

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The tongue is a bridge

Fatimah Zainal · Thursday, May 12th, 2016

If you want to get to know yourself better, take up a new language.

You'll never feel more Southeast Asian than when you're learning how every Arabic verb morphs 28 times according to each pronoun. You'll never appreciate alphanumeric more than when you're writing down the intricate bamboo strokes of a Chinese character.

If you want to accelerate your personal growth, then learn a second, or a third language.

Toil and excavate for years, then feel a joy that overrides all your hard work when you've finally mastered it. You will obtain the finest treasure from a world that you never imagined you'd have access to. Like tasting honey from the Pharaoh's tombs: a gift only for the most tenacious excavators.

Since time immemorial, languages have helped build intellectual and spiritual connection between peoples and nations. It has always been the cornerstone element on which relationships are built. Nowadays, in this increasingly globalized world where walls and borders are becoming more permeable, multilingualism is on the rise. And there's a great reason why it should continue to be elevated.

Here's why, from the lens of a multilingual and self-proclaimed cosmopolitan.

In 5 minutes how many multilinguals can I find?" challenge. Video below.

Cultural understanding

Languages can help to lay down important inroads into the annals of a culture, so that we may get to know a culture from its age-old traditions, histories, legacies, down to its very crux. In Malay, there is a popular traditional saying about language. We Malaysians thump our chests when we proclaim, "bahasa jiwa bangsa" which translates to, "language is the heart of a culture". There's no better way to get to know a culture from the ground up than to learn its language.

Also, learning a new language forces us to extend beyond the microcosm of ignorance. The experiences of learning a foreign language and foreign contexts may at times push us beyond the comfort zone, but it also expands horizons, and gives us the ability to assess a multidimensional view of things. The values that come with multilingualism would give us ability to assess any given issue from various frames of references, especially those of other cultures'. This is how we foster cultural understanding.

And learning cultural understanding through a language is especially important so that you don't make gaffes that can serve as years-long fodder supply for us unforgiving netizens. Like that one time a [British minister gifted a Taiwanese mayor with a watch](#)—a taboo gift in Chinese culture due to the similar sound of "giving a clock" with "attending an old person's funeral".

Closing sympathy gaps

Nowadays, it is simply not enough for individuals to have adequate intellectual and emotional intelligence. We must have additional intrinsic values such as social and cultural intelligence in order to have enough traction for global reach.

This is relatable to another popular traditional Malay saying. It goes, “tak kenal maka tak cinta”, which roughly translates to, “you don’t love what you don’t know”. It’s true, we mostly don’t care about something that we have no relations with. Things happening in far-flung regions of the world has no bearing on someone living on the other side. But all this changes with multilingualism.

It gives a person the aptitude to close empathy gaps, due to the high levels of cultural and social intelligence that comes along with one’s multilingual ability. It means that we can connect with those of other cultures from their respective vantage points and put ourselves in their shoes.

Using multilingualism to close empathy gaps offer a glimpse of hope that problems such as sympathy fatigue for the marginalized sub-populations of the world; macro and micro-aggressions towards those from periphery cultures; and age-old stereotypes can gradually be dialled down, as people make more conscious efforts to get to know and understand each other by removing language barriers.

Improving moral compass

Previously, parents, educators, and policy makers considered multilingualism as a cognitive deterrent. Foreign languages take the backseat to national languages and the phrase “[global citizenship](#)” was lost somewhere on the grapevine during its travel down the line. However, now, in an increasingly globalized world, people are more aware of multilingualism’s pull factor.

The narrative has changed. More nations are keen on developing global citizens, or, people characterized by their identification as belonging to the global community before any other. But in order to internalize the concept of global citizenship and really become a cosmopolitan, one must have multilingual ability.

This is because multilingual ability is not only practical in enabling us to converse with a wider range of people, but it also helps to improve our moral compass. [Multilinguals are not only scientifically proven to be smarter](#), but also have higher abilities to monitor their environments. They are more observant, sensitive to changes, and can acclimatize better to quick turnaround settings across cultures due to their cognitive ability of having two or more language systems active at the same time. Plus, due to their expanded horizons, thus they are more adept at jumping through cultural mental hurdles such as racism and ethnocentrism.

Through multilingualism, the tongue becomes a bridge, connecting us to the world outside ourselves. Through cultural understanding, the world becomes a village. And through global citizenship, the village becomes a family.

A great re-imagination of unity?

I think so too.

Featured image Mural of Tree of MultiCultural Life in Santa Fe CC-licensed by Flickr via Jay Galvin

<https://youtu.be/E5UhD8d8dxA>

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