

The Importance of Learning French

Interview With Author and Renowned French Teacher, Laura K. Lawless

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French is one of the most influential languages in the world and as such continues to attract new students. Laura K. Lawless shares francophone insights with Suite101.

Laura K. Lawless is arguably the most popular online French teacher today and has been living in France for nearly two years.

Suite101 interviewed her during the first month of 2010 when people commit to new year's resolutions such as learning a foreign language. In this article she speaks about the value of learning French, how to

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define fluency in a language and also how to stay motivated in the face of discouragement.

LAURA K. LAWLESS - LAURA K. LAWLESS

How Many People Speak French in the World

According to Lawless, French is the most studied second language in the world after English and has between 72 and 79 million native speakers as well as 190 million secondary speakers.

"French is spoken as a native language in more than two dozen countries on five continents," she explains.

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She adds that French is an official working language in a number of international organizations, including the United Nations, International Olympic Committee, and International Red Cross.

"French is the lingua franca of culture, including art, cuisine, dance, and fashion. France has won more Nobel Prizes for literature than any other country in the world and is one of the top producers of international films," she states.

About Laura K. Lawless

American born, Lawless considers herself a French fanatic and has been studying French since the tender age of 10. Her introduction to the language occurred when her brother, who was taking French in high school, taught her a few words. "Somehow that just grabbed my interest and never let go."

She has been the French Language Guide at About.com for more than a decade and she is also the author of seven books about language: four French and three Spanish. In addition, she works as a freelance translator.

Definition of Fluency in Language

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The definition of fluency in language varies considerably from person to person but Lawless defines it as the ability to converse on just about any topic without struggling for words.

"I temporarily reached that point after eight years, having studied all through high school and college, when after receiving my BA I lived in Rouen for 6 weeks."

She states that French students need to be immersed in the language in order to achieve fluency. However, she points out that even though she has been immersed in the language for years, various factors like fatigue and her interest in whatever is being discussed still affect how well she speaks on any given day.

How Language Affects Perceptions

One of the most interesting things about learning a new language is the way it allows one to see the world in a different light. "It's amazing to discover how much of what we do and how we think affects and is affected by language," says Lawless.

She explains that most people don't give much thought to language unless and until they start learning a second one. "When you start learning a second language, you have to rethink what you say, how you say it, and even why you say it – and I find it fascinating."

She explains that a picture is worth a thousand words* but that those words can be very different. "For example, in English there are two parts to bread: the crust, and the soft part. In French, there's *la croûte* and then there's *la mie* – there's actually a word for what we generically call the soft part."

*She says that the equivalent French proverb is *Une image en dit plus que de longs discours*; literally, An image says more about it than long speeches.

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Lawless advises that when the going gets tough one has to keep one's goal in mind. "Why are you learning French? If you dream of living in France, or working in an international company, use those dreams to stay on task."

She recommends that students should find like-minded people to study and practice with. "If at all possible, take a trip to France or another French-speaking country once in a while – it's unbelievably rewarding and inspiring."

She emphasizes that the French truly do appreciate it when one can communicate with them in their language and that the infamous "rude French" are virtually nowhere to be found. "The French are generous, thoughtful, and loyal friends, but you'll only find that out if you can talk to them," she explains.

Lawless says that her favourite French phrase is: *[On peut se tutoyer?](#)* "This is what the French say when they want to switch from the formal *vous* to the friendly *tu*, and it's like music to my ears."

According to Lawless, speaking fluently has not taken any of the *je ne sais quoi* of the language away. "The more I learn, the more I'm delighted by French. When my husband and I hear interesting expressions and constructions, we can't wait to share them with one another," she concludes.

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