

Anchorage Daily News  
Textbooks vs. life  
Students tout value of  
immersion in learning another tongue

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Learning a foreign language is one of the most important things a student can do before graduating from high school. Unlike the other seemingly useless pieces of information we learn -- such as the structure of a villanelle poem or how to graph a polynomial function -- there are countless ways in which knowing a foreign language can be useful.

Here are the main incentives for taking a foreign language in high school:

- Studying a foreign language improves one's understanding of his or her native language.
- With the study of a foreign language comes a knowledge and appreciation for a culture completely different from that of the student's native culture.
- For admission, most colleges require two years of study of the same foreign language. Some colleges even recommend four years.
- More and more jobs and businesses are becoming international. In many careers, there is an increasing demand for employees to be bilingual.

With all this in mind, Anchorage high schoolers might wonder about the value and effectiveness of foreign language classes in our school district. Perfect World asked around, and here's what we found:

Ariel Hyams, a junior at West, has been in a Spanish immersion program for 12 years. Hyams said there are definite advantages to the program. Her fluency has helped her during several trips to Mexico. "I like talking to cabbies down there. It's a lot of fun because they don't always think that the ... girl from the States knows what's going on. It shocks some of them," she said. Hyams also loves the friendships and relationships the Spanish immersion program has brought her.

"Once you're in the immersion program, it's like having a family you can always fall back on. Every year you have at least one guaranteed class with the same people that you've known forever. I think that the fact that the ASD has such a strong Spanish immersion program bodes really well for their other developing immersion programs."

Terranova Tasker, a sophomore at Dimond, is a great admirer of the Japanese immersion program that she has been a part of for 11 years. "Through the program, I have had some of the greatest teachers who taught me much more than just the language, but the true essence of Japanese culture. Also, my sister went through the program, so I was able to speak with her in Japanese and our parents had no idea what we were saying. It became almost like a secret language and would drive them crazy." Tasker said. "I think the ASD does a great job offering native speaking teachers for their foreign language classes and provides useful information on exchanges and opportunities to foreign language students." Of course, no class is perfect. Tasker said she does find some fault with her foreign language class. "I think it would be more beneficial to the students if teachers focused more on speaking the language and embracing the differences between our cultures. Also if the teachers would communicate more with each other on the lessons, they would correspond better from year to year." While immersion students are positive about their foreign language experiences, non-immersion students find more to be frustrated about.

"The classes I've been in have this irregular order in which they do the lessons," said Jordyn Aquino, a sophomore at Dimond. "We don't learn things together. For example, we learn random words like 'car' and 'bread' and 'jump' all at the same time. "It would make so much more sense if we learned about words in sections. If we learned about the city, we would learn words like 'car,' 'building,' and 'hotel.' "

Sydney Gunnarson, a junior at West, said there often isn't enough progress between the classes. "The textbooks are too easy. After French II, it's all review. French IV, French V, and AP and IB French are all the same class! How are we supposed to learn anything new if the material isn't getting any more challenging?"

Daniel Schwicht, a junior at South, sums up the frustrations of non-immersion students who take foreign language classes: "After three years of study, you should be conversant in a language. Instead, we do review worksheets and fill in conjugation boxes. We shouldn't do stuff just because it's (in) Spanish. We should do fun stuff that happens to be in Spanish." "I'm frustrated beyond words at the ridiculous volume of busy work foreign language classes have. Homework is sometimes necessary, but only if it teaches something to the students."

"The moment class becomes engaging," Schwicht said, "even the slackers start learning and speaking the language."

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LEARNING TO TALK: What do you think about your foreign language class? Tell us at [adn.com/perfectworld](http://adn.com/perfectworld)

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