



Why foreign languages are a **'crucial'** skill

Learning another language brings cultural understanding that is critical to working—and living—in a global society, experts say

Educational technology consultant Alan November is fond of telling a story about a conversation he once had with a senior executive at a global investment bank.

During the course of their discussion, November asked the executive: What's the most important skill for today's students to learn, so they are prepared to succeed in the new global economy?

"Empathy," the executive replied—the ability to understand and respect different cultural points of view.

Most of today's companies do business with customers all over the world, and several also have branches in multiple countries. Chances are good that when students enter the workforce, they'll be working with—or at least doing busi-

ness with—someone from another nation, with its own culture and its own unique perspective, at some point in their career.

It's not hard to find employees who are smart, the executive told November. What *are* hard to find are employees who can empathize with, and be sensitive to the needs of, people from other countries.

Learning another language is an important way to develop this cultural empathy. That's why a growing number of K-12 leaders believe that exposure to world languages and cultures—even at a very early age—is critical for students' success in the 21st century.

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But learning another language isn't just an important workforce skill; it's also integral to becoming a more responsible global citizen.

In a Nov. 2012 document called "Succeeding Globally Through International Education and Engagement," the U.S. Department of Education wrote, "In today's globalized world, an effective domestic education agenda must ... aim to develop a globally competent citizenry."

The document continues: "Students will need to have the substantive knowledge and understanding to address issues, phenomena, and catastrophes that cut across borders. ... They also will need to be able to communicate and work collaboratively with international peers to address these global challenges."

"The world is becoming more and more internationally connected," said Megan Dunnigan, coordinator for the Provo, Utah, School District's eSchool program, which uses an online curriculum from Middlebury Interactive Languages to teach foreign languages to students.

She added: "Learning another language gives students more opportunities."

A crucial life skill

That's a belief shared by Delaware Governor Jack Markell, a Democrat, who in 2012 created a program to bring foreign language instruction to the state's elementary schools.

"World language capacity is crucial ... to maintain and strengthen our state's economy," Markell said in a statement. "We want students in Delaware to have the challenge and the opportunity to learn another language before they reach high school."

Funded by a federal Race to the Top grant, Markell's World Languages Expansion Initiative aims to bring immersion programs in either Spanish or Mandarin Chinese to 10,000 students in grades K-8 by 2022.

"The ability to speak another language

is a life skill that is becoming crucial in the global job marketplace and to our growing state economy," Markell said, noting that in Asia and Europe, children typically begin learning additional languages as early as five years old.

As of press time, the program was in place at 12 elementary schools in Delaware. Students are taught academic content in English and a foreign language, with a focus on building proficiency.

Kindergarteners entering the program will be able to continue their immersion study into middle school and earn Advanced Placement credit in ninth grade. In high school, they'll be encouraged to study an additional language, as well as continue their immersion study through dual-credit offerings.

Learning another language in the early grades often results in the development of native or near-native pronunciation and intonation, research suggests. That's why the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages recommends that students "be provided the opportunity to learn a second language as early as possible in school."

Other benefits to learning another language in the early grades include "strengthening of literacy in students' first language, raising standardized test scores in other subject areas, and developing comfort with cultural differences," the organization says.

How technology can help

Delaware is using federal funding to support classroom-based instructors for its language immersion programs, but not all schools have this luxury—especially at the elementary level. To remedy this problem, many schools are turning to online language instruction.

One Michigan school district has taken a unique approach by establishing a "virtual foreign exchange program" so that students can take classes from teachers in other countries.

Oxford Community Schools' virtual exchange program allows American and Chinese students to take online classes taught by teachers on the other side of

the globe. Students from three Oxford sister schools in China are learning English from the district's teachers, and in turn, Oxford students are learning Mandarin language and Chinese culture from teachers at the Chinese schools.

As the program grows, the district anticipates establishing similar virtual partnerships with other sister schools in countries such as Mexico and Spain, said William Skilling, superintendent of Oxford Community Schools and a 2012 winner of the Tech-Savvy Superintendent Awards from eSchool Media.

Students in the virtual foreign exchanges have 24-7 access to course content. The classes themselves are synchronous, however, despite the 12-hour time difference: American students attend their classes early in the morning, and Chinese students log on late at night.

At the Provo eSchool, an online program that serves 1,100 K-12 students from all over Utah, students in third through 12th grade have access to Spanish, French, German, Latin, and Chinese courses from Middlebury Interactive Languages (MIL), an offshoot of Middlebury College and its renowned Language Schools.

While students at the Provo eSchool are not required to take a foreign language, "about a quarter of the students do," Dunnigan said. Offering foreign language instruction online, she added, "gives students a wider variety of options to choose from; not every school can have a teacher who's certified in Chinese."

The MIL curriculum is based on principles that studies show to be effective in language instruction, such as the use of authentic materials and experiences. For instance, Middlebury faculty have recorded real interactions between native speakers in different countries.

"We've built language learning activities using these videos, as well as authentic written resources such as newspapers," said Aline Germain-Rutherford, chief learning officer for MIL and director of the French School at Middlebury College.

The use of authentic materials helps

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In the global world we live in, students need opportunities to become knowledgeable in world cultures and languages.” –Keith Rice, academic dean for UMS-Wright Preparatory School.

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students learn not just the language, but also the culture. When watching videos of people greeting each other in Spain, compared to Argentina, “students can see the cultural differences between the two,” she explained. “It’s not just about the words and the structures.”

Meaningful interaction

Another principle of the MIL curriculum is that, to learn a new language, “students must interact and negotiate in a meaningful way,” Germain-Rutherford said. Toward that end, the curriculum includes task-based activities rooted in a real-life purpose, such as ordering in a restaurant.

To recreate this kind of interaction online, the curriculum embeds audio inputs within the dialog, and there are also opportunities for students to interact asynchronously or in real time with a certified online instructor.

Provo eSchool chose MIL as its provider of online language instruction because of Middlebury College’s reputation as a “great language school” and because of the level of interaction the courses offer, Dunnigan said.

While all of Provo eSchool’s instruction is delivered online, that’s not the case at UMS-Wright Preparatory School in Mobile, Ala.

An independent day school with about 1,200 students in kindergarten through 12th grade, UMS-Wright has enlisted MIL’s curriculum so students can take languages such as Chinese and German as electives.

“In the global world we live in, students need opportunities to become knowledgeable in world cultures and languages,” said Keith Rice, academic dean.

UMS-Wright begins its language instruction with Spanish in kindergarten, and this instruction continues throughout the Lower School. In sixth grade, students study Latin. In the seventh and eighth grades, they can choose

either French or Spanish, and starting in the ninth grade, they must take two consecutive years of a language.

Until recently, students could choose either French or Spanish, but last year UMS-Wright added online language curriculum from MIL and the Florida Virtual School to give students more choices, Rice said.

Students take these online courses in the school’s Virtual Learning Lab, and lab coordinator Cristin Skidmore is on hand to guide them. The online option “lets us provide these opportunities in a way we couldn’t before,” Skidmore said.

Rice, who said he envisions having “more students moving to this model” as a way to expand the school’s enrichment opportunities, told the story of one former student who recently came back to visit. This UMS-Wright graduate had taken part in a Chinese language immersion program while enrolled in a graduate business degree program.

“He said he wished he’d had this opportunity in high school,” Rice said.

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