

Year Eleven French Language Main Lesson with Cathy Lebrum - Partap Singh, a surprise guest speaker

Our main theme for Main Lesson is “France and French in the world”. Most French-speakers (59%) live in Africa. In the computer lab, we were watching in French a documentary on 6,000 languages and the influence of French in the world when a technician came in and serviced the photocopier. As he was leaving, I had the bright idea to ask him how many languages he could speak. Six languages! I could see my students’ amazement. Our inconspicuous service technician turned into a guest speaker in linguistics!

Born in Singapore, Partap was schooled in English (his first language) and he naturally learned Mandarin. His background is Indian so he can speak Hindi and Punjabi (his mother tongue). His second language is Malay-Bahasa (“I can read poetry in that language but not in my mother tongue”). He can read and write in three languages.

He worked in various Asian countries:

“You know that English is not widely spoken when the locals keep answering “yes” to everything. “Where is the toilet”, “yes”. If you want to work with people, you need to speak the local language.”

So that way, he learned Hokkien (Shopkeepers in Box Hill can’t believe that an Indian-looking person can speak a Chinese dialect), Thai and Tamil (spoken in South India and Sri Lanka). He also mentioned that English varies widely, for example, Singapore English is quite different from Japanese English.

He didn’t only speak about languages used daily but also about dead languages. He reads Sanskrit for religious reasons. “Once you know Sanskrit, you easily understand Hindi and Punjabi and a lot of words are similar in English and Sanskrit”. I started scratching my head. Maybe, yes, there is a relationship between Sanskrit and Latin as there are both Indo-European dead languages and English has borrowed a lot of words from French, a Latin language.

Hang on! Partap actually speaks more than six languages at various levels. He went on to service another photocopier in the school.

We could not possibly speak about 6,000 world languages without coming back home, Australia where 300 Indigenous languages are spoken.

*Cathy Lebrun, French Teacher*