

Language Education We Can Use

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As the global nature of work and life in the 21st century becomes clearer by the day, calls for a greater focus on international education and language learning are growing louder. Leaders from the education, business, and national security communities are agreed: International understanding and second-language proficiency are critical to individual and national interests—and our K-12 system must do more to promote them.

But with respect to international education and language learning, more of what we are doing today wouldn't be better. In fact, it might be worse.

For too many years, we have maintained a language-learning strategy that simply does not work. In programs using outdated pedagogies focused on grammar and translation and coupled with low expectations, students take foreign languages with goals that seemingly include everything except actually learning to speak the language. If graduates of our high schools regularly reflected that, after four years of mathematics, they couldn't solve for an unknown variable, we would be outraged. But we share a laugh when someone says, "I took four years of a language, but I can't really speak it."

As a nation, we seem unconcerned by students' wasting years in language programs with instructional approaches that have no chance of helping them achieve meaningful levels of proficiency. Students are neither learning to speak in large numbers nor at high levels because the traditional platform cannot possibly deliver enough intensity or time in the target language. As a result, everyone understands that putting Spanish or French or Mandarin on your resume simply means that you took it, not that you speak it.

But what is the goal of traditional programs if it is not learning to speak the language? Teachers and administrators will tell you that there is much more to language classes than just oral proficiency. There is cultural awareness and sensitivity, global knowledge, and exposure to the target language.

They are absolutely right. And these objectives would be well worth the investment if traditional world-language programs were actually set up for those outcomes. Unfortunately, they aren't. They continue to operate with the primary goal of increased proficiency and a secondary goal of increased global knowledge. The result? We achieve neither.

But we could. To do so, however, we will need to part ways with our traditional one-size-fits-all approach to language instruction.

Let's start with increased global knowledge. Rather than perpetuate the fiction that world-language classes can result in advanced proficiency, it is time to convert existing courses to a classroom experience that provides a combination of introductory language exposure, cultural studies, and deep, experiential learning about the countries that speak the target language. These middle and high school language courses would have the following three components:

- Specific, real-life language instruction narrowed to focus on survival travel skills and with the goal of teaching a subset of the current language curriculum to greater depth and understanding—with relevance and utility as guiding principles;

- A cultural-studies framework that teaches students how to understand a country's cultural identity and to compare and contrast countries; and
- Global knowledge through the study, comparison, and contrasting of countries that speak the target language.

To be clear, students will not leave these classes with advanced language proficiency. What they will obtain, however, are the language skills needed to travel in countries that speak the language, an understanding of other countries and cultures, and an awareness of the global issues that impact both those countries and our own.

For the students who seek to achieve proficiency, classrooms with dual-language instruction will provide the route. In these classrooms, the target language is not taught as a separate subject; it is the language in which instruction is delivered. Students master the curriculum objectives in all subject areas, while becoming highly proficient in a second language. A recently released book by the renowned dual-language-education researchers Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier, *Dual Language Education for a Transformed World*, provides ample evidence that not only is dual language a best practice for second-language acquisition, but it is also the "most powerful school reform model for high academic achievement, whatever the demographic mix!"

There are different models of dual-language education, including 50/50 two-way (in which half of instruction is presented in English and the other half in the target language), and 90/10 full immersion (in which nearly all instruction is conducted in the foreign language being taught). Communities with native Spanish-speaking, Mandarin-speaking, or other English-language-learner populations can benefit from the 50/50 model—a program that promotes academic achievement through enrichment, rather than remediation. In 90/10 programs, native English-speaking students benefit from the academic rigor inherent in learning nearly all content through the target language.

For students who enter these programs in the elementary years, school districts and states would develop companion middle and high school coursework that would build their language skills and ensure high-level proficiency by high school graduation.

No doubt, it will be difficult to wean our schools and districts from their traditional language approaches. But these approaches seek to teach language to 100 percent of the students with a success rate of 1 percent. Instead, we should aim for 10 percent participation in dual-language education to achieve 100 percent success, and support the remaining 90 percent of students with courses that will build survival language skills, cultural understanding, and global knowledge.

The good news: We can redeploy the existing world-languages course platform, teaching positions, and support resources to implement a language-learning and international education agenda that will actually achieve results.

In doing so, we will be in tune with the demands of states, businesses, and parents to better prepare students for the global world in which they will live and work.