

The Girl Who Had Two Languages

AGES 3-12 · SUSAN, SOUTH-WESTERN IRAN

The night before a new school, Ariana turns a question over: am I American, Iranian, or both? Homa carries her and Aryan to ancient Susa, where they meet Niloufar — a girl who speaks two languages and cannot understand why anyone would call that a problem.

THE BIG QUESTION — FOR EVERY STUDENT

What do you gain from a second language that you cannot get any other way?

Ask it of the whole class. The supports below are for students who need a way in — not an easier question.

Words to know

heritage

translate

ancient

trade route

belong

Before you read

- Is there a word you use with your family that you never use at school?

Talk about it

- Niloufar speaks two languages and has never thought of herself as half of anything. What changes when you stop counting in halves?
IF STUCK *If you stop counting halves, you get to be ...*
- Ariana wonders whether she is American, Iranian, or both. Why do you think she felt she had to choose?
IF STUCK *She might feel she has to choose because ...*
- A language carries jokes, songs and ways of being polite that do not translate. What is lost when a family stops speaking one?
IF STUCK *If a family stopped speaking it, they would lose ...*
- Susa was a city where people speaking different languages lived side by side. How is this room like that?
IF STUCK *This room is like Susa because ...*

Make it

The Language Map of This Room

30 MINUTES

A world map, sticky notes, and pens. No preparation needed.

Step-by-step instructions are on the student sheet overleaf — photocopy one per child.

Check they got it

Count the languages on the map with the class, out loud. Then ask: **was that more or fewer than you expected?** The number is the point. Follow up with one student: *what can you say in your other language that is hard to say in English?* — a real example, not “it’s just different”.

What students often get wrong

- ✗ That a second language holds children back. Research consistently finds the opposite — a secure sense of heritage tracks with better wellbeing and school attitudes.
- ✗ That everyone in an ancient city spoke one language. Cities on trade routes were mixed, and Susa sat on those routes.
- ✗ That translation is exact. Every language holds ideas the next one has no single word for.

The real archaeology

- Susa is one of the oldest cities on Earth, lived in for thousands of years, and a place where people from different lands met, traded and settled.
- Because it sat on routes between regions, more than one language would have been heard in its streets — which is why the author chose it for this story.
- The same city gives us the clay toys in Book 3 — the two books are set in one place, thousands of years apart.

How many languages live in this room?

In the ancient city of Susa, a girl called Niloufar spoke two languages and thought nothing of it. To her they were simply two ways of reaching people. Let us find out how many ways this room can reach people.

- 1 Write down every language anyone in your home speaks — even a few words from a grandparent counts.
- 2 Put your sticky note on the map, where that language comes from.
- 3 Count all the languages in the room together. Write the number down.
- 4 Teach the class ONE word from a language other than English.

My name, written the way my family writes it:

Languages spoken in my home

Languages in this whole room

The word I taught the class

What it means

Now think: What can you say in one language that is hard to say in another?

One thing I would ask Niloufar:

.....

Finished early? Find two languages on the map that sit close together. Do they share any words?