

BEYOND LINGUISTIC PROFICIENCY

Early Language Learning as a Lever for Building Students' Global Competence, Self-Esteem, and Academic Success

By *Chris Livaccari*

On a recent visit to Yinghua Academy, a pioneering Chinese language elementary immersion program in Minneapolis, I was thrilled to see young learners discussing early American history in Chinese. While I did wonder if these children would ever learn how to say “Betsy Ross” or “George Washington” in English, I was amazed by their use of Chinese terms like “colony” and “revolution.” I began to ponder how powerful the impact for these students was to look at the history of their own country through a completely different linguistic and cultural lens. I also began to think back to my own experiences as a Chinese and Japanese language educator at a school in Staten Island, New York.

The Singapore lawyer and parliamentarian Simon Tay has described Staten Island as “a suburban borough in New York, just a 30-minute ferry trip from Manhattan but a world away from its frenetic pace and international connections.” I moved to Staten Island in 2005 to teach the Chinese and Japanese languages at the College of Staten Island High School for Interna-

tional Studies, where I took Simon as part of the research for his 2010 book *Asia Alone* (Wiley & Sons). In the book, Simon goes on to say that some students he met at the school on Staten Island had (unbelievably) never even visited Manhattan. Working in such an insular community showed me the power of language and culture to expand students’ visions of the world. As I sat in that classroom in Minneapolis, I thought how much more transformative the experiences of those young learners would be than for the high school students with whom I had worked.

It is no exaggeration to say that language learning is the very foundation of global competence and the most deeply effective way for students to be able to “investigate the world, recognize perspectives, communicate ideas, and take action,” which is the definition of global competence developed by Asia Society Vice President for Education Tony Jackson. Using the twin lenses of “linguist” and “diplomat,” Asia Society is working with a national network of 100 K-12 schools that teach Chinese in almost 30 states, with the goal of including Chi-

nese language learning as a core component of a much larger mission to build students’ global competence. Learning a new language, particularly one as challenging and as different from English as Chinese, can also play a major role in building students’ self-esteem and self-confidence. It is important to recognize this social-emotional dimension to language learning, and to understand it together with the more usual attention given to language proficiency, cognitive, and academic development.

The benefits of a rigorous multilingual education are perhaps most apparent in communities that are traditionally classified as underserved. At the 2013 National Chinese Language Conference, an annual event co-organized by Asia Society and The College Board that took place in Boston (April 7-9, 2013), a panel of leaders in the field spoke about the critical issue of “Equity and Access in Chinese Language Education” and the ways in which Chinese language learning specifically – but also world languages education more generally – has served as a lever for giving students, especially those in the early grades, both the

competence and confidence to succeed.

The panel featured four speakers from different regions of the United States, representing each of the four time zones from Eastern to Pacific. Gregg Roberts, the world language and dual language immersion specialist for the Utah State Department of Education spoke about the ways in which his state, although dead last in per-pupil spending on education (literally 51 out of 51, if you include the District of Columbia), has committed to developing 100 dual language immersion programs in French, Mandarin, Portuguese, and Spanish. He declared monolingualism “the illiteracy of the twentieth century,” and stressed the core idea that students are “never going to have a high level of intercultural competence without high proficiency in the language.”

Nicole Boudreaux, World Language Specialist for Lafayette Parish School System in Louisiana, talked about the development of the district’s French, Mandarin and Spanish elementary school immersion programs. They had developed “schools of choice” including French, Mandarin and Spanish immersion. While their expectation was that many middle and upper class parents would choose these options, it turned out that almost none of them did, and these programs wound up being subscribed by the “most underserved” students in the district, almost 99% free and reduced lunch, almost all African-American students living below the poverty line. Nicole described a presentation given by these students at an event organized by the local telecommunications company. As the students walked past a lot of “men in suits and ties [who were] mostly white,” she described them as looking “terrified.” The students interacted with a teacher in China via digital video, and once they got going, they became the highlight of the event. In Nicole’s words, “these people came for technology, and instead got a lesson in global competency from the kids in the poorest school in their district.”

Roger Harris, President, CEO and Superintendent of the Boston Renaissance Charter Public School, runs the largest elementary school in the city of Boston, with a student population that is 98% African-American and Hispanic and students who overwhelmingly qualify for free or reduced lunch. Dr. Harris introduced Chinese as a means for helping these students become, in his words, “twenty-first century global citizens.” He remarked that his students “feel special because they know that they are learning something kids in their neighbor-

hood are not learning...right now it’s fun, it’s exciting, they feel special, but I don’t think they understand the long-term implications.” He described his hope of “seeding the city of Boston” with the climate of multilingualism and multiculturalism that exists in his school.

Marcos Aguilar, who directs Semillas Sociedad Civil, an innovative charter school in East Los Angeles, talked about the multilingual, multicultural focus of his school. He introduced the Mandarin language, along with English, Spanish, and Nahuatl (an indigenous language of Mexico spoken by the Aztecs), at a time when there were very few Mandarin Chinese programs of any type in the Los Angeles Unified School District. “When we started, we were teaching more students Mandarin than the entire district.” Marcos described the student population of LA Unified as primarily students who are “underserved, undereducated, [with] higher levels of poverty, [and] higher levels of disconnection and disaffection with the political system...” “We have kids that have never seen the beach in Los Angeles. Not only do we want them to see the beach, but we want them to see the other side of the world...we want them to be able to imagine a world that’s so much larger than themselves.” As Marcos talked about his students who had never seen the beach in LA, I was reminded of my own students who had never taken the 25-minute ferry ride from Staten Island to Manhattan. In a district with a sixty percent drop-out rate, Marcos was proud to report that “ninety percent of the students from our first graduating class went on to college, and it had everything to do with this experience in Chinese.”

At another session of the conference, a guest teacher from China, Ms. Li Xin, described her experiences arriving at a school in Michigan to teach elementary school Chinese. She discussed the bewilderment of most people in the community about having a Chinese program at all. She joked that some people said, “We don’t have any Chinese people here, so we’re not sure why you’re here. We know we owe the Chinese money, but...” While initially baffled by such statements, Ms. Li eventually learned to say, “Well, that might have something to do with why I’m here!” But while the economic arguments for multilingualism undoubtedly proved most persuasive for members of her community, she also referenced the power of language to transform students’ lives and vision of the world. “For a young child, I think the world is unlim-

ited. By learning about another culture, through another language, I can encourage them to see their world expanding and encourage them to explore other cultures, other places, and other people.”

Ms. Li later described one of her elementary school students, a girl whose parents said that even as late as four years old, she didn’t speak at all. This surprised Ms. Li, because she was one of her most articulate and accomplished students. She later learned that the girl had been teaching her parents Chinese and that she pretended that she was Ms. Li each night she came home from school, and taught her parents in the same way that Ms. Li had taught the class that day. After several months, the parents concluded that they needed to take a Chinese language class themselves, because she was learning so quickly now that they “couldn’t keep up.”

While it is likely too late for this young learner’s parent to “keep up” with her, it is important that other young students have access to the same kinds of multilingual and multicultural experiences. And while those students in Minnesota may never know that “Bei-qi-luo-si” is pronounced “Betsy Ross” in English, they will very surely be able to “keep up” with Ms. Li’s student, and engage the globally connected world of the twenty-first century with the competence and confidence to succeed.

Christopher M. Livaccari is Director of Education and Chinese Language Initiatives at Asia Society. As of August 2013, he will begin a new role as upper elementary principal and director of the K-8 Chinese language immersion program

at International School of the Peninsula in Palo Alto, CA. He is a teacher of the Chinese and Japanese languages and a former US Foreign Service officer who served at the US Embassy in Tokyo, Japan and as Deputy Director of the Tokyo American Center, as well as at the US Consulate General in Shanghai, China. He is the co-author of Structures of Mandarin Chinese for Speakers of English (3 volumes, Peking University Press) and the Chinese for Tomorrow series (3 volumes, Cheng & Tsui). A graduate of Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and New York University, he speaks Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, reads Classical Chinese, and is proficient in Korean.

