



Effects of learning languages on volunteering

Ailina Nursultankyzy Makhmut*; Natalya Nikolaevna Khan; Gulzhaina Kuralbaevna Kassymova; Ardak Kenesbayevna Kalimoldayeva; Elmira Kanatovna Ketebayeva

Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Kazakhstan

*Corresponding Author. E-mail: minaichigo27@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

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Learning languages is an important aspect of modern times that influences people's thinking which was studied by many researchers. Today the knowledge of different languages is becoming an increasingly significant aspect of volunteering, having a profound impact on its various aspects. This article discusses the importance of knowing foreign languages for developing empathy, improving communication skills, and expanding the worldview of volunteers using a questionnaire consisting of 12 questions divided into three main sections (empathy, communication skills, and worldview). Each section includes four questions related to the specific aspect that are given randomly. Responses were received from random respondents from various universities in Kazakhstan in Almaty through the use of a Likert scale in the questionnaire. This article, based on the collected materials and the results of other studies, shows that learning languages has a positive effect on the development of empathy, as it helps to better understand a person, and their mood, and can help to imagine yourself in the place of another. In addition, it shows how knowledge of languages affects the development of communication skills in a volunteer, as it helps to better understand a person, be a good listener and at the same time maintain a conversation. The data also showed that learning languages can have a positive impact on the development of things like motivation and analytical thinking and encourages people to try new things.

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INTRODUCTION

Since its Independence Day, Kazakhstan has begun constructing a new socio-cultural establishment and administered several education reforms under the Law on Education of Higher Education to gain degree recognition and join the world education community (Nogaibayeva et al., 2023). Volunteering is one way to integrate into a new socio-cultural environment. Many studies have been conducted on the impact of volunteering on a human's social culture. There are many relevant studies on the impact of volunteering on altruism and prosocial behavior (Snyder & Dwyer, 2012) including how volunteering influences leadership and social responsibility (Dugan & Komives, 2010), the role volunteering in the community and university collaboration (Chupp & Joseph, 2010), and even social connectivity through volunteering (Grönlund et al., 2011). In addition to these studies, much has been studied concerning the effect of language learning on social culture. There are studies on the cognitive effects and social implications of language learning (Deluca et al., 2019) and its sociocultural and sociopolitical dimensions (Carpenter, 2011). However, the effect of language learning on volunteering has not been studied enough.

Many studies have been conducted on the influence of language on human thinking. After all, as Whorf (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015) notes, "Language shapes the way we think and determines

what we can think about". Nowadays, there are many different countries, cultures, traditions, and people in the world whose way of thinking may completely differ from our own. Some people argue that this is due to our language. To be more precise, there is a statement that our native language shapes our thinking. Many linguists and researchers are divided into several groups according to their opinions.

Piaget (2005), who is a biologist and psychologist of the development of modern science, believes that it is not language that creates thinking, but on the contrary, it is thinking that determines the possibilities of the formation and use of language. Through his research, he concluded the connection between speech and cognition. Therefore, he suggests that it is the gradual acquisition of thinking strategies that determine our linguistic development. As proof, he cites the example of experiments on the children's perception of quantity. In this experiment, the same amount of water is poured from one container into a container of another shape, as a result of which the water level seems higher. At first, children think that the amount of water in another container has increased because the water level is higher, but then children come to the conclusion that changes in the appearance of the quantity do not affect the quantity itself. Therefore, according to Piaget (2005), this understanding does not depend on language, since it is a change in the thinking process. However, it seems that here he was talking more about cognition and not about the connection between language and thinking since thinking and cognition are not the same thing.

Other linguists Whorf and Sapir (Regier & Xu, 2017) take the opposite view that our native language determines how we think and perceive the world around us. This hypothesis is associated with the principle of linguistic determinism, according to which the specific language a person speaks determines his thinking. The hypothesis is also associated with the principle of linguistic relativity, which establishes the statement that speakers of different languages also perceive reality differently. In the book *Through the Mirror of Language: Why People of Other Languages See the World Differently*, whose author is linguistics expert Deutscher (Hong, 2012), there is a mention of Whorf who cited the intuitive understanding of Einstein's theory of time among indigenous people in America as an example, because that is how time is described in their language. However, over time, this hypothesis has been seriously criticized. One of the main criticisms is that, according to the hypothesis, our native language sets the boundaries of our intellectual horizons and limits our ability to understand some ideas used in other languages.

Anthropologist Boas (Seiferle-Valencia, 2017) and linguist Jakobson (Vykypěl, 2021) associate language mostly with culture than with thinking. Culture is closely related to language and language is a part of culture. After all, the culture of different nations is expressed through their languages. For instance, in the Japanese language, many hieroglyphs can be associated with rice, since in Japan rice plays a significant role in their history.

Later, a linguistics expert, Deutscher, considers the explanations of Boas and Jacobson and describes the influence of language on our thinking. He states that our native language can nudge us to pay attention to specific details, recognize certain terms, and have certain associations. Deutscher (Hong, 2012) describes that language can influence our perception of the world, especially the associations that come to our mind, but we are all still able to perceive many other things in this world. As an example, he cites languages that do not use the terms "right" and "left"; instead, some tribes use the geographic sides of the world such as "west" or "east" as the direction. He also gives an example that in English there is no gender for inanimate objects, while, for example, in Russian or German there is a feminine and masculine gender, and this influences human associations. Another example he gives is related to colors in languages. After all, what in English will be dark blue and light blue, in Russian it will be "siniy" and "goluboy". Therefore, they will be perceived as two different colors: yellow and blue, so, Deutscher, unlike Whorf, says that our language influences some aspects of our thinking but not all our thinking, and it does not set boundaries for people that would prevent them from understanding another language and other (Sindelar, 2013).

Learning foreign languages fits firmly into the sphere of modern volunteering, having a significant impact on its various aspects. There have also been studies showing the important role

that language learning plays in volunteering. This is supported by research conducted in Russia, which showed that during the XXVII World Summer Universiade 2013 in Kazan, language skills were in demand among volunteers to hold a major sporting event. The research data demonstrated that volunteers with good foreign language skills and knowledge of the cultural differences of visiting delegations were highly valued at the event and these qualities were very important in connection with the arrival of many international athletes, government officials, and media representatives. Moreover, the research showed that some respondents would like to continue volunteering because they are proud of their participation in the 2013 Summer Universiade in Kazan. Many volunteers felt important and useful when communicating with foreign participants and helping them during the sporting event. Volunteers noted how much learning the language helped them, and the Universiade helped many volunteers gain a deeper understanding of the culture behind the language and place it in the context of the world. Improved language, interpersonal, and intercultural skills helped the Kazan volunteer team continue their participation in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi (Amirovna & Rustamovna, 2014).

Volunteering is an important symbol of social civilization and progress, and it is an important part of strengthening spiritual civilization and cultivating and practicing core socialist values. And learning languages gives volunteers great opportunities. This is confirmed by studies from China like the Russian study described above. The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games have led to an increased demand for volunteers who speak foreign languages. At the same time, they showed that, in scenarios where volunteers are needed for large events, conferences, exhibitions, etc., college students, who are numerous and have more free time and the ability to act independently, have become the main force of volunteering compared with other groups (Cai et al., 2024).

The volunteering process impacts many aspects of the volunteer's life. Volunteering can play a key role in improving both verbal and non-verbal communication skills, as well as developing empathy and ultimately influencing the volunteer's worldview. Skills acquired through volunteering, such as active listening and emotional intelligence, can translate into improved communication capabilities in a variety of contexts (Vogel et al., 2018). Learning foreign languages allows volunteers to better understand and perceive the feelings and needs of people from different cultures, developing their empathy and ability to provide emotional support. In addition, knowledge of foreign languages improves the communication skills of volunteers, ensuring effective interaction with representatives of other countries and cultures. Volunteers who speak multiple languages can more successfully resolve conflict situations, build trusting relationships, and find common ground with diverse groups of people. Moreover, learning foreign languages helps expand the horizons and worldview of volunteers, opening new horizons for them, and introducing them to different cultures, traditions, and customs. This experience allows volunteers to better understand the diversity of world culture, accept differences, and build harmonious relationships in a multinational environment. However, the effect of language learning on empathy, communication skills, and worldview has not been studied enough. Therefore, this article discusses how language learning impacts these aspects of volunteering to show why these aspects are important in volunteering. This article may be useful for volunteers, and various training programs for volunteers, as the article answers the questions of how language learning can help volunteers in their activities and what opportunities it opens for them.

METHOD

At first glance, language has nothing to do with volunteering, but it can help volunteers improve in many areas; to find out in which areas and how exactly learning languages affects volunteering and what skills it helps volunteers develop, a survey was conducted on the impact of learning a language on volunteering. For this, respondents were randomly selected and anonymously completed the survey. After that, the collected answers were compared and analyzed.

Participants

The survey was completed by 20 respondents aged 19-29 years, 11 of whom were females. Also, 11 respondents worked and four combined works with study, the remaining five were students. Twelve of the respondents know three languages (Kazakh, English, and Russian). It was taken from the different people who studied or worked and combined both in the city of Almaty. The survey was conducted for almost two weeks from February 7, 2024, to February 21, 2024. For confidentiality maintenance, the respondents were anonymized, and this is also to guarantee that the data obtained during the study were used only for research purposes.

Data collection and analysis

The survey, entitled “The Impact of Language Learning on Volunteering,” is an anonymous questionnaire that consists of 12 questions (including age, sex, employment, and known languages of participants) and three specific sections (related to empathy, communication skills, and worldview). The survey was conducted online by using “Google Forms” online platform for collecting data and for the convenience of respondents. This survey aims to find out how learning languages influences various aspects important for volunteers, precisely empathy, worldview, and communication skills, as well as to get answers to whether learning languages can be useful for volunteers or not by collecting responses using Likert-scaled questions and comparing them by visualization of the answers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Empathy

When the question was asked whether learning languages helped to understand the feelings of other people better, the majority answered positively. Only 20% had doubts but were nevertheless inclined to give a positive answer (Figure 1). This shows that most respondents believe that learning languages can be useful for understanding the feelings of another person, which lies within the basis of empathy.

Learning languages helps to understand another person's feelings better

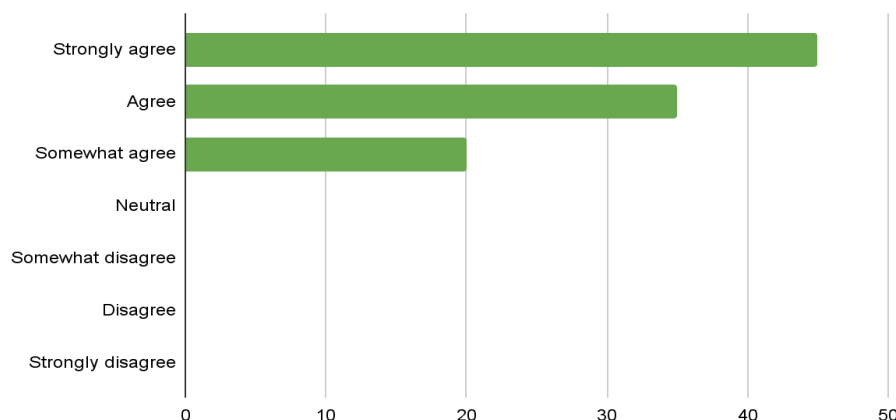


Figure 1. Answers in Percentage (%) to the Question from the Survey Related to Empathy 1

And when another question was asked whether learning languages allowed one to put oneself in someone else's shoes. More than half of the respondents gave a positive answer and only 21.1% answered neutrally (Figure 2). This means that most respondents think that learning languages helps to imagine themselves in someone's place better because it helps to understand another person more, so it is closely connected with empathy.

Language learning helps the volunteers to put themselves in someone's shoes

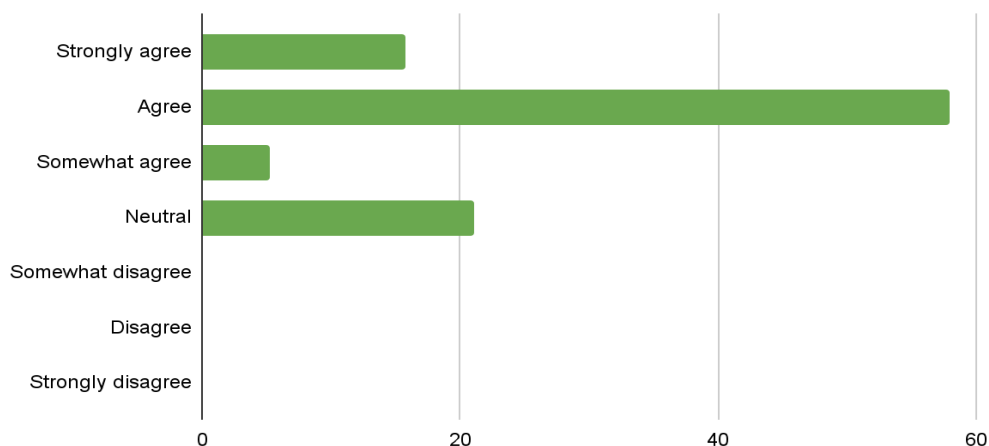


Figure 2. Answers in Percentage (%) to the Question from the Survey Related to Empathy 2

On the question of whether learning languages helps to better understand a person's mood, 5% of respondents disagreed and 5% somewhat disagreed with this statement, while 35% agreed with this statement (Figure 3). Understanding someone else's mood is also closely related to empathy, as it helps to better understand another person and sympathize with them, choose the tone of the conversation, and understand what the person is thinking about. However, according to the indicators, although the majority agree with this statement, there are still those who do not agree or are unsure of this statement and do not think that learning languages will help to recognize a person's mood.

Learning languages helps the volunteer better understand a person's mood

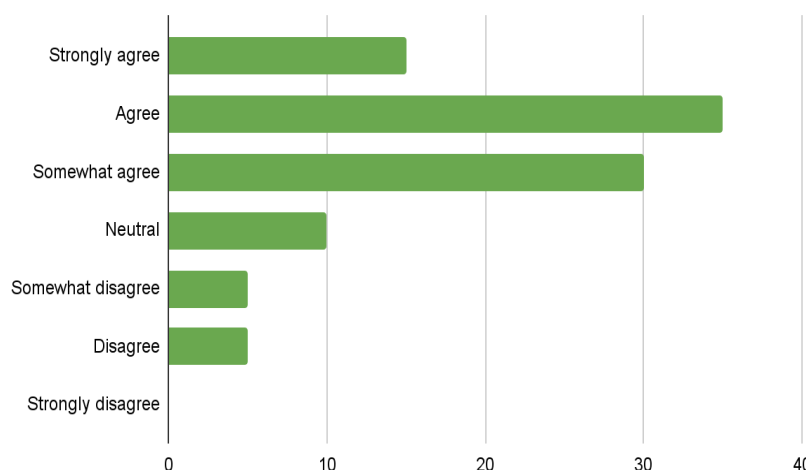


Figure 3. Answers in Percentage (%) to the Question from the Survey Related to Empathy 3

Communication Skills

The survey also asked whether learning languages helps one communicate better with people, to which only 5% had some doubts but were inclined to give a positive answer (Figure 4). Communication skills take an important part of volunteering as volunteers often must communicate with strangers, especially if it is international volunteering. Based on the respondents' answers, in such situations, learning languages can improve communication skills.

Learning languages helps to communicate better with people

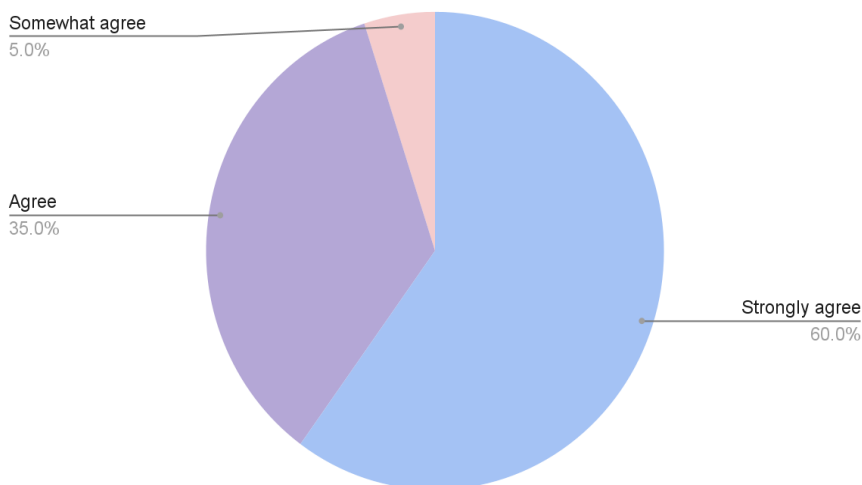


Figure 4. Answers in Percentage (%) to the Question from the Survey Related to Communication Skills 1

To the question of whether learning languages helps to develop listening skills, the majority also agreed with the statement and only 10% responded neutrally (Figure 5). Listening and conversation skills are important for a volunteer as these skills are closely related to empathy. Therefore, many respondents answered positively, agreeing that learning languages can play a significant role in improving these skills.

Learning languages helps a volunteer develop the ability to hear and listen to an interlocutor

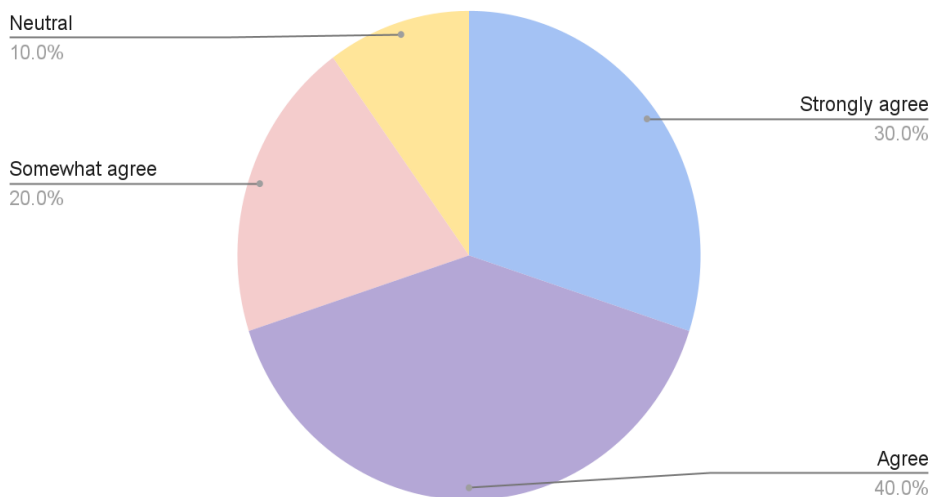


Figure 5. Answers in Percentage (%) to the Question from the Survey Related to Communication Skills 2

People were also asked whether learning languages helped them maintain a conversation with other people, to which only 5% answered negatively and 15% were inclined to answer positively (Figure 6). Maintaining a conversation is a key element in communication skill, and it can help volunteers in international communication. For this reason, most of the respondents also agreed with this statement, despite that few of them still disagreed.

Learning languages helps the volunteer maintain a conversation with other people

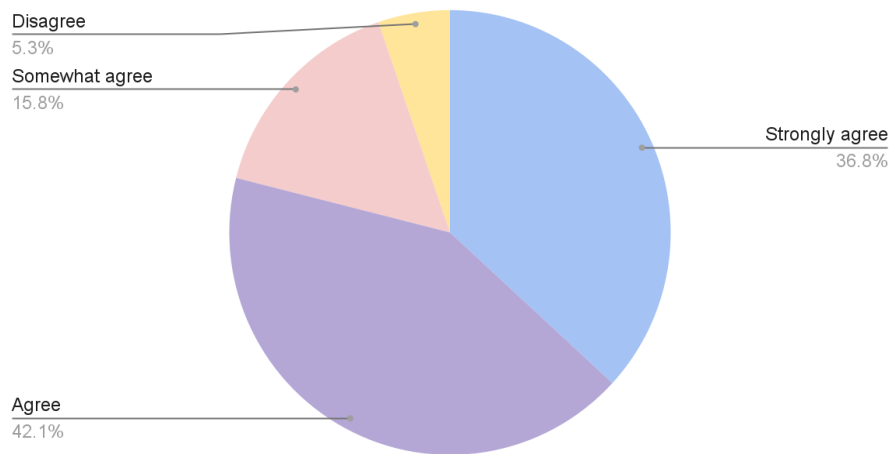


Figure 6. Answers in Percentage (%) to the Question from the Survey Related to Communication Skills 3

Worldview

To the question in the survey, whether learning languages influences changes in worldview, most of the respondents also gave a positive answer, while only 5% gave a neutral answer (Figure 7). By learning other languages, a person also gets to know another culture, which undoubtedly impacts a person's worldview. It can also contribute to a broader understanding of people of other nationalities, which also plays a role in volunteering. This explains why there are many positive answers.

Learning languages can influence changes in a volunteer's worldview

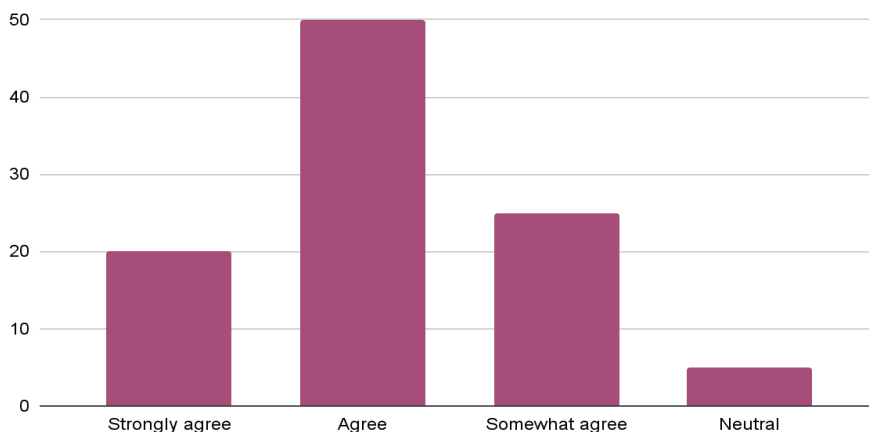


Figure 7. Answers in Percentage (%) to the Question from the Survey Related to Worldview 1

When the question was asked whether learning languages contributed to the development of analytical thinking, 20% responded neutrally. Moreover, 5% disagreed with this statement, but 35%, on the contrary, agreed with the statement (Figure 8). Language is closely related to the thinking process, and at first it was believed that language even shaped human thinking, and it turned out that language affects aspects of perception. For this reason, most of the participants still agreed that learning languages helped develop analytical thinking.

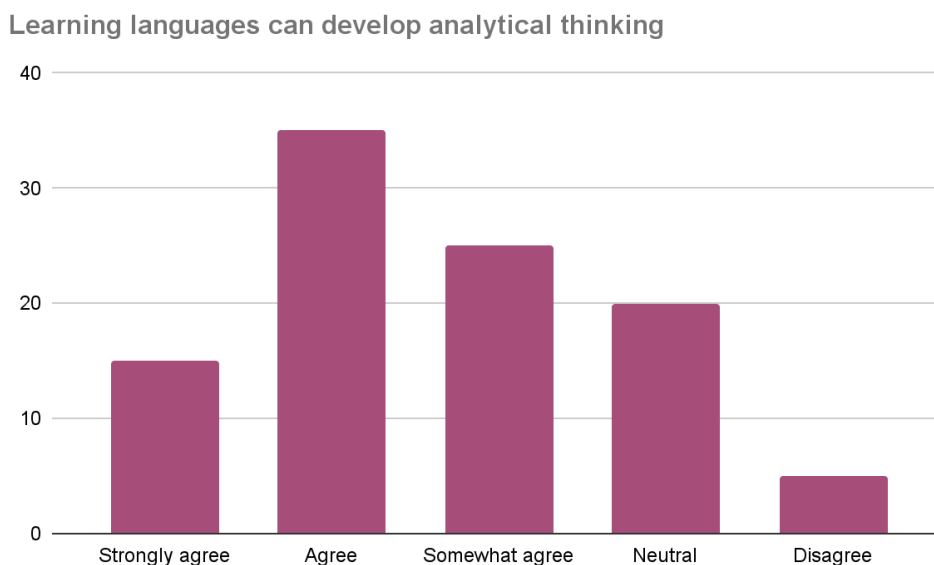


Figure 8. Answers in Percentage (%) to the Question from the Survey Related to Worldview 2

Answering a question about whether learning languages motivates people to do something new, 45% strongly agreed with this statement while 40% agreed (Figure 9). Learning other languages is something new for a person, which in turn helps to gain experience and try something new in a new area. In turn, this shows that learning languages can develop self-confidence to try a person in new situations, in which a person with more experience may not get confused, which is an important skill for a volunteer.

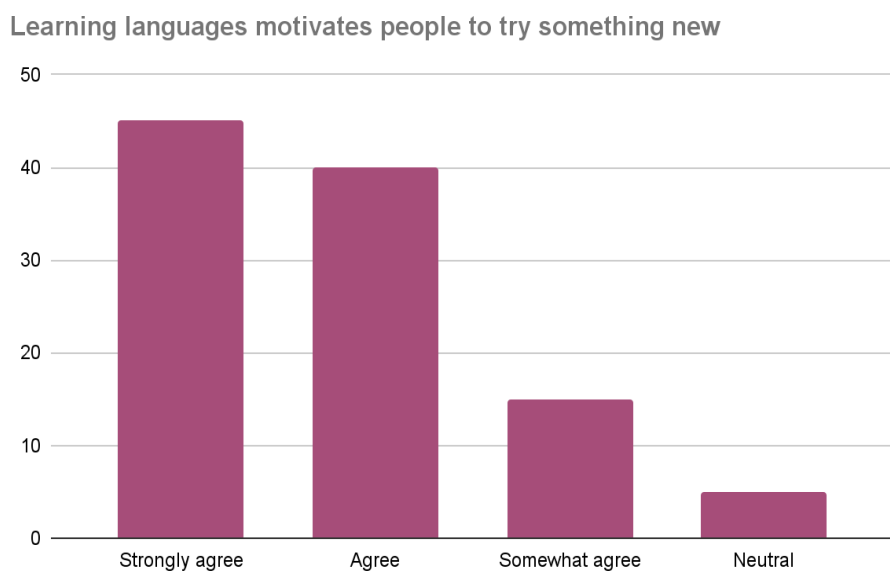


Figure 9. Answers in Percentage (%) to the Question from the Survey Related to Worldview 3

In addition to the survey, Table 1 shows exactly how learning languages can help in volunteering. Table 1 shows which areas of learning and knowledge of languages can help volunteers in their activities. Thanks to this survey, we could understand that learning languages do have an impact on various aspects of a volunteer's life.

Table 1. Aspects of volunteering that are influenced by language learning

No.	Aspects	Examples
1.	Empathy	When a volunteer is in another country, he learns the language of the country where he is. This can help him better understand the people whom he is helping.
2.	Communication skills	In situations when a volunteer needs help and knows languages, he can ask for help or explain the situation to another person.
3.	Worldview	Through the knowledge of languages, a volunteer can exchange experiences and knowledge, which helps him to expand his horizons and can carry out cultural exchanges with people from another country or other volunteers.

Discussion

First, language can help volunteers develop empathy. The collected materials help us understand that learning languages has a positive effect on the development of empathy, as it helps to better understand a person and his mood and can help to imagine ourselves in the place of another. According to Freud (Vetö & Sánchez, 2017), empathy is the ability to recognize the emotions and feelings of another person and to understand his internal state. The definition was formulated by Freud (Vetö & Sánchez, 2017) when he recommended that psychoanalysts put themselves in the shoes of their patients to better understand their experiences. Furthermore, the analysis of other research reveals that empathy consists of understanding, feeling, and sharing another person's experiences while maintaining a sense of self-other differentiation (Eklund & Meranius, 2021). When a volunteer is in another country, he learns the language of the country where he is, and this can help him better understand the people whom he is helping. Moreover, Kim (2020) notes that language covers many aspects of human life. In his research, he viewed language learning as a tool for the development of a whole personality. He also concluded that learning a language could help people immerse themselves in the world of others and promote empathy and understanding despite social and political differences. Accordingly, this can help volunteers to improve their empathy skills. The role of language learning in developing empathy is also emphasized, especially in professions and activities where effective communication is crucial (Moudatsou et al., 2020). Language proficiency in such contexts can enhance empathic interactions, as it enables various professionals and volunteers, among others, to better understand and respond to the emotional needs of different groups of people.

Secondly, language can help in unexpected situations. This survey also showed that learning languages affected the development of communication skills in a volunteer, as it helped to better understand a person, be a good listener and at the same time maintain a conversation, which in turn was an important factor for volunteering. If a volunteer is in another country and knows other languages, he can help people more effectively. For example, if he needs help and knows the language, he can ask for help or explain the situation to another person. Another example is that if the volunteer knows a language very similar to the language that another person speaks, then he will be able to try to understand the volunteer and there will be a high chance that this person will help. The psycholinguistic concept of studying the speech activity of people in psychological and linguistic aspects, including the psychological activity of the subject in learning and using the language system of N. Chomsky, deserves special attention. This concept reveals the affective-cognitive nature of empathy. This nature of empathy can be expressed in the information processing of the text since the information contained in any speech work ensures the choice of a certain point of view on the described situation. In other words, the act of empathy can be carried out directly in the process of communication (Solovieva, 2012). Moreover, Hanifa (2018) states that the mastery of communication skills is undeniably considered the most important aspect nowadays. Patel and Jain (2008) also state that one of the primary functions of language is communication. Communication is the interaction between two or more people to get or provide the information needed so it is an important skill of volunteers. Hanifa (2018) also highlights the

psychological aspects in her research that may impact volunteers' communication skills when learning a new language. Furthermore, [Rose et al. \(2020\)](#) examine the factors that contribute to success in learning English, arguing that the close interaction between language proficiency, academic skills, and motivation is vital for effective communication. This supports the idea that language learning is not just a cognitive endeavor, but also a social one, in which interaction plays a crucial role, which is what volunteering can provide. After all, a volunteer is involved in the communication process, helping, and actively interacting with others ([Rose et al., 2020](#)). Interpersonal skills are important for effective communication and good relationships between people. Volunteers may interact with different environments in society and will face different interpersonal problems. This encourages volunteers to think about how to accurately express their ideas and how to communicate with others more appropriately and politely in practice. In such an environment, volunteers can effectively improve their communication skills ([Cai et al., 2024](#)).

Thirdly, language can help change the mindset of volunteers. Research has also helped to understand that learning languages can have a positive impact on the development of things like motivation and analytical thinking and encourages people to move into new areas. After all, linguistics expert Deutscher ([Hong, 2012](#)) writes earlier about the effect of language on our thinking. Thanks to knowledge of the language, a volunteer can exchange experiences and knowledge, which helps him to expand his horizons and carry out cultural exchanges with people from another country or other volunteers. [Coghlan and Weiler \(2018\)](#) highlight that international volunteering through travel and interactions with foreign people can lead to significant transformational changes, facilitating critical self-awareness, and redefining self-identity. This transformation often occurs due to exposure to different cultures and languages, which challenges pre-existing beliefs and stereotypes. The ability to communicate in the local language enhances this transformational process, as it allows volunteers to fully immerse themselves in the cultural context and engage in authentic interactions. Moreover, [Mykhailiuk and Pohlod \(2015\)](#) also argue that if the new language is very different from the native language, it can provide insight into another culture and another way of life. Additionally, [Majid et al. \(2018\)](#) examine how different languages encode perceptions of the world, finding that speakers of different languages can interpret sensory experiences differently based on linguistic structures. This suggests that learning new languages can not only expand vocabulary but also fundamentally change perceptions of reality, thereby broadening the worldview of volunteers as well. Also, according to the research of [Bai and Wang \(2020\)](#) in primary school in Hong Kong, language learning is closely related to the growth of mindset, self-efficacy, and intrinsic values. [Oberemko et al. \(2021\)](#) conclude in their study that a person who speaks several languages is a phenomenon characterized by the interaction of sociolinguistic forms and norms of various cultural and socio-political characteristics in the linguistic consciousness of a person. Their results determine that those learning several languages combine several linguistic pictures of the world in their linguistic consciousness, which they speak to approximately equal degrees, which undoubtedly shows the effect of language learning on a person's worldview.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there has been a lot of research on this topic how slowly but surely this idea has developed over time by different scientists, and the question of how learning languages can help volunteers. Learning languages helps to better understand others, which is undoubtedly the basis for the manifestation of empathy. Empathy, in turn, can be manifested in communication with other people, in which knowledge of languages can provide significant assistance for communication, as shown by the findings and discussions of other researchers. In addition, learning languages, which also implies a better understanding of another culture, allows volunteers to broaden their horizons, influencing a person's worldview. According to the research, knowing and learning languages can help them develop empathy, communicate with people in different situations, and change their worldview according to the results of the survey with random sampling and the statements of other researchers in these spheres. However, some people do not understand

why knowledge of languages is needed in volunteering. This study may help to further serve as a basis for further research on why volunteers should learn other languages, to attract volunteers to learn other languages in different programs. This material and findings can be helpful for international volunteers or volunteers who would like to participate in international volunteer programs as well as for the national volunteer network of Kazakhstan and other countries. Volunteers are recommended to study languages to improve their skills and to expand their capabilities described in this article.

Studying and collecting data in the article is limited by the time and finding people to complete the survey. Many areas of volunteering that are affected by language learning have not been described and these results may be useful for further and deeper research of the areas described in the article (empathy, communication, worldview) or may offer directions in the study of other areas of volunteering, including the areas of social or civic responsibility, as well as analytical and critical thinking.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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