

NOT JUST A SPECIAL ANYMORE

World language classrooms, the center of meaningful problem solving

by Amanda Seewald M.Ed.

Here is a riddle: What is the difference between school and life?

In school you are taught a lesson and given a test.

In life you are given a test that teaches you a lesson.

But why is this true in education when we know better?

We know that designing backwards and thinking about our goals first are what will ultimately lead to success. We know that real life problem solving is the most significant way to develop cognition. We know that inquiry drives motivation and ultimately leads to innovation. We know that risk taking and errors are extremely valuable for meaningful growth in every way. But most importantly, as language educators, we know that the best lessons life can teach you and that we can teach our young learners is that our best selves are seen through the eyes of another. We know, as Fernando Lázaro Carreter said, that language is the skin of the soul.

If we can together find a way to demonstrate the power of language and globally engaged learning then we will definitely not be considered “Just a Special” anymore...

What is a special? Let’s define that clearly. What comes to your mind when you think of the term specials? Specials are defined roughly as electives taught by specific, specialized teachers to give a rounded education. They’re an addition to regular classroom studies, including physical education, arts,

foreign languages, and technology.

But we know the true meaning of being called a special, don’t we?

Special area subjects, ironically called “specials,” are important experiential learning opportunities for all learners that are traditionally cut from the day whenever there is an assembly or any type of school event. Students are often pulled out of these classes to make up work or for any other reason. Specials are at the

bottom of the school food chain in terms of funding and are always considered a bonus or extra because there are typically no high stakes statewide assessments made for them. Specials are considered less important and somehow on the periphery of learning.

Yes, this is a slightly sarcastic but completely true definition in terms of how schools treat our classes. You see, specials are where the experiential learning grows. Often these are the classes that if used properly, could lead to stronger understanding across the board, but one stands out. World language learning is a different breed of special because, though so marginalized by our national educational structure, it is truly the essential building block for all learning. Up to this point and for the foreseeable future,

we will not be placed in the role of a core “subject” so let’s focus on what we really are.

We know that in order to set our concept for what we want language learning to be as a part of the school or district’s central

focus and essential educational experience, we need to have a clear understanding of what makes us an entrée and not a side dish. However, in order to make that understanding clear to those around us, we also have to take a big long reflective look at what we are

doing or not doing to demonstrate that we are to be valued.

The history of our field as an uninspiring conjugation experience still exists and there are still many in the field who are just learning to adjust antiquated practices, but we have the power of globalization on our sides now along with the reality of national standards and pushes for best interactive learning practices.

WE, as early language educators, are the leaders of that effort. We need to take a strong look at what we do and how we can help influence the future of our profession and of multilingualism in our nation.

To do that we can carefully consider the four proven pillars of what world language learning represents and can be.

WORLD LANGUAGE LEARNING...

- **Is the best vehicle for culture and Global Citizenship**
- **Builds cognitive growth! Wrap your mind around that!**
- **Encompasses STEAM! We can do it all! ... Well, we can do some of it!**
- **Can help you address real issues through problem solving.**

Ultimately, all of us, as elementary language educators, are so easily connected daily to an environment focused on discovery, literacy, nurturing learning proclivities, and development of self-reflection and growth and we can be the (pardon the expression) STEAM that powers that engine if we play our cards right. Schools are increasingly looking for ways to distinguish themselves by broadening their reach beyond the walls of the classroom whether through service learning, community engagement, project based learning, IB, or simply STEM. What many schools are not able to see yet is that world language teachers and world language classrooms are the full package that students and schools need to reach many of these goals as a community.

The challenge is there for us to grab. Each one of us can take our own language learning experiences and bring them to bear for this cause. We can show the schools, the students, the parents, our colleagues, the administrators, and beyond that the vine that conveniently binds the stem together consists of language, communication, cultural understanding, and the inherent desire to connect beyond our own four walls.

Together let's take a closer look at these four essential educational goals that world language learning encompasses. It is my hope that we can wear these ideas like badges and use them to build out our pathway to leadership in our educational settings.

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Global citizenship is a framework through which we bring global issues into all subject areas. A global citizen doesn't have to have a passport; it is a mindset.

• *Coco Killingsworth*

I greatly appreciate this definition of global citizenship from Coco Killingsworth as I think it speaks to the lens through which language educators can take the reins and enhance global citizenship education in schools. Organizations like UNESCO and globalcitizen.org are working very hard to provide us with great tools to introduce and explain global citizenship to our stakeholders.

What can we do to foster global citizenship in our students? In our schools? In our communities?

Consider how the ideas can convert to your classroom or your community.

We must move away from list driven topics and work towards engaging themes that connect to real life issues. We need to get our students out of their bubbles and always remember that comparing houses and

families in the U.S. and Spain or France only shows part of the story. In order to show our students the world and to help them see and understand, our language class comparisons and contrasts should include people and places from all over the world. The way we raise the stakes on proficiency growth is to, in part, broaden the depth and breadth of what our students see and understand and get to discuss.

Most importantly, focus on the idea of comparison and contrast to grow language proficiency, but also to use language for deeper understanding of issues.

Resources like The Hungry Planet, a picture based look at food around the world, are unique tools for helping students to see difference and understand the challenges faced by others. Use any and all resources available to engage students in the experience of recognizing their places or responsibilities to their communities and to the world.

COGNITIVE GROWTH

This is your brain...

This is your brain on language...

A 2016 study done by the University of Alberta demonstrated that "the most prevalent (pattern) in our studies, is that bilingualism is a positive force that enhances children's cognitive and linguistic development, improving access to literacy if the two writing systems correspond and development of general executive processes for all bilingual children solving a wide range of non-verbal problems requiring attention and control. These executive control abilities are at the centre of intelligent thought."

Cognitive growth as the result of second language development is not a myth and is supported by research that demonstrates its effects far beyond the experience of learning language. What are we doing to educate our communities about this? How are we sharing the many articles about this with our community stakeholders? Never underestimate the power of advocacy in every little way. Make it your business to find and send at least one article about brain research and language to your board of education, administrators, and especially students and parents. Put it on your list of things to do because it can have a profound impact on your success!

The upshot of this study and others is

that language growth clearly affects brain function. If we know that global citizenship requires knowledge of concepts and that our brains are highly functional when we use language, then we should be sure that the way we teach reflects that. Don't teach about language. Teach via the language.

STEAM

STEAM is already in our classrooms if we can simply begin looking at language as a pipeline that carries information and if we focus on teaching in a way that uses language to dramatically bring ideas to life. It is about turning food into understanding how people get their food or about turning family into traditions and comparisons.

STEAM!! We can do it all!...Well, some of it!

CONTENT IDEAS

How do plants grow?

What is the best way to protect our air and water?

Which is the most important invention? What can you invent to solve a problem?

What can you explain about people from their art?

LANGUAGE SKILLS

I think ... statements

Ordinal numbers

Commands/giving directions

Verbs

Descriptive language

I can ... statements

I like ... statements

We can easily take what we are already doing and inject it with a true sense of purpose. But how?!

Here are a few tricks:

- Choose the themes at each grade level that will work best for you... you don't have to do it all!
- Design backwards...and keep in mind that the resources you choose to use will help you decide on the best linguistic goals for that unit.
- Remember that STEM, STEAM, and any content you use will give you the proper platform for helping your students understand that language is truly for communicating ideas and solving problems.

In my work with teachers around the country and in Europe, I find that the biggest challenge we face is how to make this work. Adjusting is definitely a process but the work done to move in this direction will be a large part of the advocacy that you develop to make your program successful.

I often hear teachers go from extreme to extreme, but we need to be the ultimate connectors. So a science or math teacher or any "regular" classroom teacher becomes nearly

dependent on the support for learning that our content-driven instruction provides to bolster student learning.

Be the connector! Start from the content not from the language goals. Whenever you plan for content, the language you need to teach, use, model, and evoke becomes crystal clear. Organically find that language....as early childhood educators, we are the masters of this!

Don't ever let your students lose sight of the fact that speaking another language is a journey to communication of thought and to finding solutions for problems. Make sure that this is the backbone of what you do; the "what do I want them to be able to say and do with this" piece of teaching.

This leads to the most exciting way to reach students: engage in active inquiry. Always start with a question and a problem to solve.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Problem solving requires asking questions, making guesses and predictions, experimenting, looking for clues, analyzing information, comparing and contrasting, and making decisions.

Each one of these functions is a key to language proficiency growth. And the greatest part is that it is tons of fun. Children's programming and games have been designed with these engaging concepts in mind for many years. Think back on your favorite TV shows and games and consider which ones had specific goals for problem solving. Can you think of one? Why did you like it? Chances are that it made you think around ideas and draw conclusions. These essential skills are also the ones we use to circumlocute as we develop language skills.

Take the ideas you get from your favorite board games and children's programs. Make your lessons into a learning mystery. Any and every time we gamify the learning, our students' motivation rises and our ability to engage them is much stronger. Use problem solving as a way to drive meaningful conversation and interactive construction of ideas.

Use the steps of problem solving to help your classroom come to life

Make problem solving a visual and interactive part of your classroom. To do this You

can use videos, stories (children's literature is powerful at all ages), science experiments, social experiments and keep in mind that many of the best problem solving experiences come from games.

Additionally, we can use problem solving and inquiry driven experiences to encourage metacognition. Getting students to consider their own thinking and how they learn best will inevitably assist in enabling students to reach stronger outcomes.

Focusing instruction through problem solving is motivational not only for the learner but fun for the teachers as well! The more we enjoy our instruction, the more our students will as well.

Don't you want to be the teacher and have the class that the kids can't wait to be a part of? Not because it is time off but rather because it gets them thinking....globally....with fun...with inquiry....with mystery...and most importantly ...all of this via the target language which for them poses another intriguing aspect to the learning experience.

Step away from that correction....and inject your classroom with the ideas that make language learning a real life experience.

In order to get there, we have to envision our goals:

WE have to see ourselves and help others see us as the conduit through which culture,

content, communication, and collaborative learning all connect. Language functionally braids together the tools of education, tools like Math, science, social studies, and literacy.

Remember that education is not a finite set of ideas or words, but rather the process of using these tools to understand and affect the world around us.

By doing this we can vastly change the way we are viewed....no longer an aside, but rather that central, pivotal piece around which ideas revolve.

Never has this multicultural, multilingual communication goal been more important than it is now in our nation and in our world. We are the only teaching superheroes who can prepare our children for this reality.

So let's pull their unending energy towards us by attracting it with the type of

learning that will inspire everyone it touches including our colleagues and administrators.

This list is only the beginning, but the possibilities are endless if we reframe our vision of language instruction to focus more on inquiry, real and meaningful content, and problem solving.

Imagine language as the vine that wraps around the stem to provide communication and impact problem solving to connect in ways that make the outcomes more powerful.

The four pillars of world language learning as described give you a reminder of what it means to education and an energizing set of guidelines to help you create learning experiences that will ultimately help us all achieve our goal of a multilingual globally connected citizenry. By incorporating these ideas, you can make language learning the necessary component that we already know it is, keeping in focus that communication and problem solving are the true DNA of real learning and the center of cognitive and social growth.

Ultimately, we need to help the educational community at large see clearly that critical thinking and problem solving are the truest "STEM" of real learning, and the "STEAM" that powers cognitive and personal growth.

Amanda Seewald, M.Ed. is the Author and Director of MARACAS Spanish Program for Young Learners and the new animated series MARACAS La Clase del Mundo (www.maracas123.com). She has been teaching and developing curricula for pre-school and elementary students in New Jersey for over 12 years. Amanda works with educators and schools across the country providing interactive professional development as well as program development guidance and evaluations. Additionally, Amanda has developed programs to engage parents in advocacy and in their children's educational experiences. Amanda is the current president of Foreign Language Educators of New Jersey (FLENJ) and serves on the Advisory council for the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NECTFL). She is also the New Jersey State Representative for the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL).

