



French Cultural Contest In Florida

Virginie Spelle – January, 2007

Sona Thakur did not know a single word of French two years ago. In two months she will perform a French poem on stage in front of judges, teachers and students from all over Florida. The 8-year-old girl is one of the 25 children who push through the door once a week at the French school in Gainesville.

It is the perfect age to begin to learn a second language as she learns it as a game and assimilates it more easily.

Since the beginning of the year, Sona began preparation for a new challenge. From March 22-24 she will compete at the 55th "Congrès de la Culture Française en Floride," - the French Cultural Contest in Florida. The statewide contest will take place in Orlando, and the year's theme is gastronomy.

The contest was established to pique the interest of Floridian students for the language, the literature and the civilization of French-speaking countries, according to Eliane Kurbegov, the organizer of the event.

Almost all high schools in Florida compete in different categories, such as vocabulary, plays, skits, discourses, recitations of poems and lectures.

It enables students to demonstrate their skills as well as meet other young people enthusiastic about French, she said.

Approximately 25 judges evaluated the contest, which includes nearly 1,000 participants. Scoring is based on pronunciation, fluency, memorization, acting and staging.

The prizes include two \$500 scholarships for juniors, two \$500 scholarships for seniors and three to five 10-day vacations to France for the winners. Other students receive trophies and medals.

"I was very impressed by the number of students who learn French and attend this contest," said Nathalie Ciesco, French professor at the University of Florida, who was judge from 2003 to 2005. "And the French fluency is excellent."

Judy Charudattan, who teaches French at the French school of Gainesville, has sent her students to the contest since 1990.

She said she discovered her passion for the French language while visiting Pondicherry, a former French colony in India. She learned French at the college and now wants to share her knowledge with children.

When she arrived in the United States from India, she said she was surprised to notice that foreign languages were not offered until high school.

"Young children should have an opportunity to learn a foreign language," she said. "That's why I started teaching French to young children."

It's an advantage if they start early. The brain is not encoded in the same way for preschoolers as it is for adults, she said.

On the one hand, children who are less than 10 years old have an easier time learning foreign language. They can just learn a language as they hear it, absorb the words and understand the situation.

On the other hand, children who are older than 10 and adults need every word translated as they attempt to acquire a new language.

Charudattan tries to teach French in the easiest way as possible. It is not easy to learn a foreign language, and her pupils only hear French when they attend class, she said.

At the French school children sing French ditties, listen to fairy tales in French, watch Disney movies in French, cook French food and count in French.

Charudattan also prepares worksheets to teach them colors, shapes, numbers, alphabet's letters and days of the week.

"It is a very nice way of learning French and having fun at the same time," she said.

Little by little, their vocabulary builds. For every word in a second language, people need to hear or see it 65 times on average depending on their attitude.

Every time they get exposure to a word, it strengthens their understanding of this word, and they are unlikely to forget it.

Even though learning a foreign language is easier for younger children, it's not impossible for adolescents to become fluent in a new language.

While learning a new language is often frustrating, the contest serves as a unique way to enhance education.

The contest sets goals for adolescents that help them learn, Charudattan said.

The students really want to go and perform in the contest, she said. They want to continue year after year with French classes so they can go to the contest.

"The contest is a very big motivating factor for children," she said. "It gives them self-confidence and a sense of achievement that they have done something worthwhile."