

# The Role of Higher Education in Raising Global Children

by *Sandhya Shanker and Angelika Kraemer*

Fall season at the Michigan State University campus displays nature at its very best. Walking along the Red Cedar River, one can see the sun's rays touching the water and shrubs with bright yellow and crimson leaves. The river winds through a large part of the campus. By Wells Hall, ducks waddle in large groups unmindful of people sitting on the grass. Another kind of noise fills the air – children shouting goodbye as their parents drop them off for their language classes, and student volunteers welcoming and directing them to the entrance of the building. It is a typical evening at the CeLTA Language School (CLS) at Michigan State University. As the children make their way into the classrooms, one can hear loud bursts of “¡Hola! Konnichiwa! Nǐ hǎo! Bonjour!” In a few minutes, they will sit in a circle welcoming each other in one of the many languages instructed at CLS.

From previous research on second language acquisition and early language learning we know that young

children have a cognitive advantage to learning a foreign language over other age groups (e.g., Garcia-Sierra et al.; Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson; Singleton and Ryan; Werker et al.). More recently, we have seen an increase in functional benefits for learning languages at a young age. Thomas Friedman postulated almost ten years ago that the world was becoming flat. He conceptualized the flat world to be a place where more people have the ability to connect, compete, and collaborate. Stacie N. Berdan and Marshall S. Berdan's recent book *Raising Global Children* emphasizes the need to develop a global mindset among children. The book provides 225 pages of ideas on the various resources available to children to learn a language. The ideas included are applicable for both parents and educators. These publications emphasize that the process of developing a global mindset goes beyond individual efforts to collective ones.

While our public schools tirelessly strive to meet growing global demands, statistics such as the ones below reflect the difficulty of the “one size fits all”

philosophy:

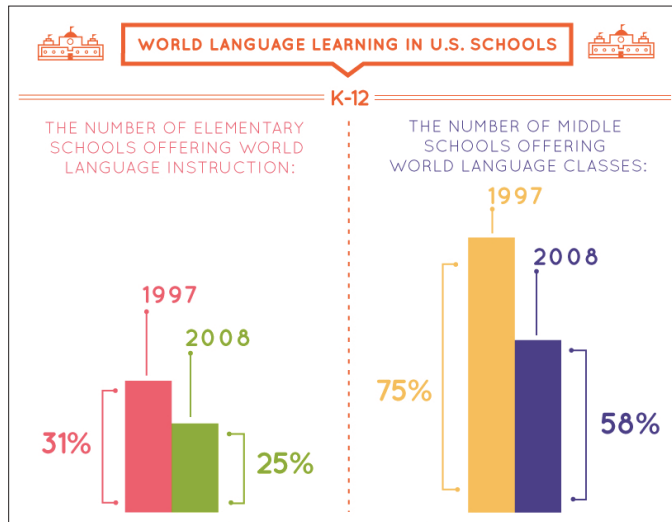
- The percentage of public and private elementary schools offering foreign language instruction decreased from 31% to 25% from 1997 to 2008. Language instruction in public elementary schools dropped from 24% to 15%, with rural districts hit the hardest.
- In the same time-frame, the percentage of all middle schools offering foreign language instruction decreased from 75% to 58% (Skorton and Altschuler).

On a national scale, current enrollment trends in the U.S. indicate that most foreign language study happens from grades 9-11 (ACTFL 20). Figure 1 shows the percentage decrease in the number of world language courses offered in elementary and middle schools in the United States in recent years.

Figure 2 shows the age at which most students start learning a language and the number of years spent learning it in both the U.S. and Europe.

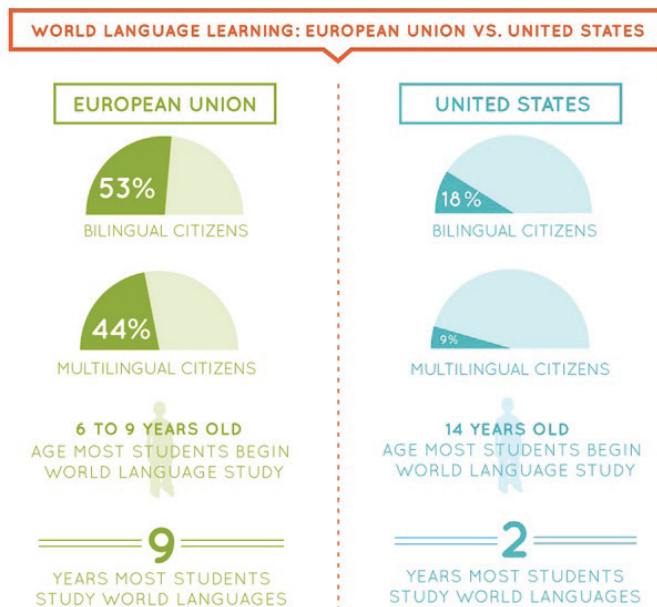
Figure 2 indicates that children in Europe spend more time learning a language than children in the United States and start out earlier, leading to higher percentages in bi-/multilingual citizens. Recently, Europe experienced a dramatic increase in foreign language programs owing to the design of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (commonly called CEFR), published in 2001. This framework highlights the notion of plurilingualism. Plurilingualism refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as

**FIGURE 1**



Number of elementary and middle schools offering world language classes in the United States. "Second Language Acquisition By The Numbers." Huffington Post, 6 Dec. 2013; Web; 7 Aug. 2014.

**FIGURE 2**



Number of years spent learning foreign languages in Europe and the United States; "Second Language Acquisition By The Numbers." Huffington Post, 6 Dec. 2013; Web; 7 Aug. 2014.

a social agent, has proficiency of varying degrees in several languages and experience of several cultures (Common European Framework 4). Hence plurilingual competence is not synonymous with mastering various languages at a high level but with acquiring the ability to use more than one linguistic variety to differing degrees and for different purposes (Cheng). This concept has further reinforced the European reality of gaining sufficient competence in functioning in more than one language. In the United States, from a globalization standpoint, the following questions merit a deeper examina-

tion:

- Is a two-year world language requirement in high school (as in place in the state of Michigan) sufficient to equip students with cultivating global mindsets?
- Are we falling short of meeting the demands of our global society by requiring our students to study just one language?

In recent years, demand for foreign language programs for young children has experienced a surge. A Berlitz Corporation survey conducted in 2011 shows that 86% of parents polled expressed interest in involving their children in after-school language programs (Berlitz). Berdan and Berdan have provided extensive data reinforcing the idea of creating a global mindset among young children. A survey conducted with 1,000 participants including teachers, superintendents, administrators, and parents shows that 98% of the survey participants value the study of a second language. Ninety-seven percent of the participants also believe that children should be exposed to other cultures through music, visual arts, dance, film, books/literature, and museum exhibits. In addition to globalization fueling the demand for learning languages, changes in our national demographic data have also been a contributing factor. Currently there are more multiethnic communities and a larger number of children born to new immigrant parents. An analysis of data by the Center for Immigration Studies reveals the following trends:

- In 2013, a record 61.8 million U.S. residents (native-born, legal immigrants, and illegal immigrants) spoke a language other than English at home.
- Of the school-age children (5 to 17) nationally, more than one in five speaks a foreign language at home (Zeigler and Camarota).

Institutions of higher education can step in to meet the growing demand for learning foreign languages and provide assistance to schools in meeting the challenges of a globalized world. One strategy that higher education institutions are using to address the issue of globalization is to increase programming for non-traditional or lifelong students. This gives learners an optimal range of choice and flexibility of entry and exit points within the system (Schuetze and Slowey 318). Table 1 (see next page) lists some important differences between traditional and lifelong learning modes in higher

**TABLE 1  
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND LIFELONG LEARNING MODES**

TRADITIONAL MODE	LIFELONG LEARNING MODE
Restricted access	Open access
Admission only with academic credentials	Placement based on age and prior language experience
For the young only	For a wide variety of age groups
Selection for excellence	Learning opportunities for all
Full-time studies	Part-time learning
Campus/classroom based, on-site studies	On-site programming with a conducive environment for communication
Linear studies with final examinations	Module-based curriculum with built-in formative assessments
Discipline oriented, curriculum centered organization of studies	Student centered and proficiency oriented
Focus on degrees	Includes continuing higher education
Use of teaching staff with institution/unit-determined qualifications	Use of teaching staff (from both within the institution and from the community)

**TABLE 2  
CORE CONCEPTS COVERED IN PRESCHOOLER AND CHILDREN'S CURRICULA**

PRESCHOOLER CURRICULUM	CHILDREN'S CURRICULUM
Use of the present tense (in 1 <sup>st</sup> person singular)	Use of the present tense (in 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , and 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular, and plural forms)
Simple adjectives	Simple adjectives
Numbers 0-10	Numbers 0-50
Singular and plural nouns surrounding a given theme	Singular and plural nouns surrounding a given theme
-----	Use of imperatives (commands)
-----	Expressions of likes and dislikes
-----	Basic question forms (what, when, where, who, why, how)

**TABLE 3  
SAMPLE THEMES COVERED IN CHILDREN'S CURRICULUM**

	MODULE 1	MODULE 2	MODULE 3
Week 1	My favorite activities	Going on a picnic	Describing myself
Week 2	My favorite activities	Going on a picnic	Describing myself
Week 3	Days of the week	At the zoo	My house
Week 4	Days of the week	At the zoo	My house
Week 5	Review & mid-semester assessment	Review & mid-semester assessment	Review & mid-semester assessment
Week 6	Culture Day	Culture Day	Culture Day
Week 7	Transportation	Fairy tales	Family
Week 8	Transportation	Fairy tales	Family
Week 9	Review & end-semester assessment	Review & end-semester assessment	Review & end-semester assessment
Week 10	Last day of classes & end-semester celebration	Last day of classes & end-semester celebration	Last day of classes & end-semester celebration

education based on Schuetze and Slowey's model.

The CeLTA Language School (CLS) at Michigan State University has incorporated the idea of lifelong learning as its primary mission. The language school was founded in 2008 as part of the Center for Language Teaching Advancement (CeLTA), the university's language support unit, to foster language learning of all age groups from young children to adults. The programs for preschoolers and children have adopted the need to meet the growing demands of globalization as their underlying philosophy by including the following elements into the curriculum:

### OPEN ACCESS

CLS provides community-based language and culture programming for children in pre-kindergarten through high school as well as adults. Programmatic activities include enrichment programs at area elementary schools, culture events on and off campus, weekly academic classes for preschoolers, children, teenagers, and adults, language summer camps, and professional development opportunities for pre- and in-service language teachers. Language offerings vary depending on the program and currently include Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish. Approximately 120 children sign up for the various language classes each semester and about 150 children enroll in enrichment programs each semester. CLS spring and fall semesters are 10 weeks long and classes meet once a week for 60-90 minutes, depending on the language and level.

### MODULE-BASED CURRICULA

CLS recently designed a common foreign language curriculum for the preschooler and children's programs. The foreign language curriculum for preschoolers (ages 3-6) consists of a four-year cycle of language learning and the curriculum for the 7-12 years age group is comprised of a six-year cycle of language learning.

A module-based curriculum was adopted given two underlying assumptions about our student population:

- Students are not all at the same stage of physical and mental development.
- Students are not at the same stage of language learning.

The following are some typical characteristics of the modular approach to sequencing lessons, adapted from Nation and Macalister (85):

1. Modules break a course into independent non-linear units based on learner

needs. The modules are therefore learner centered. The CLS curriculum uses only age-appropriate activities depending on the students' cognitive and physical development. The primary focus is on speaking and using the language orally. Reading and writing skills are not prioritized as these could be challenging for younger learners.

2. Each unit or module is complete in itself and does not assume knowledge of previous modules. This means that students can enroll at any stage of the curriculum.

3. Both curricula focus on the core concepts listed in Table 2. As a result, students do not need to be familiar with specific concepts in order to enroll in classes. The core concepts covered in the curricula vary slightly between the preschooler and children's programs.

4. The modules are either skill-based focusing on the different language skills or based on language functions or, more broadly, situations. The term *themes* is different from *topics*. *Themes* refer to activities drawn together under a common umbrella of reference rather than being presented as a series of unrelated learning experiences. According to Scarino et al., a theme can be related to the conceptual content (e.g., animals that live under the sea or celebrating holidays) or it may be related to a situation (e.g., at the train station or at school). The themes are also based on a child's life horizons and experiences (59).

This way, there is a direct application of language to a child's real world.

Table 3 illustrates some of the themes covered in the CLS children's curriculum.

### USE OF CRITERION-REFERENCED TESTING

The CLS program makes extensive use of formative assessment focusing on criterion-referenced testing. Formative assessment is ongoing, usually informal assessment during teaching and learning. A variety of assessment tasks are used depending on the age and proficiency of the child: problem solving, information gap, opinion gap, affective gap, games, tasks using pictures, etc. (McKay 102). CLS teachers use the assessments to give parents feedback about their child's progress. The evaluation comments on, not only, a child's mastery of language-specific content (vocabulary, songs, finger plays) but also his/her attitude toward learning. This is a very important component of creating a global mindset.

### CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR COMMUNICATION

In *Languages and Children, Making the Match*, Curtain and Dahlberg state:

The young learner in an early language program has neither the skills nor the opportunity to use the target language in a natural communicative setting, but the teacher can create settings within the classroom that will satisfy the learner because there is genuine exchange of information taking place. These experiences also prepare the learner for the day when the opportunity for natural communication will be available. (34)

Young learners who are enrolled in CLS programs often times are not even aware of the exact geographical location of the country whose language they are learning. A crucial part of our programs includes creating an optimal environment for them to absorb as much of the language and culture as possible. As part of our early language learning curricula, we focus on the inclusion of the following elements:

- Games
- Songs, rhymes, and finger plays
- Props, materials, and hands-on experiences

Incorporating these activities can help young language learners develop qualities necessary to get a global mindset:

1. Ability to appreciate cultural differences;
2. Ability/willingness to listen carefully to others which in turn fosters a good understanding of peoples' verbal and non-verbal communication patterns;
3. Foster interest to learn more about other cultures;
4. Tolerate ambiguity when communicating with people from different cultures; and
5. Develop intellectual curiosity by being motivated to learn more about a country and culture (Berdan and Berdan 193-221).

In order to instill a greater degree of cultural awareness among children, the CLS children's and preschooler curricula assign one day per semester as Culture Day. Teachers focus on extended activities that deal with holidays and celebrations in the target culture(s). Examples include Oktoberfest, Chinese New Year, French Independence Day, Diwali, etc.

### MAXIMUM USE OF RESOURCES

CLS teachers come from a pool of faculty members, graduate students, and community members who are all native speakers of the target language. In addition, every class includes additional language volunteers who are undergraduate students minor

ing or majoring in the target language. In addition to improving their language skills, volunteering in the language programs gives the students invaluable service learning and pre-service teaching experience.

The features of the lifelong learning model enumerated above provide for the optimal use of resources at a higher education institution and can be instrumental in developing the global mindset of young language learners. In addition, they also complement public schools' efforts to include language study at a young age by providing additional resources. In fact, higher education institutions carry a social responsibility of service to the larger community because they are:

1. Complex adaptive service systems that can easily adapt to civic and academic responsibilities;
2. Made up of a diverse ecosystem and thereby rich in manpower – from students who become job seekers to faculty doing research, to local businesses looking for growth, etc.;
3. Vital to the local economy, because they not only employ the most people, but also play the important part of training students for future employment; and
4. Rich in infrastructure within its boundaries that make them perfect to offer varying services to society (Spohrer, Fodell and Murphy 53-64).

The curricula created for both the preschooler and children's programs are generalized in nature and adaptable to any language offered at CLS. In addition to providing students a broad variety of languages, it also gives the students an opportunity to form connections between related languages within a particular theme. The more languages the student is exposed to, the easier it is to activate this knowledge and increase awareness.

The themes and activities are designed to promote a global mindset among children with the use of both human and institutional resources. The authors hope that the CLS curricula will serve as a model for the creation of similar programs at other institutions of higher education that wish to promote globalization.

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**Dr. Angelika Kraemer** is the Director of CeLTA Language School at Michigan State University (MSU) and Executive Associate Director of CeLTA, the Center for Language Teaching Advancement. She conducts research on online and blended learning, early language learning, program administration, and second language acquisition, has published articles based on her work, and given presentations at national and international conferences. Angelika received the Curricular Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Award from MSU's Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement in 2010 and the Special Recognition Award for Promoting International Understanding from MSU's International Studies and Programs in 2014.



**Ms. Sandhya Shanker** is an Outreach Specialist at Michigan State University (MSU). She is the curriculum and volunteer coordinator for the CeLTA Language School. Sandhya developed the preschooler and children's curriculum and oversees its implementation. In addition to her administrative responsibilities, Sandhya also teaches French classes for children, teens, and adults at CLS. Through the Gifted and Talented Education unit at MSU, Sandhya developed and is leading an accelerated, intensive two-year course in the French language designed to meet the curricular goals and merit standards of four years of high school French. Sandhya is also a rater for the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) in French for secondary education teacher candidates at MSU.

