



Students today live in an age where nations and peoples from around the world are far more interconnected than at any other point in our collective history. With emerging technologies bringing the world into our homes and schools, it is now commonplace for students to interact with individuals from countries once seen as distant and “foreign.” In order to effectively prepare students for life and success in the 21st century, it is imperative that we equip them with the language skills, content knowledge, and leadership qualities needed to carefully navigate this exciting global landscape.

In the recent past, foreign language curricula have focused on building proficiency and on learning “survival language,” providing students with the vocabulary, structures, and phrases needed to communicate at a basic level if ever they found themselves traveling in another country. The emphasis was on learning about “the other” to the degree necessary in order to check into a hotel or order in a café.

In the 21st century, the needs of our language students have changed dramatically. Instead of using language simply as a tool for survival in a foreign land, students must embrace it as a tool for empowerment and collaboration with peers both at home and abroad. Political boundaries between countries are seemingly more arbitrary to this generation of learners, as social media put students in direct contact with their global neighbors in new and more interactive ways. They no longer need to board a plane in order to put their skills to use. To meet these changing needs, our students need a deeper and more nuanced understanding of culture and context, and of how differing values and norms affect communication, action, and our relationships with the world.

With exposure to world languages and opportunities to use them in an authentic setting, students gain invaluable skills that are transferable to other subject areas and integral to their ability to engage as global citizens. Through language study, students become resourceful and respond to new situations and cultural contexts with ease. They can cultivate meaningful relationships with others based on shared understandings and mutual respect. Through the use of emerging technologies, world language students can communicate directly and effectively with real-world partners. Studying other languages allows students to reflect on how language is structured and how their own language can be used as a tool for communication, persuasion, and negotiation. Studying other cultures gives students a deeper appreciation for their home culture and the values that affect their interactions with others. When learning about others in a collaborative environment, students are invariably curious and eager to learn more.

This intellectual curiosity will lead to new discoveries in other subject areas as well. Beyond this, the study of world languages empowers students to make contributions to improve the world around them. By communicating with others, students can learn about the needs and challenges faced by their global peers, are able to build their capacity as global citizens, and can find creative solutions to real-world dilemmas. As we prepare our students to be globally competent and college ready, we must expose them to new languages and cultures, providing them with the skills needed to interact effectively with the world around them. By focusing classroom instruction on global competence, teachers can inspire a new generation of learners to connect with others, thrive in new settings, and problem solve in collaboration with their fellow global citizens.