mensa International, 2024).

While estimates of the number of gifted individuals vary, a relatively small percentage of the population is considered gifted. While 6%, or 3.3M, are enrolled in gifted and talented programs, it is estimated that just as many, or 3.3M, may be overlooked and should be included (NAGC, n.d.; Dreilinger, 2019). Within this subset of the population, individuals may have relative degrees of giftedness as well as giftedness in specific areas, including verbal and mathematical giftedness, the latter being especially relevant in terms of language learning ability, or linguistic giftedness. Gifted individuals often have an above-average ability to learn vocabulary and grammatical concepts, which can accelerate the language learning process.

Beyond traditional definitions of giftedness, the gifted language learner can also include heritage language speakers and highly motivated learners – motivated by the individual sense of purpose and by specific purposes to learn one or more additional languages. Talented and motivated language learners and multilinguals can make a difference in the world, acting as change agents at the global level as global citizens and in confronting global crises at the local level in reducing segmentation and increasing communication and understanding in our communities and in our society.

7. Multilingualism, Language Learning, and the Gifted

It is interesting to reflect on the prevalence of multilingualism among the gifted throughout history and across the disciplines, along with its origins and impact (Weiner, 2016). Gifted individuals have demonstrated language skills and multilingualism throughout history and have often been described as polyglots (Lyons, 2019). It has been said by Wittgenstein that “the limits of my language are the limits of my world” (Richter, 2021). From Cleopatra to James Joyce and Nikola Tesla, many gifted individuals throughout history and across the disciplines have been multilingual or polyglot, including American lexicographer Noah Webster. Many celebrities also speak one or more additional languages, including Bradley Cooper, Jodie Foster, Sandra Bullock, Leonardo di Caprio, Timothée Chalamet, Shakira, Gyneth Paltrow, Serena Williams, and many more (Wells, 2023; Macedo, 2022). In terms of the link between language skills and earnings, Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Ma are two well-known examples (Koyfman, 2018). Current American public figures who are known for their language skills include Antony Blinken, John Kerry, and Mitt Romney.

Multilingualism has been linked to creativity, identity, self-esteem, and global citizenship, and more than half the world population uses at least one additional language on a regular basis (Kharkhurin, 2012; Jaumont, 2017; Ayres-Bennett & Fisher, 2022; Grosjean, 2010. 2020). A possible reason for the prevalence of multilingualism among the gifted is the fact that “gifted individuals acquire language competence earlier than their peers and the majority of gifted individuals have many characteristics based on their higher verbal competencies” (Gokaydin, Baglama & Uzunboyulu, 2017, p. 110).

In framing the discussion of language learning, it is important to remember that languages and language learning are for all, as there are no cognitive, language, and academic achievement differences in language learning among LD students (Sparks, 2022). Within the framework of the need for language learning and language skills, “the rationale for teaching world languages to gifted learners” includes the fact that language learning is an “optimal match” for the gifted learner, including its nature as a “another symbol system that can provide high challenge and complexity. They go on to discuss the vocabulary, the curiosity, the thinking and comparative abilities, along with the ability to make connections and the creativity of the gifted learner. In addition, they highlight the possibility of accelerated language learning for the gifted learner, the importance of interdisciplinary learning, and the “transfer effect” – or benefits of language learning for the gifted learner (VanTassel-Baska, MacFarlane, Baska, 2017, p. 5-9). In addition, multilingualism “may enhance their generative and innovative capacities of creative thinking” (Kharkhurin, 2012, p. 173),

As with all language learners, questions arise as to how to best develop language skills. Language learning generally takes place in the home, family, and community, or in an educational setting. This discussion has been framed by questions of the role of specific language aptitude and of intelligence – including types of intelligence - on language learning ability (Gardner, 2006; Sparks, 2022). An early start to consistent language learning and the opportunity to use the additional language(s) in a variety of settings is important, and motivation is a major factor in successful learning outcome.

Recommendations for best practices in language teaching and learning for the gifted include both learning environments and a wide variety of learners. The need to develop language skills in gifted children within the home and within the family is important, with early exposure of “up to 4 such languages” recommended (Giles, 2016). In terms of language learning for the gifted in an educational setting, recommendations include: improvement of educational policies and programs for gifted individuals and language in order to enhance knowledge and understanding of educators and practices in this field; increase in the number of courses in teacher training programs at the universities in order to train teachers who are aware of teaching language skills to gifted students; development of seminars, conferences, or in-service training sessions for teachers of gifted learners in order to increase their knowledge in this field; increased communication with families about the importance of language skills for their gifted child; along with additional research and study (Gokaydin, Baglama, Uzunboyu, 2017).

In a study comparing high and low achieving language learners, findings showed that that verbal intelligence was higher in the high achieving group of language learners as compared to the low achieving group and that relevant intelligence types were intrapersonal and visual intelligence. The authors also indicated the need for further research (Hemmati & Sadeghi, 2015).

8. The Role and Importance of Technology in Language Learning

Technology plays an important role in language learning for learners of all ages, with authentic language and language learning materials available in a wide range of languages, including more languages than would typically be taught in even the largest and most comprehensive educational institution.

While many may think of an app for translation, the array of technology-driven tools for language learning is far more extensive, ranging from synchronous and asynchronous online courses to OERs (free online educational resources created by educators and educational institutions), to AI-driven chatbots where learners can develop their conversational skills. While many are fee-based or available as part of a school or college course, some are freely available online. In addition, authentic language is available in news, media, and entertainment, as well as through video-conferencing technology and experiences (Davila, 2023).

Technology is available for all learners, whether in an onsite or online class, or whether working as independent learners, as “digital technologies are ideally placed to help teachers working with learners, and learners working independently” (Motteram, 2013). The choice of technology is learner-driven, with “technology is best driven by the needs of the language learner” (ACTFL, 2017). AI-driven tools like chatbots can improve student learning outcomes, AI can enhance accessibility, and provide an overall language and writing skills set in translation and beyond (Doylo, 2023).

9. The Independent Self-Directed Language Learner

While language is part of life and can be learned in many settings ranging from the home and family to the university classroom. However, many language learners – including the gifted – learn languages as independent self-directed learners.

Independent learning is a natural fit for the gifted learner at any age, but it is especially interesting to consider all the possibilities available for the independent self-directed language learner at any age. It is important for the self-directed learner to develop goals and a plan for learning, and to self-assess (Wilson & Conyers, 2018). Independent learning has been described as a four-step process, including “1) being ready to learn, 2) setting learning goals, 3) engaging in the learning process, and 4) evaluating learning.” The importance of an advisor for the independent learner is also stressed (Center, 2024, p. 1).

10. Creating and Sustaining Motivation for Language Learning Among the Gifted

Sustainable motivation is considered a significant factor in successful language learning outcome, and the same is true for gifted learners (Dornyei, 2005, APA, 2024a). The most important thing to remember in creating sustainable motivation is that each learner has his/her individual purpose(s), and it is important to connect with learner purposes to develop and sustain motivation – from the initial conversation about multilingualism or learning one or more specific languages, through the inevitable plateaus when motivation may decrease, and abandonment of language learning is possible.

Beyond the specific purposes of language learners, including cultural identity and family history, career goals, and personal interests, one aspect of language learning and use that is often not highlighted is the joy and fun of learning a language and then actually using it within the framework of individual goals. Knowledge of another language has actually been considered the sign of being a cultured person and of being sexy (An Easy Guide, n.d.; O'Hare, 2017).

It is equally important for language educators, stakeholders, and enthusiasts to ensure that the process remain enjoyable for the learner through leveraging authentic and local language sources in news and media, entertainment, populist culture, along with individual and community interests and goals.

The next step is to ensure that – once the need and the benefits of bilingualism have been established, along with sustainable motivation – gifted learners have the best learning environment to optimize their giftedness and to develop language skills as thoroughly and quickly as possible (Gali, Fakhrutdinova, & Gali, 2019). Accelerated, self-paced, experiential, and independent learning can help to ensure that gifted learners achieve the best language learning outcomes possible. Accelerated learning offers gifted learners multiple avenues and resources to maximize their giftedness in the language learning processes. Learners can cover curriculum more quickly and can learn from multiple sources simultaneously. Independent learning offers gifted learners the opportunity to learn beyond the classroom or curriculum using those avenues of language that work best for them (VanTassel-Baska, MacFarlane, & Baska, 2017). Experiential learning offers the opportunity to use the additional language in a variety of settings and to validate progress and the usefulness of additional languages in communicating with and helping others and in creating a better world.

11. A Gifted Response to the US Foreign Language Deficit in a Globalized World

The need for change in many areas is documented in news headlines, scholarly monographs, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, with the ability to communicate effectively with others in order to develop the partnerships in order to achieve goals an essential skill (SDGs, n.d.). The process of change has been described as an 8-step process (Kotter, 1996). With their intelligence and creativity, talented and gifted individuals have the opportunity to play a role as change agents for good in a multilingual world through their ability to learn additional languages more quickly and effectively than the average learner. The question is how to make the most of this opportunity.

Gifted language learners have access to more language learning resources than ever, both online and traditional, and can – like any independent learner – design the program that best meets their needs. A difference may be that the gifted learner can design a self-directed independent learning program that matches their abilities. Language learning programs freely available online are just the beginning – actual college and university courses are freely available online, as are a wide variety of web resources, which include music, media, and more.

Beyond individual independent self-directed language learning, gifted learners of all ages can benefit from programs that not only include them, but also have a special focus on them, whether in school programs, or those offered through enrichment or association programs specifically intended for their needs in order to develop needed skills in a wide variety of languages.

Beyond the learning, however, there is an additional level of contribution possible, within and beyond the academic and workplace setting. The gifted individual is often learning additional languages outside the framework of school or workplace requirements and is, for that reason, free to deploy their language skills and cultural knowledge in a wide range of settings without concern for fulfilling employment or academic requirements.

The gifted bilingual/multilingual individual has the opportunity to engage in projects, ranging from writing and research to speaking and active engagement.

12. Language Education – Next Steps for The Gifted

Within the framework that languages have multiple benefits for the individual, for our society, and for our ability to engage effectively as global citizens, it is important to consider the potential contributions of the gifted to the promotion of language awareness and language skills.

On a personal level, those who are gifted can take advantage of their memory and analytical abilities to learn additional languages and to use them whenever possible to assist and to facilitate communication among others. Beyond our daily lives, these bilinguals/multilinguals can use their language skills in a wide range of volunteer activities reflecting their skills and interests. Those who would like a deeper level of engagement can support and even initiate language learning and use opportunities and programs develop OERs, and become language activists.

13. Conclusions - Current Trends and Future Directions

In conclusion, it is important to note that language and languages are part of the global skills set. While the gifted are generally able to learn more quickly and to engage readily with the complexity and interdisciplinarity of language learning, differentiated instruction is the key to effective language learning for all. Online access to authentic language and to learning resources, ranging from online courses and OERs, to blogs, podcasts, and chatbots, not to mention media, entertainment, and cultural resources make multilingualism possible for all.

The gifted are among us – children and young people, along with individuals of all ages. When considering language learning for the gifted, in addition to best practices in the classroom and teacher training, it is essential to consider self-paced and accelerated learning and independent self-directed learning. As with all learners, it is important to include differentiated instruction, along with access and affordability.

The linkage of giftedness with language learning and language skills is multifaceted, including both the significance of language skills as beneficial to individuals and to society globally and locally as well as the need to provide educational services, support, and opportunity to all our students. Encouraging the gifted to acquire language skills, either heritage languages or additional languages, through the courses and materials designed to maximize their inherent language learning talents is an opportunity expand the opportunity for our society to build language capacity and to thrive and do good in a multilingual world.

Note: The author convenes a weekly online French conversation group for the gifted through Mensa. Many thanks to all!

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