PRIORITIES *in* PRACTICE

The Essentials of World Languages, Grades K–12

Effective Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

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An Overview of the Field

If you don't know foreign languages, you don't know anything about your own.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Thanks to a number of technological advances—ease of travel over vast distances, instantaneous telephone connections, and the Internet—interacting with people from other countries has become commonplace for a great number of us. This unprecedented accessibility to other languages and cultures—whether for social, political, business, governmental, or humanitarian purposes—has created what is now universally referred to as the "global community" and is calling into question our concept of what is "foreign." Our health is affected by conditions and events in China, Africa, South America, and Britain. Sales representatives, bank employees, and computer technicians who provide us with everyday home and business services may be living in other countries. Furthermore, changing demographics worldwide have increased interaction among individuals who speak a variety of languages on a day-to-day basis, in the home community as well as in the workplace.

Time to Reposition World Languages

In this context, the term *foreign language* is a misnomer, and use of the term *foreign* to describe the field of second-language education fails to reflect the interconnectedness of the world's peoples, their languages, and their cultures. The word *foreign* also denotes exclusion, isolation,

and alienation, rather than a sense of acceptance, collaboration, and community. Estimates released by the U.S. Census Bureau in June 2004 predicted that Hispanic and Asian populations in the United States will continue to grow at much faster rates than the U.S. population as a whole (Mok, 2004). Hence, the languages and cultures of the world beyond the United States can no longer be considered "foreign." This realization has caused educators in many states to shift their thinking and, as a result, to adopt the term *world languages,* renaming the discipline to reflect a world where peoples and cultures are in a constant state of movement and interaction, and where knowledge of world languages will enable students to think and communicate globally in their future lives as citizens and workers.

In recognition of this era of interconnectedness, this book refers to the languages spoken and taught in the worldwide community as *world languages*. This term is all-encompassing; it appropriately represents the languages and peoples that make up our present multilingual and multicultural global community, but includes the study of classical languages, thereby reflecting the past as well. (Any appearance in this book of the phrase *foreign language* reflects the wording of the source being referenced.)

The renaming of this area of the curriculum may seem largely symbolic, but it reflects a real paradigm shift in thinking about who is studying other languages, when language instruction should take place, what is being studied in language classrooms, and how language instruction is delivered and assessed. It introduces the idea of inclusivity to an area of study previously dominated by the idea of exclusivity. It also underscores the need to create a different mind-set among the U.S. public about the value of language learning to enlist widespread support for the development of well-articulated K–12 second-language programs.

Who Is Studying Other Languages

The adoption of national standards for second-language study was brought about through a collaborative effort of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and other language-specific organizations (National Standards in Foreign Language Education

Project, 1996, 1999). With the advent of the standards movement, the traditional population of students selected to study world languages has changed dramatically. Many states have embraced the national standards document and now acknowledge the value of language study for all students, whether they are college-bound, career-focused, English-language learners, or students with special needs. In past—and even in current—practice, however, college-bound students have made up the greatest percentage of the student population studying a second language. Students in the mainstream middle school population, in particular, have frequently been denied participation because their standardized test scores weren't considered high enough or because of average or below-average past academic performance—perceived indicators of an inability to learn a language. Yet with population demographics changing rapidly in many areas, the need for language skills continues to grow with each passing year.

Moreover, the practice of excluding students directly contradicts the advice given by language acquisition experts, who emphasize several guiding principles in considering language learning for all:

- Language learning is an innate human capability and, as such, cognitive ability should not be a prerequisite for determining whether a student can effectively acquire a second language;
- If a child functions in one language, he is already a viable candidate to function in other languages; and
- Ability to function in the native language expands the student's candidacy as a learner of other languages (De Mado, 1995).

Additionally, educators are realizing that the benefits attained by students through the study of languages extend beyond the practical one of proficiency in a nonnative language to cognitive, academic, and affective benefits—particularly attitudinal benefits, such as respect and appreciation of cultural diversity. The prevailing view of *who* learns another language has therefore shifted from offering language study as an academic pursuit for an elite student population to offering language study as a life skill to be acquired by all students, regardless of their post–high school plans. It incorporates a new world of language learners.

When Language Instruction Should Take Place

When students begin the study of a language is an important factor in ensuring success for all learners. Typically, such study begins during the middle school years, a fact that troubles many language teachers. "It's a shame that many U.S. students do not begin studying a second language before [middle school]," says Rebecca Fox, assistant director of George Mason University's Teaching and Learning Program. "If they start earlier, students have the opportunity to learn a language for a much longer period and to increase their oral and written skills," she says.

Moreover, the practice of starting language instruction late riles many instructors. "We don't wait until 6th grade to start teaching math instruction," says Nancy Rhodes, director of foreign language education at the Center for Applied Linguistics. "Why do we do it for language instruction?" Yet the notion of starting language instruction early sparks considerable debate among educators.

When students begin learning second languages early in high-quality programs, they have time to internalize the sounds of a language, accumulate a bank of vocabulary and phrases, and develop language-learning strategies that will lead to greater language proficiency when they continue language study at the secondary level. Therefore, among educators in the field, the issue of *when* language instruction should take place has evolved from a narrow, prescriptive time frame of two years of instruction at the secondary level to a broader and more flexible time frame that may occur at multiple entry points at the elementary level. "If [students] begin learning before puberty, they will develop better fluency and sound more like a native speaker," Rhodes adds. "But after a certain stage in [brain] development, it becomes much more difficult for synapses to make connections. Starting language instruction earlier clearly has advantages."

How Standards Are Affecting World Language Instruction

The implementation of standards has redefined the content of world language instruction. Standards-driven instruction focuses on meaningful communication and genuine interaction among students through

classroom activities that are embedded in authentic, real-life contexts. Most people, when they begin studying another language, assume they will acquire the skills that enable them to communicate with other speakers of that language. After all, communication is the stated goal of language instruction, both in course descriptions and curricula. What was most likely experienced, however, was an emphasis on language lexicon, syntax, morphology, and phonology. Not surprisingly, the learning outcomes reflected the goals of the instruction rather than those of the curriculum: people knew how to conjugate verbs, analyze abstract grammatical structures, and translate sentences and paragraphs with grammatical accuracy using long lists of memorized vocabulary, but very few could communicate at even a basic survival level in the "real" world. "Grammar and vocabulary are certainly important," says Martha Semmer, project specialist with the Center for Applied Linguistics. "But language instruction is more realistic now. We see more emphasis on contextualizing language instruction to make it more meaningful to students."

What should today's students expect to be able to do when studying another language? In standards-driven world language classrooms, students should expect to engage in relevant, age-appropriate communicative tasks that emerge from nonacademic areas of interest and importance as well as from academic content in other curricular areas. The standards guiding the teaching of languages (see Figure 1.1) are summarized as the five Cs (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996):

- Communication (exchanging, understanding, and presenting information and ideas)
- Cultures (understanding the products, practices, and perspectives of people who speak the language)
- Connections (acquiring information from other cultures and learning content from other disciplines)
- Comparisons (comparing other languages and cultures to one's own)
- Communities (using language beyond the classroom for lifelong enjoyment and enrichment)

FIGURE 1.1

Standards for Foreign Language Learning

Communication: Communicate in Languages Other Than English

Standard 1.1: Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.

Standard 1.2: Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.

Standard 1.3: Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

Cultures: Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures

Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.

Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.

Connections: Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information

Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.

Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are available only through study of the foreign language and its cultures.

Comparisons: Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture

Standard 4.1: Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.

Standard 4.2: Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

Communities: Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home and Around the World

Standard 5.1: Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting.

Standard 5.2: Students show evidence of becoming lifelong learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

Source: From *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* (p. 9), by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), 1996, Yonkers, NY: ACTFL. Copyright 1996 by Author. Reprinted with permission.

Rather than being the primary focus of study, the second language instead becomes a means for exploring areas of student interest. Content in the grade-level curriculum is learned, reinforced, or enhanced as students acquire and develop second-language skills. For example, 8th grade students in a middle school Spanish class learn Spanish by studying a thematic unit on global warming, concentrating on its potential economic and cultural effects in Spanish-speaking countries. The traditional view of Spanish as a subject area has changed, because Spanish grammar and structure are not the focus of instruction. This is not to say that structure is ignored, but student acquisition of language structures emerges naturally from the communicative tasks and assessments designed around the theme of the unit—in this case, global warming. Shifting the focus from linguistic content to real-world content allows students to use language to obtain information for social purposes, which is critical to acquiring language. This approach also motivates students to communicate and helps students to retain concepts, transfer them across disciplines, and apply them to real-life situations.

How Language Instruction Is Delivered and Assessed

Teaching and learning strategies used in world language classrooms are multifaceted and based on students' active involvement with their own learning. Classrooms once limited to a single text as the primary instructional resource and pencil-and-paper assessments have transformed into classrooms that use the latest technologies to provide culturally authentic materials as the foundation for the creation of meaningful communicative tasks. Students work collaboratively on multistage projects that have a real-world purpose, similar to those they will encounter in the community or the workplace.

New assessments in world language instruction reflect a similar focus and mirror the performance-based instructional activities taking place in the classroom on a daily basis. They allow students to demonstrate what they know and can do, showing their growing language proficiency in multiple ways using real-world tasks. "My students learn how to order from menus," says Janet Glass, an elementary school teacher in North Bergen, New Jersey. "We use authentic menus that I get when I go

to Mexico or when I find them online." Students practice ordering foods, sustaining conversations, and understanding news broadcasts in the new language. "We've really gone beyond kill-and-drill," Glass adds.

The culture of testing world languages has, therefore, shifted from reliance on assessing only what students *know* through objective tests to assessing what students can *do* through multiple measures and perspectives. "Because of the broad range of behaviors and functions associated with [second] language proficiency, performance assessment would have to entail a variety of assessment methods in a variety of content [areas]" (Donato, 1998, pp. 169–175). The new testing culture is inextricably connected to a wide range of content and a variety of instructional strategies practiced in K–12 classrooms and, most important, has the primary goal of emphasizing achievement for all learners.

Balancing the Curriculum

The critical need to include the study of world languages in the core curriculum has been consistently reiterated in reports, studies, journals, and articles published within the past several years. The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), in response to the concerns of its members about the status of both arts and world languages study in the United States, examined the current trend in U.S. education policy of narrowing the curriculum to focus on federal and state accountability mandates. Despite this trend, parents and the public at large support a comprehensive education that includes the study of academic areas beyond English language arts and mathematics (Hayward & Siaya, 2001).

The 2003 NASBE report *The Complete Curriculum: Ensuring a Place for the Arts and Foreign Languages in America's Schools* provides a compilation of research on the cognitive and affective benefits of the study of world languages and the advantages of early language learning; presents an overview of the current state of world language education in U.S. schools; and recommends policies to support the inclusion of world language instruction in states' core curricula. Among these recommendations are the following:

1. Adopt high-quality licensure requirements for staff in the arts and foreign languages that are aligned with student standards in these subject areas.

2. Ensure adequate time for high-quality staff development in the arts and foreign languages.

3. Ensure adequate staff expertise at the state agency in the areas of arts and foreign languages.

4. Incorporate both the arts and foreign languages into core graduation requirements, while simultaneously increasing the number of credits for graduation.

5. Encourage higher education institutions to increase standards for admission and include arts and foreign language courses when calculating high school grade point averages.

6. Incorporate arts and foreign language learning into K–12 standards, curriculum frameworks, and course requirements. Also, encourage local school districts to incorporate the arts and foreign languages into instruction in the early years, whenever possible.

7. Advocate continued development of curriculum materials for the arts and foreign languages from the textbook publishing industry.

8. Incorporate all core subject areas, including the arts and foreign languages, into the improvement strategies promoted by No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

9. Urge the National Assessment Governing Board to increase the frequency of administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments for both the arts and foreign languages.

10. Urge the U.S. Congress and state legislatures to make a greater commitment to the arts and foreign languages (NASBE, 2003, pp. 5–25).

In *Academic Atrophy: The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America's Public Schools*, Claus von Zastrow (2004), senior program director of the

Learning First Alliance, reports on the waning commitment of time and resources for teaching the liberal arts in the United States, especially in schools with high minority populations. The report is based on the results of a survey of 1,000 principals that explored K–12 students' access to a liberal arts curriculum in schools in Illinois, Maryland, New Mexico, and New York. Approximately three-quarters of the principals surveyed reported increases in instructional time for reading, writing, and mathematics—all subject areas for which their schools are held accountable by NCLB. Similar increases were found in professional development for these three areas. A decreased commitment was reported for the arts, foreign languages, and elementary social studies. For foreign languages, both increases (11 percent) and decreases (9 percent) were reported in low-minority schools, but in high-minority schools, 23 percent of the principals reported decreases in foreign language instruction (von Zastrow, 2004, p. 17). Most principals reported that instructional time had decreased greatly, and only 9 percent reported increases in foreign language instruction. In high-minority schools, 29 percent of principals expected further decreases in the future, and half of these expected the decreases to be large. In contrast, in low-minority schools, only 14 percent predicted future declines. The report concluded that "the possibility that minorities are more likely to experience a narrowing of the curriculum raises important questions of educational equity" (2004, p. 9).

"Curriculum for the 21st century must cultivate a variety of potentials and possibilities that are of long-term value, which enrich students in ways aesthetic and interpersonal as well as financial," says Scott Shuler (2003, p. 45), an arts education consultant with the Connecticut Department of Education. The role of world languages in the core curriculum is difficult to dispute when viewed in this context.

As language learners, students take an active role in constructing meaning from their personal experiences, an approach that reflects the philosophy and beliefs of educating the whole child. Moreover, language learning provides students with knowledge and skills across a range of subjects, not just those that are tested.

"The United States must invest in an educational infrastructure that produces knowledge of languages and cultures, and must be able

to steadily train a sufficient and diverse pool of American students to meet the needs of government agencies, the private sector, and education itself," says the American Council on Education (2002). "Developing global competence is a long-term undertaking and must begin at an early age, especially for foreign language acquisition" (pp. 7, 10). A curriculum that excludes the study of world languages does not meet the current demands of globalization; it does not prepare our children for the roles they will play as adults and workers in an interdependent world; and it runs the risk of permitting the United States to fall further behind other nations where world language study is more prevalent. In many European nations, for instance, statistics show that 45 percent of people are fluent enough to converse in a second language. In some countries, this rate rises to 80 percent (Wilcox, 2006).

Despite the compelling rationale for the inclusion of world languages as an essential component of the core curriculum by policymakers, educators, and the government and business communities, the appropriate resources to ensure such inclusion are not being allocated. Catharine Keatley (2004), associate director of the National Capital Language Resource Center, reports, "Total funding for foreign language education in the U.S. Department of Education (ED) budget in 2003 was a maximum of $85,425,469, which constitutes 0.15 percent of the overall ED budget. In other words, for each $100 spent by the Department of Education in 2003 . . . 15 cents . . . was spent on foreign language education" (p. 15).

Creating a New Frame for the Value of Language Learning

A 2003 study of how Americans view international education, conducted for the American Forum for Global Education and the Asia Society by the FrameWorks Institute (Bales, 2004, pp. 1–19), yielded some interesting findings. Although the goal of the study was to evaluate current thinking about ways to engage the U.S. public in supporting programs and policies to improve students' international skills, the results of the study are applicable on a broader scale to world languages and other areas. In the

study, researchers used a unique perspective on communicating social issues—strategic frame analysis—to assess public thinking.

The study found that the U.S. public views international education as a luxury or a set of skills that can be postponed to postsecondary education, especially in a system of education perceived to be failing at the basics. Researchers also found that the public views the reforms necessary to achieve international education as additive, rather than transformative. "As a monolingual nation, we have very unrealistic expectations of what it requires to learn a language," says Semmer. Clearly, these findings have implications for the study of world languages, especially in light of the general perception that learning languages other than English is not an essential component of the core curriculum and certainly not important enough to be included across the K–12 spectrum.

Rather than invoking national security, international relations, the economy, or lack of student knowledge, educators instead must argue for the study of world languages in a way that reflects a new, more inclusive view of the world, the United States' role in it, and the opportunities such study would provide today's students, researchers suggest. "Americans have this grand illusion that everything that's worth knowing is in English, and that's not the case," Semmer says. "For kids to gain and access the ways of thinking and perspectives of other people is an amazing thing, [and] those kinds of multiple perspectives are going to be necessary to solve the many challenges that the world is facing." Educators and specialists further advise beginning public communications with vivid examples of schools that are making the transformation to international education. They underscore the importance of defining the difference between what currently exists and the vision of what needs to be developed to encompass a global perspective, thereby assigning accountability to the system.

Rather than narrowly addressing current problems, frames that work best inspire a positive vision of what we could become or achieve. Understanding and respect are frames that achieve the most public buy-in. Moreover, these findings are consistent across the entire body of FrameWorks Institute research on public attitudes on international issues both before and after September 11, 2001. As with the Institute's findings regarding the U.S. public's view of international education, this information has

obvious implications for the study of world languages and can be of great value in helping educators make their case to the public.

Members of the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (2002), responsible for implementation of K–12 world languages standards in their respective states, make the case for world languages by reframing the value of language learning for state policymakers in the manner suggested by the FrameWorks Institute research. They have focused on the United States' new role in the world and have created a positive vision of what world language education could be, underscoring the need for understanding and respect of other cultures. They propose several critical steps for educators and policymakers:

> 1. Advocate 21st century international literacies (i.e., the notion that all children must develop the communication skills necessary in an interconnected world, broadening their view of literacy from reading and writing in one language to understanding, presenting information, and conversing in English and one or more languages other than English).
>
> 2. Develop cross-cultural competency by learning languages (i.e., the ability to view the world from the perspective of other people and to comfortably function among people of different cultures).
>
> 3. Tap into the valuable language resources in America's ethnic and indigenous communities. Heritage-language learners need to maintain and develop high levels of competency in their first language, and native speakers of English should begin the study of these languages at the elementary level, thereby meeting the need for speakers of languages demanded in the 21st century.
>
> 4. Establish a new world language agenda. Improve world language education in the United States through reforms in teacher training, curriculum and assessment, and the use of technology (Sandrock & Wang, 2005, pp. 24–31).

By establishing a new frame for thinking about the value of language learning, and implementing new goals and objectives for language study for all students, we will be able to deliver citizens who are able to communicate and function across linguistic and cultural borders worldwide.