




# Foreign Languages Enable Tolerance

By Dr. Robert Kilroy





# Sorbonne University is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the world, a name synonymous with the highest standards in academic excellence.

## **What are the cognitive and emotional benefits of learning multiple languages?**

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan once said that “the unconscious is structured like a language.” In other words, we see ourselves and the world around us through a linguistic lens. The basic principles of translation support this theory. In English, when we say “I looked through the window at the garden” we are presenting the facts chronologically because we perceive events as unfolding over time. A French speaker, however, might emphasize the result of the action over the process: “J’ai regardé le jardin par la fenêtre”. This suggests a more ‘logical’ perception of the world. Learning a new language can, in this very real sense, change the way we think. It is a type of re-cognition that increases emotional recognition: by understanding what it means to see the world differently we acquire a heightened sense of empathy.

## **What is the correlation between learning a new language and understanding or empathising with its culture?**

Language learning reminds us that the essence of communication is not the message but the act. All communication requires a certain leap of faith: we must trust that another speaker knows what we mean when we say certain words. This trust establishes an important social bond, a feeling of mutual recognition that develops into a shared set of values and beliefs. Thus, by facilitating communication, a new language reveals the internal architecture of a given culture.

## **Why is it important for people to understand and empathise with other cultures?**

Unfortunately, it is easier to keep a distance from what we do not understand. For respect and tolerance to prevail over antagonism and division, active intellectual engagement with other cultures is essential. Only empathy can replace walls with bridges.

## **What changes with this understanding?**

A shift in perception occurs: what appeared foreign becomes familiar. We adapt our ways of seeing in line

with what disrupts our ways of thinking. In doing so we realise that, while beliefs may differ, the capacity to believe is human.

## **Why is foreign language study important at the university level?**

University students have a naturally higher level of intellectual maturity and curiosity. What they require are methods for assimilating and applying new knowledge. Foreign language study does not just provide linguistic tools; it equips students with the analytical mindset necessary to effect social change.

## **What are the career opportunities for a linguist?**

With a second language barriers fall and opportunities appear. In uncertain times, skilled communicators – teachers, diplomats, interpreters – are a valued commodity. For a linguist, the globe becomes a garden. And now more than ever, the world needs gardeners.

## **Tell us about the French academic system at Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi.**

### **a. What is the biggest difference between this system and all others in the UAE?**

Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi offers ECTS accredited, fully transferable LMD diplomas (Licence/Bachelor, Master, Doctorate) that are identical to those offered in Paris. No other university in the UAE applies the same standards of accreditation.

### **b. What are the core values and educational approach of the French system?**

Sorbonne University is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the world, a name synonymous with the highest standards in academic excellence. As “A Bridge Between Civilisations,” SUAD aligns this tradition with the UAE’s commitment to innovation, development and opportunity. This fusion results in four, mutually reinforcing, core values: Academic Excellence, Freedom of Thought, Ethical Integrity, Cultural Diversity.



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My name is Dr. Robert Kilroy and I am an English Lecturer in the Department of Applied Foreign Languages. I also teach on the Masters in the History of Art and Museum Studies. Generally speaking, my work focuses on the overlap between languages, art, psychoanalysis and philosophy. In my PhD research, I re-examined the textual/visual output of the French artist Marcel Duchamp using the conceptual framework developed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Currently, I am developing a new art historical approach to the study of images that will be used to engage in a critical analysis of social media.