

## Linguist



Name: **Dora Johnson**

Profession: **Linguist**

Number of Years in this line of work: **40 years**

Languages: **English, Armenian, Arabic, French**

### 1) What is your profession?

I am a Linguist at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC. "CAL is a place where linguists, scholars and educators who use the findings of linguistics and related sciences in their research and teaching problems." What I do is focus on the teaching of the languages and accumulating research on how to learn the languages.

### 2) What is your native language or languages?

My mother tongue is Armenian, but I grew up in a multilingual situation, and now that I am 40 years old my first language is English. My parents were born in Turkey and they spoke Turkish. I grew up in Lebanon, so I learned Arabic, and during the time I was growing up we also learned French.

### 3) Are these all the languages you speak?

These are all the languages that I function in either maximally or minimally. Some of the other languages partly because I have looked at a lot of language materials in my work.

### 4) Do you think that knowing these languages makes your job easier?

Oh, absolutely. At CAL, knowing a lot of languages always makes life a lot easier because I can understand and converse with people who speak other languages. When you learn a foreign language it makes my life a lot easier to be tuned in to much of the different kinds of ways that people think in their country and out of country.

### 5) Which foreign language would you learn if you could learn any?

Italian. I do not know Italian, and I love the sound of it. There are other languages that I would like to learn, but there is something about Italian that just sounds so romantic.

### 6) Would you say that there are more career opportunities for people who speak multiple languages?

That's a difficult question. A lot of people ask that question and I'm never really sure if there are more career opportunities. I think that there are going to be more career opportunities for people who speak multiple languages. I think that if you are an economist who speaks Russian, or Chinese, and are fluent in those languages, you are more valuable. A lot of global corporations decided that they were going to hire people who speak multiple languages. They have come to realize that they end up hiring "doorkeepers". It is in the interest of the company and the society that it is interacting with, so using a country's language is an idea and necessary.

Also, having employees who speak the host country language gives that company an advantage. For example, the head of General Motors went to Brazil and as he learned Portuguese, the company began to look to him, and how General Motors could better serve the Brazilian market. So, yes the opportunities are there, and they are only for those who are fluent.

### 7) How do you think your life would have turned out if you had never learned a second language?

Oh man, BORING! I think, at the risk of sounding a little elitist: narrow minded. I think my life would be as much as a very circumscribed life, and would not really be willing to explore other cultures.

### 8) What advice would you give to a teacher about to teach an entry-level foreign language student?

I think that probably the first thing I would do (beyond the "Hi, how are you" and let the student get comfortable) is to throw the students into a situation when they would have to swim a little. Not so deep as to be in the middle of the pool. The reason for it is that I am a firm believer in learning a language in a meaningful way, instead of simply learning the grammar. But I do think that the

a meaningful way, instead of simply learning the grammar). But, I do think that the very important.

**9) How essential do you feel it is to not only learn the syntax and vocabulary culture?**

I think both [language and culture] are important. Language and culture are like the other--they both drive each other. In order to become fluent, you must understand (referring to syntax and grammar).

**10) What percentage of the class would you devote to teaching culture?**

If I were teaching a class, I probably would start with 70% speaking, and 30% grammar where the class was doing 50:50. The goal is to provide the student with a good idea in different situations.

**11) How would you go about teaching culture?**

The best way to learn a culture is to go live in that country, but that's not always going opportunities now, many print materials and a huge amount of videos and wonderful satellite technology that we now possess, we can download and watch international. When I first came to the States, I watched soap operas and I learned a lot from them. The rest of it is really important. Soap operas describe a lot of the common culture. You learn relationships, and how different classes relate to each other. They are slow, you never start absorbing other things that happen within that context. You learn how to learn about clothing, etc.

**12) What advice would you have for students considering taking a new foreign language?**

I think you should take every opportunity you can to use that language. And that means having to make an effort. Little kids can be dragged along, but language is lost in the foreign language need to actively look at the risk of being uncool and spend time while they are learning. They should make it a point to go to events or restaurants where they can lose the language if you don't make an effort. You can learn it and learn it and, but the mental tape that is played in your head that will never come out of your mouth.

**13) What is your opinion on the foreign language teaching and learning in the United States?**

To me, learning languages is a necessity. When I came to this country in my junior year, I wanted to learn another language. Learning languages in places where I grew up (like Europe) to learn at least two languages... In this country, learning foreign languages is uncommon. We have isolated ourselves. What we need to do is hammer in the fact that there are different kinds of ways of looking at the world, which I think is very important to people. It's an active sort of way. The fact that you have come up against another culture, another way of thinking that it is an important growth experience for everybody.