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In this episode of The Crafty Polyglot, Dr. Felicia Eybl welcomes Florence McNeal, a French educator at the British International School of Charlotte with more than a decade of experience teaching students across multiple age levels. As a native French speaker and international educator, Florence brings a valuable perspective on how early language learning, cultural exposure, and a globally focused curriculum can shape students' confidence and worldview.

This conversation is especially meaningful for parents and educators interested in multilingual education because it explores how foreign languages are integrated into an international school setting, the role of culture in language acquisition, and the importance of encouragement, authentic experiences, and consistent exposure in helping students become confident language learners.

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Host: Felicia Eybl (Horse Education Group)

Guest: Florence McNEAL

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SCRIPT

Felicia Eybl

Hello, I'm Dr. Felicia Eybl, member of the Horse Education Group Board and the moderator of the podcast The Crafty Polyglot. Today I am happy to welcome Florence McNeal, who is an educator at the British International School of Charlotte. Welcome, Florence.

Florence McNeal

Thank you very much. Good morning.

Felicia Eybl

Good morning. Tell us about yourself, how you came to Charlotte, and share your background in foreign language education.

Florence McNeal

As a French citizen, when we moved to America first, to upstate New York, I became a substitute teacher and then a teacher in Maryland. So, New York, Maryland.

When I arrived in Charlotte, I was looking for a part-time job. The only school that had a part-time job was BISC, the British International School in Ballantyne.

I have been there now, starting my 14th year.

Felicia Eybl

Wow. That is wonderful, wonderful. How did you learn about the British International School of Charlotte?

Florence McNeal

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To be honest, I think it was through Felicia.

Felicia Eybl

Okay. Great.

Florence McNeal

So I just went. I said, “I will apply, and we will see.”

Part-time was perfect. Now I am full-time, but yes.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, yes. Our jobs do evolve.

Florence McNeal

Exactly.

Felicia Eybl

How is foreign language instruction integrated into the curriculum at the British International School of Charlotte, and which foreign languages are taught there?

Florence McNeal

It is completely integrated because it is obligatory to have French and Spanish.

Every student from 18 months to 18 years old has French and Spanish. I do not teach the little ones anymore, what we call the foundation class. I am teaching from Year 2, which is the equivalent of first grade, through senior year because we teach the IB program too.

It is part of the curriculum, so they have to have it.

But I want to correct something. When they arrive in Year 7, which is sixth grade, they have to choose French or Spanish. That language is going to follow them until they graduate.

You have to understand, it is an international school. We have a lot of students who arrive who do not speak English. So they have to learn English. They have to have French, and they have to have Spanish. Then at home, they may have another language—German, Danish, Italian, every other language.

In our school, we have students from 18 countries.

Felicia Eybl

That is so very diverse. How do you see that impacting the children’s language learning when they come not speaking English, not speaking French, and not speaking Spanish?

Florence McNeal

The first few months can seem very overwhelming. Some are doing so well. It is incredible.

I am talking mostly about the little ones. It is incredible. They get everything.

They are doing so well. When we see them in the corridor, they know that they have to tell me “bonjour,” and they know that with the Spanish teacher, they have to say “hola.” They do not make mistakes. It is incredible how children can embrace the different languages.

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But it is true: the younger you start, the better it is.

Felicia Eybl

Absolutely. The younger you start, the better it is. That is very true.

From your perspective, what are the key differences between teaching foreign languages in a private school setting versus a public school environment?

Florence McNeal

To be honest, I never really taught in public school, but I know in private school, the classes are very small. Very small classes. I know public school classes can be a little bit bigger.

But I think teachers are good in both settings, so I do not see too much difference.

Sometimes, it is not every teacher, but the student. If the student really wants to learn, he or she will learn. That is really the only thing I can say between both.

Felicia Eybl

Because the children start at such an early age, which I think is amazing, and I believe the earlier you start, the easier it is to learn the language unless you are getting it at home, how do you see language education shaping the students' worldviews? Do they embrace the different cultures?

Florence McNeal

Yes, yes. We have many examples.

Sometimes we get examples from the parents. One parent told me her husband was going to Canada, and the little girl at home said, "Yes, in Canada, we eat some poutine."

It is incredible how the kids can pay attention and retain more than we think.

That is the little ones, but the big ones as well. Sometimes they say, "You told us about the French pastries. We went with my parents this weekend, and it was so good."

I just said it. I did not push them to go.

With the bigger kids, it is more international. We teach about many countries in Africa and all the Francophone countries in the world. When they can link things together—the language and the country—that is important.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, it is very important to connect the language and the culture, especially in education.

What role do you see culture playing as students develop their linguistic skills?

Florence McNeal

I think it is very important to have a second or third language.

Of course, since I am teaching French, and as a French person, I am pushing French more.

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French is a language we speak especially in big international organizations like the Red Cross, the Olympic Games, Doctors Without Borders, and organizations like that.

Even if you go to visit the United Nations in New York, the first language is French. Next to each room, it is in French, and underneath, it is in English.

I think French is very important. We really need to continue to promote it.

I think some students who really want to be in business or fields like that, it is good for them.

Felicia Eybl

Wow, I did not know that about the United Nations. That is very interesting. But when you consider the Francophone countries, that makes a lot of sense.

Florence McNeal

Yes, absolutely.

Felicia Eybl

What resources or tools have you found to be valuable in your foreign language classroom?

Florence McNeal

All the technology, of course. Movies, videos. We do some role play. Again, it depends on the age.

We love role play, especially when we do the restaurant and food.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, restaurant and food.

Florence McNeal

We use websites, of course. We have some good websites, especially for the IB students. There are good websites designed especially for students, so this is very good for them.

There are so many tools we can use—songs, learning songs, reading books. There are so many things.

Felicia Eybl

Are there other French teachers at the British International School of Charlotte?

Florence McNeal

There is another French teacher who teaches the little classes—18 months, two years old, three, four, and five years old.

Felicia Eybl

What does your collaboration look like, even with the Spanish teachers?

Florence McNeal

With Spanish, it is the same. We have two Spanish teachers and two French teachers.

We have a Spanish teacher who teaches the same classes for the little ones. With the other Spanish teacher, we do the same. When one group has French, the rest of the class has Spanish.

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We do collaboration, especially mostly for IB. For example, when they have tests or assessments, or if we decide to surprise them by cooking, we collaborate well.

I think the other two teachers do the same because they have a curriculum they have to follow with the little ones. We work well together.

Felicia Eybl

Tell me again about IB and the foreign language component.

Florence McNeal

In IB, they have to have it. I think it is the same in every school. You have to have a language to graduate.

The IB is a little bit similar to AP.

Felicia Eybl

Right. Let me just clarify that IB is the International Baccalaureate.

Florence McNeal

Yes, International Baccalaureate.

Some students, especially when we have French students, have to take the IB because when they go back to France, they need to have their baccalaureate to go to university and things like that.

Felicia Eybl

The students have to have language as part of the IB curriculum?

Florence McNeal

Yes, automatically.

Of course, it is worldwide. Especially with listening, they need to be able to recognize accents—Canadian, Belgian, some African accents. Sometimes it can be tough, but they have to be able to understand them.

That is why we train a lot. Sometimes in school, we have different parents come and talk to them because they always hear me. It is nice sometimes to hear a Canadian who has a different accent, or somebody from Senegal or Cameroon who has a different accent when they speak French.

They have to know that.

Of course, it is worldwide. They have to know what is going on in Burundi, Ivory Coast, Algeria, Morocco, French Polynesia, Belgium. We cover all the Francophone countries.

They also have the oral component. If they are in the higher-level section, they have to read a book. That book has to be written by a French author or a Francophone author. It cannot be a translated book.

Very often this works well, especially when they like to read.

Of course, they have the writing section and the reading comprehension section. They do the exam in May, and they get the result during the first week in July.

So far, so good. We have had IB in the school now for eight years, and they have all passed.

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Felicia Eybl

Congratulations. That is wonderful, wonderful.

How do you help students overcome their anxieties about learning a second language?

Florence McNeal

They have to learn it because it is part of the program.

Honestly, we have never really gone through much anxiety because it is part of the curriculum. They know they have to take it.

I tell them, "Try. Everyone makes mistakes. Do not be afraid."

We have small classes, so that helps a lot.

If I see someone who is not ready, I say, "Come on. Yes, you can do it. Say it. Nobody is going to judge."

I make mistakes myself, and we learn by making mistakes.

I have never really gone through this kind of anxiety with students.

Like I said, it is easier because we are a small school. Sometimes a little tap on the back and saying, "Okay, you can do it," helps them too.

Felicia Eybl

Do most students remain from, let's say, pre-K through graduation?

Florence McNeal

No, because we have a lot of expatriates. Sometimes the parents are here for a contract of maybe two or three years. Sometimes they leave and have to go to another country.

We have some students who stay long-term, but not many. Very often, they are Americans who live in Charlotte.

For international or foreign students, it is very rare because they often have to move.

Felicia Eybl

Other than the IB assessments, what else do you use to measure student success in the foreign language?

Florence McNeal

When I can see that they are so happy to speak French with me and to tell me so many things in French, that is success.

We also need to have a good student-teacher relationship. You want the student to remember you later, even if they do not remember all the vocabulary. At least they will remember the teacher. So that good relationship helps a lot.

When they talk to me about something, or even when the parents tell me things, it is meaningful.

Last year, I had a family who went to Paris in September. The mother said, "I just could not believe it. He was telling me, 'Madame McNeal told us this. Yes, I know this because Madame McNeal told us.'"

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That makes me happy.

Felicia Eybl

Right. The students pick it up, and they love to know more than their parents do.

Florence McNeal

Exactly. That is true.

When they really enjoy it, that is wonderful. They might read a book in English that has French words inside and say, "What is this word? Déjà vu?"

When they notice those words, I think, "Okay, I accomplished something for them."

I feel good, and they feel good.

Felicia Eybl

Absolutely. It is always a good feeling when you see that light bulb go off in students' heads—that they are comprehending, that they are speaking with you in that native language or foreign language, and that they are enjoying it.

Florence McNeal

Yes, that is true.

Felicia Eybl

What advice would you give to parents who are considering the British International School of Charlotte or any language program for their child?

Florence McNeal

The advice I would give parents is to encourage them. Do not pressure them.

If you pressure them, that is when it does not work.

Just encourage them and say, "That is good." Ask them, "What did you do in French today?"

That is a big thing, but no pressure. That is number one. Just encourage.

Maybe say, "This weekend, we can watch a movie together. Let's put it in French."

Even if the parents do not understand French, it does not matter. I think the child will be very happy.

I encourage them sometimes to watch a Disney movie that they already know in English and put it in French. Just listen.

That is a good thing when the parents decide to do this. The child seems so happy afterward.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, that is definitely encouraging. That is a good idea too because there is so much technology available. People really need to take advantage of some of that, especially when it comes to language learning.

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Is there anything else you would like to add?

Florence McNeal

I am very happy where I work.

The British International School of Charlotte is a very, very good place. It is a small school, but everyone knows everyone. Every student knows the name of every student.

It is really like a big family.

If you have any questions, you can always ask me about the British International School of Charlotte.

Felicia Eybl

All right. Thank you very much for joining us today.

Florence McNeal

Thank you so much for having me. Thank you.