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AMERICAN COUNCIL ON THE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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2016 NATIONAL LANGUAGE TEACHER OF THE YEAR

EDWARD ZARROW

Westwood High School
Westwood, MA
NECTFL
Latin



When I was a first year teacher more than fifteen years ago leading seminars and giving lectures in the college environment, the study of the ancient world was my passion. Even so, I wondered a great deal about its usefulness and how I would ever justify it to my students should they ask—students who would likely never study Latin or ancient history again and certainly could never tout the knowledge of Latin as a job advantage in a multi-lingual, global economy. Finally, years later, when one of my most defensive and jaded students identified Latin as a vehicle for learning how to think, I felt an immediate recognition of a principle which I had always known but as a rookie would have been hard pressed to identify, express, or justify. My goal as a Latin teacher and the true value of learning language and culture is just that: to teach students how to think. This principle extends beyond the tenet of learning language for the purpose of meaningful communication or knowing how and when to say what to whom. Every day in the classroom, whether discussing the origins of English vocabulary through Anglo-French (Freshman) or exploring views on the nature of the soul during the “Second Sophistic” (Seniors), I try to engage with the ancient world so that my students can think about their own lives and the world in which they live in a new way.

By studying Latin, I like to think that my students learn how to think logically and critically, act rationally, and argue persuasively, even if they do not realize it and cannot articulate it until long after they no longer remember conjugations or demonstrative adjectives. They will have immersed themselves in a language and culture through which they were compelled to reexamine their own values and beliefs. As a result, they come to be scholars and life-long learners, to lead informed lives, to respect knowledge for its own sake, to go beyond a shallow understanding of the world, and to seek the truth—for only then can we come to recognize what is good and beautiful when we see it, and even fight for it when we have to.

[View Zarrow's 2016 Regional Conference presentation.](#)

LENI BRONSTEIN

Williamsburg Middle School
Arlington, VA
2016 Finalist from SCOLT
Spanish



Language teachers know why learning a language and its culture is a vital part of every child's education. Unfortunately, sometimes teachers have had to advocate for their subject and recruit students, especially in an environment of budget cuts. Thankfully, there also appears to be a wave of change in which non-language educators, administrators and families are recognizing the importance of World Languages. They are starting to understand that learning a second (or third) language and its culture makes a child's education more relevant to the demands of today's world as they enter adult life. The world has become a community in which we need to understand one another linguistically and culturally. School systems and states demonstrate this by including World Language as part of the core curriculum and adopting the Seal of Biliteracy.

Learning a language and its culture is a life skill which enables one to communicate with a variety of people, have a more open mind, and embrace differences. Language learners benefit from enhanced intellectual development, improved chances to get into college, more career opportunities, greater ease of travel, and a better understanding of their own language. An emphasis on language learning will enhance America's image abroad and better prepare us to compete in the global economy. Over the years I've heard from many former students whose experience in my class has laid the groundwork for future enrollment in study abroad programs, specialization in language in college, and using Spanish to advance their career. Language teachers need to emphasize that language is more than a school subject. It is a life skill that prepares students for their future.

Teaching a World Language is inseparable from its culture. Middle schoolers are by nature self-absorbed and entrenched in their own popular culture. The challenge for language teachers is to broaden students' world view and help them see commonalities and differences in language and culture. Years ago I was taught to integrate culture in my teaching, but not focus solely on culture with a big "C" but also with a small "c". Just because I might be interested in the roots of Flamenco or the Ballet Folklórico de México doesn't mean my students will be.

How does a 60 year old Hispanophile begin to share the culture of middle schoolers in other countries? My solution has been to establish an e-mail exchange between my students and their counterparts in Spain. Not only are they able to practice writing, but they are also made aware of the similarities and differences of other teenagers. Last spring, imagine my excitement as 21 of my students got to meet their "keypals" at a chocolatería in Valladolid, Spain. I can't think of a more authentic linguistic and cultural experience.

The mission statement of my school, "Educating the Whole Child for the Whole World," supports the belief that learning a language and its culture are essential in producing global citizens of the 21st century.

BRENDA GAVER

East Valley High School
Spokane, WA
2016 Finalist from PNCFL
Spanish

The first time I traveled to a Spanish-speaking country was during my senior year of high school. I participated in a trip that was organized by a local high school. We landed in Mexico City, and after checking into our hotel, went to sleep since we needed to be at breakfast at 6 AM. Breakfast was interesting, to say the least. I did not like anything that was served and was surprised that we weren't having what I considered to be "breakfast food" (onions, tomatoes, peppers, and "green stuff" just didn't appeal to my 17-year-old palette). Had I been exposed to other cultures, I may have appreciated this new opportunity.

After spending two days in Mexico City, we traveled to Cuernavaca, where we lived with a family. This was my first experience having to rely on another language to communicate. Nobody that lived in the household spoke English. I also quickly learned that the daily schedule and customs were very different than what I had grown up with.



I frequently think about that experience when I plan my lessons and (re)design my curriculum (isn't curriculum design an ongoing process?). It is important that students understand that "their" way is not "the" way to do things. It is also important to point out that not all Spanish-speakers have the same customs, traditions and celebrations. My students are often surprised when I explain that in Spain, the concept of "afternoon" stretches until dinnertime, which may be as late as 10:00 PM. This is another shock to them – the fact that Spaniards eat dinner so late in the evening.

By integrating culture into daily lessons, rather than stopping every once in a while to touch on the topic, students become more culturally aware. Culture becomes a daily topic of conversation, rather than an isolated lesson. This is where online language classes fall short. It is impossible to gain cultural experiences through software. Students need to interact with one another and communicate in the target language.

I also wonder why so few school districts offer foreign language opportunities to younger students. It just does not make sense to begin to learn a new language in high school. What would happen if we decided that students could not learn math until the ninth grade? It would be impossible for them to do so many things. The same is true when we wait until the ninth grade to teach a second language. In other countries, students learn second and third languages by the time they reach high school age.

Finally, I believe that language classes should be built around themes, rather than grammatical points. It took me a few years to figure this out, and it has changed my teaching immensely. I used to plan my scope and sequence around grammar. Now I plan using "I can" statements. This helps the students understand the purpose behind lessons and when they can easily see where they fall on the proficiency scale.

FERNANDO RUBIO

University of Utah
Salt Lake City, UT
2016 Finalist from SWCOLT
Spanish

One would think that the value of learning other languages and cultures should require no explanation. Proficiency in a language other than your first allows you to understand other people's points of view and broaden your perspectives of the world in addition to the obvious practical advantages of being able to communicate with others around the world. However, although evidence is abundant on the value of learning foreign languages, from instrumental benefits to cognitive advantages, our educational system is still struggling to find the necessary resources to make it a priority. Perhaps the reason may be that, until recently, the understanding was that language learning is a difficult, long and very often unsuccessful process that should therefore be left to those with exceptional aptitude or the necessary financial means; or perhaps it is the assumption that our attention and resources should be directed to the more practical and marketable STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) subjects. And while I agree that both expertise in the STEM subjects and adequate linguistic and cultural proficiency are crucial to compete globally, I believe that in the 21st century, in an increasingly interconnected world, collaboration will be even more important than competition, which will make multilingualism and multiculturalism even more essential for our ability to successfully collaborate. Proficiency in foreign languages and intercultural competency will be just as critical as expertise in the STEM fields.

Our challenge as a profession is to make language education efficient, effective and relevant. In general, the current state of foreign language education or, more precisely, its outcomes, are woefully inadequate. Only about one-fourth of high school students take a foreign language. The situation is even worse in higher education with only one in ten students studying languages. Most of those students go through short programs, often no more than two years, which results in minimal levels of proficiency. I believe that, as a profession, we need to set a goal to make language education accessible to every student and teach more languages to more students at more levels with the goal of increasing the country's language capacity and global cultural awareness. We need to strive to



introduce language instruction earlier and extend it further. Our goal should be to create extended and well-articulated learning paths from a basic exposure to a second language and the culture/s that it represents at the elementary level, to professional expertise and the resulting increase in global awareness at the higher levels of post-secondary instruction.

I am lucky to live in a state in which both the community and the government understand the value of being multilingual and multicultural. We are fortunate to have a statewide initiative for dual language immersion that is the envy of the nation. However, without adequate planning and extended support to cover the secondary and post-secondary levels, that financial and human investment will be wasted. Our responsibility is to work together as a profession across institutional, linguistic and curricular boundaries to gather the necessary support from the local, state and federal levels to promote the development of second language and cultural proficiency at all levels.

DEANA ZORKO

Madison West High School
Madison, WI
2016 Finalist from CSCTFL
Spanish

I believe strongly that all students should and can learn a world language. Providing an environment where risk-taking is safe and opportunities to experiment with language are facilitated, is an integral part of my belief. This coupled with helping to mold a new way of thinking, moving students from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset, models the desire for not only being bilingual, but also bicultural, while preparing all students to be lifelong learners.

To be an effective language educator and pass on the value of bilingualism and biculturalism, I construct a learning framework for my students which includes the following:

I value a safe and culturally rich classroom environment where risk-taking in the target language is encouraged thus preparing students to communicate in real-life situations using communicative, collaborative and creative skills they have gained as they apply the content they have learned.

I value meaningful peer interactions in the target language that connect student's personal interests to the culture being studied so they are able to share with others who they are and what they value being sensitive to the diversity of cultural perspectives and linguistic contexts.

I value the use of effective evaluation/assessment systems to measure students' growth and development of language skills in an environment where students reflect on their learning progress to meet their goals of proficiency. This is essential to students' knowledge of what they are able to do in the target language and helping them focus on and improve upon the areas in which they are weakest. By strengthening their skills of initiative and self-direction and encouraging leadership and personal responsibility in their own learning, I am able to develop life-long learners.

I value addressing multiple learning styles through the implementation of a variety of activities, assessments, projects, and assignments that promote proficiency in the world language being studied so all students can achieve regardless of their learning differences as they hone their personal productivity and accountability skills while increasing their language proficiency and cultural knowledge.

I value the integration of technology to meet the above objectives and to foster and encourage students' global competence as well as preparing them to be college and career ready through the development of their media, technology, and information literacy skills.

Keeping these values at the core of my approach to teaching and learning, as well as my own personal life as a model and a mentor, allows me to foster connections and collaborations, student to student, colleague to colleague, friend to friend, and classroom to classroom. In today's global society, all students will have the opportunity to use linguistic, cultural and global competencies



beyond the boundaries of the classroom. It is therefore my responsibility and passion as a language educator to facilitate and foster the learning of language and culture in a way that supports global competence, preparing today's students to be successful in an ever-changing world.

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