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In this episode of The Crafty Polyglot, Dr. Felicia Eybl speaks with Debbie Lentz, an experienced educator, literacy facilitator, and longtime advocate for multilingual learning. Drawing on a childhood spent across Asia and 24 years supporting students and teachers at Smith Academy of International Languages, Debbie offers a distinctive perspective on the relationship between literacy, language immersion, culture, and student confidence.

This conversation provides valuable insight for parents and educators considering immersion education. Debbie explains how literacy skills transfer across languages, why students can thrive academically before receiving formal English instruction, and how creative teaching, cultural awareness, and strong school communities prepare children to succeed in an interconnected world.

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Host: Felicia Eybl (Horse Education Group)

Guest: Debbie Lentz

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Felicia Eybl

I am Dr. Felicia Eybl, moderator of the podcast The Crafty Polyglot. Today, our guest is Debbie Lentz. She is an educator and advocate for equal access to quality education for all children.

Born and raised in Asia to American parents, she developed a deep appreciation for diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives from an early age. She earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Northwestern University in Minnesota.

She earned a master's degree in education from the University of Southern California. She became the literacy facilitator at Smith Academy of International Languages, where she dedicated her career to advancing literacy instruction.

She earned her National Board Certification in 2004 and mentored other teachers to pursue lifelong learning. Her global worldview has shaped her commitment to fostering inclusive learning environments where every child is valued and empowered to succeed.

Throughout her career, she has been a passionate advocate for multilingual learners, believing that language is both a bridge to opportunity and a pathway to deeper understanding.

She is committed to helping children broaden their perspectives through language acquisition, cross-cultural experiences, and meaningful engagement that prepares them to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

Welcome to The Crafty Polyglot, Debbie.

Debbie Lentz

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Thank you, Felicia. It is great to be here. I feel honored that you asked me to come.

Felicia Eybl

Thank you. I am honored that you agreed to join us.

As the literacy facilitator, you bring a different perspective to language immersion teaching, so let's jump right in.

You have lived abroad yourself, and that early experience, as I read in your biography, shaped your worldview. How did your childhood in another culture influence your path toward becoming a literacy facilitator and English teacher in the early years when you started with the Japanese program?

Debbie Lentz

That is a funny story.

When I applied at CMS, the recruiter sat me down. He had obviously looked at my résumé and saw that I had gone to high school in Korea.

He said, "We have an opening in the Japanese immersion program for an English teacher. Would you like it?"

I enthusiastically said yes because that sounded like a great opportunity. I was not afraid of something like that.

I had never heard of it, had never been to the school, and did not even know that the other language immersion schools existed in CMS. But I thought, "This is a perfect fit."

It really was. It was a fantastic career. I was there for 24 years under Inez Olshausen and, of course, under you, Dr. Eybl. It was a great experience.

Felicia Eybl

Great.

As you know, immersion is so much more than language. It is identity, culture, and connection. From your vantage point, how does immersion shape the way students understand themselves and relate to the world around them?

Debbie Lentz

Again, going back to my own experience, even though I grew up in the Philippines, Japan, and Korea, I was not immersed in the languages in those countries because I went to American schools.

But I was immersed in the cultures. That became part of my identity as a third-culture child. That is what they call us: third-culture kids.

It gave me a broader worldview and greater acceptance of diversity and inclusion.

In America, immersion education has to be intentional.

I drove to Michigan the other day, and I was thinking about this interview. I thought, if I were in Europe, I would travel across multiple countries and encounter multiple languages.

In the United States, nearly everybody is speaking English, so there is not the same immediate necessity or feeling that you have to learn these languages.

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I grew up with a friend whose parents were from England and worked with the BBC. When her family returned to London, she went to school there. Within about three years, she was speaking French, German, English, and Spanish. It blew my mind.

I really feel that immersion is an option that I hope will grow in the United States because, with the global economy, it will become a necessity for our children.

Felicia Eybl

Absolutely.

You have been a steadfast supporter of immersion for years. What continues to fuel your commitment to this model of education, even in retirement?

Debbie Lentz

Yes, I am working with a program called eKidz, and we are attempting to introduce its English program into other American schools.

We have used it in the German program at SAIL, South Academy of International Languages.

I think the best answer to your question comes from something that Inez Olshausen showed me early in my career, which was the iceberg theory.

The idea is that you grow up in your home language and develop certain competencies, skills, and vocabulary. But underneath the surface, if you imagine an iceberg, are deeper language concepts that you do not see.

When a child learns another language, it is not too difficult because the child maintains and actually strengthens what is happening below the surface while building that second language.

There is a common core of understanding about language below the surface.

Felicia Eybl

Right. That is important for parents and other educators to understand.

You are not losing anything when you are learning a second language. You are building on the competencies that you already have.

Debbie Lentz

Exactly.

Felicia Eybl

As the English teacher and later the English literacy facilitator, you supported students who were learning English while receiving most of their instruction in another language.

What patterns or major takeaways did you notice about their readiness for English and for the end-of-grade assessments? That goes back to the iceberg theory.

Debbie Lentz

Yes, it does.

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I will say right up front that I am not a great advocate of end-of-grade assessments or standardized testing. From what I know about those tests, they test only a small portion of children's competencies. Then we take that little number and place a lot of importance on it.

Having said that, Dr. Nuss, who I think was on the program previously, conducted a data analysis of our students around 2010 or 2012.

In our program, German and French students did not receive formal English instruction from kindergarten through second grade. It was a full-immersion model.

The Chinese and Japanese students received 45 minutes of English instruction.

He conducted a comparison and said, "Let's look at their third-grade tests."

We had half of a cohort that came through with no formal English instruction at school and another group that had received a limited amount of English instruction.

The data across those cohorts was exactly the same. I think approximately 85% were proficient. It was incredible.

Does that answer your question?

Felicia Eybl

It does.

That also goes back to your proficiency as the English teacher and literacy facilitator and the support that you gave the teachers and students during that time.

English instruction in an immersion setting often requires creativity and a bit of being crafty. Can you share some examples of inventive strategies you used or encouraged among English teachers that helped students thrive?

Debbie Lentz

One strategy I remember sharing, and I had to think about this quite a bit, was using jingles with rhymes, rhythm, and movement.

I had one that went like this:

"When you write or when you read, there is always a purpose: entertain, explain, or persuade."

Not all teachers used that particular model, of course.

But the most important strategy that I learned, again from Inez Olshausen, was to give teachers license.

What I mean by that is providing teachers with permission to create for themselves.

We had incredible, innovative educators in our school and throughout Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, including at SAIL.

Giving teachers the ability to create, get to know their students, and build learning experiences that capture students' attention helps children learn language almost effortlessly.

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Of course, it is not actually effortless.

Felicia Eybl

Right. It is not effortless, but it is important.

Were there instructional strategies that transferred effectively between English-language instruction and foreign-language instruction? How did those shared approaches benefit students?

Debbie Lentz

What I thought about when preparing for this interview was the commonalities among languages.

For example, going down to the basics of phonological awareness, every language requires students to gain phonological awareness.

That means being able to hear the sounds of the language down to their smallest parts, the individual phonemes.

That is true across languages. When children grasp that concept, it is much easier for them to establish a foundation in the new language they are learning.

I also thought about Korean.

Until around the 1400s, Korean used Chinese characters and Chinese writing. King Sejong said that he needed more ordinary people to be able to read and write their language.

Korean is not a tonal language, and it has different vowel sounds from Chinese. So he created a simplified alphabet system in which each written block represented a set of phonemes.

For example, if you wanted to write a syllable, you would imagine a box where the letters fit together. The consonant and vowel sounds would be combined into a syllable block.

That is another commonality. Languages have syllables. When we speak, we often have a consonant and then our mouths open for the vowel.

These concepts are very basic, but they are essential.

Felicia Eybl

Right. Very important. I did not know that about Korean.

Were there instructional strategies that transferred effectively between English-language instruction and foreign-language instruction, and how did those shared approaches benefit students?

Debbie Lentz

Again, it goes back to the foundations of any language.

After phonological awareness, you have the phonics element. There are different vowel sounds in different languages, but each language has vowel sounds and sound-symbol relationships.

It was interesting when I would walk into a German classroom and look at their readers. The syllables in the text would be segmented using different colors.

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That is brilliant.

Even with Chinese, although students use characters, they also have the pinyin system, which allows children to read a Romanized expression of those characters.

I have seen teachers use songs frequently to introduce vocabulary and concepts. My English teachers have done the same thing.

What is great about the technology available today is that there is a lot of material teachers can borrow and adapt.

Teachers can also take a familiar song, such as "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" or "Happy Birthday," and create an educational song that helps children learn vocabulary.

Felicia Eybl

That is important.

Finally, for parents who are considering immersion for their children, what advice would you offer?

Debbie Lentz

Two words: do it.

Take the risk because it does feel risky.

It can be intimidating for a parent to think about their five-year-old entering that classroom on the first day or during the first week, especially when the parent does not fully know what that experience will be like.

But children are extremely adaptable.

I often say to a prospective parent, "Does your child have grit? Can your child handle frustration?"

Imagine walking into a classroom where the teacher speaks very little English and uses almost entirely the target language.

But it is phenomenal. When you walk into our kindergarten classrooms in January, you realize those teachers are speaking very little English, and the children are moving right along.

Sometimes they are already talking with one another in the language. It is very powerful.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, it is very powerful.

We have heard that across our interviewees. When we ask what they would recommend, they all say, "Do it. Take that plunge."

Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Debbie Lentz

Yes. I would say that there is a whole social and interpersonal element of growth that occurs when children are in this type of challenging environment.

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They gain a confidence that is remarkable. Five-year-olds are often fairly bold anyway.

But I remember many times walking into a kindergarten classroom or seeing children in the hallway. I would attempt to say "Entschuldigung" or another word that was not too difficult.

They would look up at me with such grace and say, "That is not right, Ms. Lentz."

They were not rude, but they knew it. There is an element of going home and realizing, "I know things my mom and dad do not know."

That is powerful. I think it builds confidence and boldness.

There is one other element, which is community.

Being part of language immersion creates a community for students that continues long after they leave school.

I have met with many former students who still get together with their peers, travel together, and speak with one another in their target languages. That is beautiful.

Returning to leadership, I also want to thank you for your leadership over me as an educator. Of course, Inez Olshausen was also very impactful in helping me grow into the leader I became.

Felicia Eybl

Thank you so much for joining us today, Ms. Lentz. We appreciate it.

You have definitely added valuable information to our discussion about language immersion. Thank you.

Debbie Lentz Thank you.