

Middlebury Language Schools Commencement
Middlebury, VT
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Kenneth Adams, Commencement Speaker

Language Learning as a Means to Re-build Student Confidence after COVID

LaGuardia's commencement was on June 21. Our speaker was Talha. In 2014, Talha and his parents fled political persecution in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and settled in Queens, sleeping for months on other peoples' floors. Talha was eleven. As he tells it, "My parents cried at night over all the difficulties we faced, thinking I was asleep."

When he was twelve, Talha began collecting bottles and cans to support his family. "It was fun," he says, "Like a treasure hunt, but also very uncomfortable when people stared at me." By thirteen, Talha had figured out how to pick up food from local food pantries without getting robbed.

Talha first began to learn English at his school in Dhaka. In Queens, he enrolled in Aviation High School, a few blocks down Queens Boulevard from LaGuardia. His English wasn't great. Talha knew he had a heavy accent. "My accent was an issue. I didn't speak much in class. I was less confident. I knew I had to learn to speak with an American accent."

Things changed when Talha came to LaGuardia. "At LaGuardia we all had accents so mine didn't matter. That gave me the confidence to speak up and participate in class." During the pandemic Talha earned his LaGuardia associate degree in business administration. This spring he transferred to Cornell where he is going to major in economics and marketing. His classes there start on Monday.

These days Talha has a different view of his Bangladeshi accent: "It's a good thing to have an accent. You have to represent your country."

We have approximately 22,000 students at LaGuardia – roughly 12,000 pursuing associate degrees, and about 10,000 in ESL, GED, and non-credit workforce training programs. A majority of our degree-seeking students were born outside the U.S. Fifty-four percent are the first in their families to go to college. Most qualify for government student financial aid. Consistent with the diversity of Queens, our degree-seeking students come from 133 countries and speak 62 home languages. We have 380 full-time faculty. One-quarter of them are foreign-born; they come from fifty countries across the globe.

So, when Talha says everyone at LaGuardia has an accent, he's right.

Convinced that language diversity in our classrooms is something to be celebrated and leveraged to support student success, two LaGuardia professors, Lucy McNair and Leigh Garrison-Fletcher created a professional development seminar for faculty three years ago called, "Language across the Curriculum." In March, they published an article in *Language, Culture and Curriculum* about their initiative that I recommend to those of you who are language teachers.

McNair and Garrison-Fletcher remind us that Language across the Curriculum is nothing new – the movement began in K-12 schools in England in the 1960s. This is from their abstract:

“Although innovative in promoting inclusion and diversity, (LaGuardia) reflects a common monolingual ‘Standard American English-only’ ideology in U.S. higher education. Linguistic difference is celebrated yet often viewed as an instructional and professional obstacle. Language across the Curriculum argues that such an approach compromises our institutional commitment to diversity and fails to use these cultural and epistemological assets as resources in learning.”

Their seminar helps LaGuardia faculty embrace our students’ language diversity, design innovative classroom practices that leverage students’ multilingualism, and create, as they put it, “a language-aware and language-rich campus environment.”

Professors McNair and Garrison-Fletcher explain, “...Language across the Curriculum puts languages at the center of a multidisciplinary inquiry, and outlines a paradigm shift from a ‘language-blind,’ deficit model to a ‘language-aware,’ asset-based, translanguaging pedagogy.”

Response from students and faculty to Language across the Curriculum has been positive: students appreciate the recognition and relevance of their bilingualism. Faculty see evidence of accelerated learning and increased academic confidence.

Hold that thought; we’re going to come back to it: language learning as a driver of academic confidence.

Professors McNair and Garrison-Fletcher emphasize that a truly inclusive campus community is hard to achieve without acknowledging and supporting multilingualism and language variation, especially at places like LaGuardia, where language and cultural diversity are often pedagogical gifts hiding in plain sight. They observe, “A contradiction at the heart of diversity efforts... Languages are counted and celebrated as an element of diversity yet remain untapped as resources in learning.”

You get the point – Beware of the Dark Side of the Middlebury Language Pledge – of the hegemony of monolingualism. Of monolingualism when it undermines inclusivity. Find ways to engage your students in their heritage languages. You have earned your Middlebury degrees. Now go forth and break the Pledge!

This spring we had over 800 students in our ESL program, the largest in New York City. In 2015, Lely was a Level 1 ESL student. On June 21 she shared the stage with Talha. Lely was our Alumni Speaker.

(Lely and Talha gave me permission to share their stories with you today; when I speak publically about undocumented students, I don’t use their surnames.)

Lely is from Jakarta, Indonesia. When she was thirteen her father died and her family placed her in foster care. That led to her being trafficked to New York into domestic servitude. As Lely explains, “After seven years of abuse and degradation, I mustered the courage to escape my enslavement. I

struggled for a couple of years with no English, education, legal identity, permanent home, family, nor financial support.”

Lely found her way to LaGuardia where she enrolled in ESL and later matriculated into a degree program. After receiving her associate degree, Lely earned a CUNY BA in Anthropology, Children & Youth Studies, and Public Affairs. She held several part-time jobs while attending classes on three different CUNY campuses, always earning a 3.5 or better GPA in order to maintain her eligibility for scholarships.

(Like all undocumented students in the US, including DACA students, Lely and Talha are not eligible for government student financial aid, such as Pell grants. But they can appeal to the LaGuardia Foundation for scholarships, and we help them as much as we can.)

Lely graduated magna cum laude in the spring of 2020 and is currently pursuing a master’s degree in International Affairs at Baruch College, while working as the assistant to the CEO of Sheltering Arms, a social services agency founded in 1823 to serve immigrant families in New York. Lely wants to help children in the NYC foster care system.

Regarding her English when she escaped from involuntary servitude, Lely says, “I was scared and embarrassed. I was a lost little girl. I couldn’t find help because I didn’t speak English. I washed and folded laundry in a laundromat.”

But, she adds, “At LaGuardia, I was not alone. My friends were also struggling with English. At times I felt embarrassed, but then I thought, hey, I am a second language learner. I know I have an accent. But my accent doesn’t devalue my English. And I know another language.” She notes, “The other students didn’t care that I had an accent.”

Lely recently emailed me, “You reminded me of the challenges I faced learning English and how I should be proud. I realized the importance of language as our source of communication to share ideas and thoughts with others, show respect, and especially to advocate when faced with adversity.”

There are about 1,200 community colleges in the United States. All our institutions have suffered big enrollment declines because of the pandemic. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center enrollment at public community colleges this past spring semester was down 8% from 2021. Overall, for all US colleges, enrollment dropped 4%. At LaGuardia we have lost one-quarter of our degree-seeking students since Fall 19.

Abundant research has documented the impact of the pandemic on student learning outcomes. This is a crisis in American public education no one seems to want to talk about. According to a study released in May by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard, the longer a school district extended remote instruction, the more profound the learning loss of its students.

What's more, the authors, who examined testing data from 2.1 million students in 49 states, concluded that "High poverty schools not only spent more weeks in remote instruction during 2020-21, but their students suffered larger losses in academic achievement when they did so."

Those parents, teachers, and administrators who cried out to get back into the classroom as quickly possible were right about something: K-12 COVID learning loss correlates with the amount of time students were forced to take online classes and, importantly, income level.

As we approach the start of the new school year let's remember: Millions of students across the US – in high school and college – have abandoned their educational pathways. They have dropped out and disconnected, derailed by online high school, frustrations with remote learning, poor academic performance, the loss of supportive relationships with friends, faculty, and coaches, and, of course, by economic hardship caused by job losses during the lockdowns.

For one example, consider New York City: Including the recent Class of '22, there are about 170,000 public high school graduates across the five boroughs whose educations were impacted by the pandemic. Now consider this: Enrollment in the CUNY system is down 7.5%. Unemployment of young New Yorkers aged 18-24 is a staggering 19%. So, where are these young people? What are they doing?

As we emerge from the pandemic educators across America face a critical challenge – we must help students get back into the classroom and back on their college-to-career pathways. This is not charity; it is an imperative for the social and economic recovery of our communities.

And it won't be easy. Many students whose academic momentum was disrupted by COVID have lost the motivation, commitment, and good study habits essential for learning. They have lost their self-esteem as students. We need to help them reboot their academic confidence and encourage them to dream again about their futures.

As all of you know from your experiences here at the Middlebury Language Schools, language acquisition can be a powerful driver of academic confidence. Unlike students in other disciplines, language learners employ newly acquired skills in real time. The payoff to grasping structure, grammar, syntax is immediate. An expanding vocabulary is learning in perpetual motion, a flywheel of discovery, application, validation, and repetition.

The development of the language skills that enable a student to express herself more fully boosts her confidence in the classroom and beyond. Think about Lely for a moment.

Put another way, what other academic disciplines offer such instant gratification to the learner – instant gratification as a good thing, a motivator to keep working and learning? Language learning is one of the most effective means of boosting students' academic confidence and self-esteem.

Because of this connection that is obvious at least to you, I'm convinced that American students would perform significantly better across all disciplines if we engaged them seriously in learning new languages, as is common in other OECD countries, many of which require students to learn two non-

native languages. Of course, that's a big hill to climb when, for example, NYC high schools only require two credits in a foreign language out of 44 needed for a high school diploma. We'll have to save this struggle for another day.

For the moment, consider the enormous potential of language learning to rebuild the academic confidence of students whose educations were disrupted by COVID; of classrooms and campuses made more inclusive by language-aware faculty that celebrate and leverage multilingualism; of language diversity as a pillar of this country's social and economic recovery.

And of your part in all this good work.

Congratulations.