

The Value of Book Choice
By LeRoy Nosker Tanner
Programming & Technology Services Librarian

In the Star Wars Film, “The Phantom Menace,” the Jedi Qui-Gon Jinn utters the words: “The ability to speak does not make you intelligent.” That’s a harsh insult coming from someone supposed to be a diplomat. There are numerous ways that one could argue against this statement, but it got me thinking of the power of words. There are roughly 7000 languages on planet Earth. Over 340 are spoken in the United States. However, out of all of the languages in the world, only 34 have a writing system used for everyday communication. That’s less than half of one percent. If you compare that to how widespread certain languages are, then this small number seems quite confusing since written languages, that tiny percentage, dominate the landscape. The four largest are Chinese, English, Cyrillic (used for Russian and Eastern European languages), and Arabic.

English is also by far the largest language on the planet in terms of vocabulary. It contains over one million words. The second largest language is German (also of the same alphabet family as English) with roughly five hundred thousand. Chinese, on the other hand, has only about fifty thousand words. This brings up some interesting questions. With such a huge difference in vocabulary, how do languages express equivalent ideas? What gets lost in translation? What makes writing so prevalent? Sumerian cuneiform is widely recognized as the oldest system of writing, but no one uses it today. The writing system of the Indus Valley civilization is still undeciphered. Then again, some of the cursive written by people I know is just as undecipherable, and it’s written in a language I know! To confuse things even further, some languages have words that are spelled the same way and sound the same, but have completely different meanings. For example, the word “gift.” In English, it means something given without compensation. In German, it means poison. I’d better be careful with that one.

So what gives? It comes down, in part, to wanting to share ideas. In a purely oral language, the transmission of ideas is limited to person to person by word of mouth. Have you ever played the telephone game? Unless everyone is able to memorize everything they hear, things eventually turn into a different story. There’s a saying that goes, “a soldier’s cough becomes pneumonia by the time it reaches his mother.” Writing helps guard a person’s words to share ideas. It allows the thoughts of a person to reach farther unfiltered by the minds of others.

Which brings us to my subject. Literacy studies among kindergarten through twelfth grade students across the country show that students’ academic performance and interest in reading both benefit from having the freedom to choose their own reading material. There are also plenty of studies that show how beneficial lifelong reading is for your health. At the library, we believe it’s never too late to start! We will protect and encourage your freedom to read whatever interests you. Don’t be afraid to try new things either. If you don’t like it, then at least you know. There are books that I have not enjoyed, but I still learned from the experience of reading them. Everything we read

gives us the opportunity to interact with new ideas or see things from a different perspective. But as research has shown, it's the ability to choose what to read that makes all the difference. When you are empowered to explore the written word on your own terms, any adventure is possible. Here at the library, we are happy to help you find or reach that next step on your journey.