World Readiness for a World in Conflict

Amanda Lanier prepares language learners for local and global challenges

In the year that I spent conducting observations, interviews, and surveys to understand their language programs and learning processes, I met a young boy from an Arabic-speaking family who had been accused of carrying a bomb in his backpack. Another boy, from a family with no cultural connection to the Arab world, said his parents had told him not to put any effort into his language classes. Other parents had aspirations that went far beyond language learning, including a mother who envisioned her son as "an ambassador of goodwill and bridge building and peace making" (Lanier Temples, 2013). In other words, she wanted him to grow up to reduce conflict in the world.

These days, the focus of my work and research is teacher development and collaboration in language programs. In response to my husband's question, I said that global conflict would cause demand for multilingual skills to go up, leading to more funding for language programs and opportunities for language learners, but that some language programs would benefit while others might be jeopardized. World readiness in language learning for a world in conflict will involve increasing capacity, which will mean expanding language programs and also stabilizing programs as they face these pressures.

I propose that it will also mean delivering language instruction that is effective, interdisciplinary, inclusive, and intentional about creating a foundation for lifelong learning. For learners from all linguistic and cultural backgrounds, in all contexts of learning, I believe that we need to reconsider the concept of world readiness and prepare learners for the global challenges that will impact their individual realities, while also aspiring to develop individuals who can reduce the conflicts in our world.

Not long ago, my husband and I were in our kitchen discussing the news of escalating conflict in Gaza when he asked an unexpectedly complicated question: "What happens to language learning when there is a war?" He teaches cybersecurity for a program that caters to veterans, so he frequently contemplates the impact of geopolitical tension on his field. I train world language teachers, though, and in our field the impact is harder to predict and more varied. Our most prevalent standards for language learning guide us to focus on "world readiness" (*www.actfl. org/educator-resources*), but I find that language educators are less likely to be immediately concerned about the effects of world conflict on their everyday lessons and are often wary of triggering conflict in their classrooms.

For some languages and learners, the role of global politics is impossible to ignore. I wrote my dissertation on investment in young learners of Arabic at a time when Arabic enrollments were growing faster than those for any other language.

Increasing Capacity in World Languages

Unlike in the vast majority of other countries around the world, multilingualism is definitely not the typical outcome of secondary or postsecondary education in the US. That is a problem for reasons that we do not yet fathom. Leon Panetta, speaking from his experience as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has stated that multilingual capacity in the US falls far short of demand: "In times of great national security challenges, such as those we face today, as well as in times of great opportunity, such as the opening of new international markets, we find ourselves scrambling for people who can speak, write, and think in languages other than English" (Panetta, 2018).

The languages that receive greater national investment in times of conflict are those designated as "critical" languages. This designation implies that the language is important for reasons of diplomacy, national security, and competitiveness in international trade and that the number of proficient speakers is too low to meet that demand. That said, right now the number of proficient speakers of ANY world language is too low to meet demand. Only 20% of K–12 students in the US are currently studying an additional language.

Fortunately, at least 90% of public and private school systems do offer that opportunity, most frequently in Spanish, French, American Sign Language, and German. By definition, critical languages are less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), though many of them are taught across the US, at all levels of instruction. Increasing the multilingual capacity of the US requires investing in

LCTLs, but a truly world-ready approach to language education will include all world languages.

Investment in Heritage Learners of Critical Languages

Like many LCTLs with relatively large numbers of learners in the US, Arabic is both a prominent heritage language and designated as a critical language. As a critical language, Arabic is considered desirable for geopolitical reasons, so that speakers can contribute to US diplomacy, security, and trade. As a heritage language, Arabic is the means for learners to communicate with their immediate or extended family members, a lynchpin for constructing and maintaining cultural identity, and, for some parents, viewed as a sacred obligation. Those two views of the value of language learning are not entirely incompatible, but they do imply very different goals for language learning.

Armed conflicts among nations, as well as other sources of emergency and conflict like environmental disasters, can lead us to focus on fear and scarcity. Our initial, basic human response to that fear leads us to conserve our resources so that we can deal with threats and to prioritize protecting groups that we consider to be our own people. Learning an additional language, on the other hand, inherently asks us to grapple with the perspectives and practices of people who are not part of our own cultural groups.

We can try to justify investment in language learning through fear, by claiming that language skills will be able to stave off the threats of conflict and disaster. For better or worse, that argument underlies the funding for language learning provided by the Department of Defense and the Department of State and the determination of which languages will be categorized as critical.

However, I have never met a successful learner or teacher of a world language who said that avoiding threats played a part in their decision to invest their own limited resources in language learning. Emphasizing threat and scarcity in our efforts to motivate investment in multilingualism will only weaken our case in the long run. Moreover, when our student population includes both heritage language learners and nonheritage learners, as mine did when I was taking university courses in Arabic, it can have the further negative effect of creating divisions in our classrooms. How can we cultivate a classroom environment that is inclusive and conducive to learning if any part of our pedagogy contributes to a sense of "us" and "them" in regard to speakers of the target language? Heritage learners, by definition, associate the target language with their cultural identity and family relationships. How can we motivate heritage learners by emphasizing conflict with the communities that they view as an important part of their own identities?

A successful heritage learner's ability to walk in multiple cultural and linguistic worlds with confidence and competence is precisely the skill set that the concept of world readiness holds up as an aspiration for all learners of additional languages.

Effectiveness in World-Ready Language Education

Our vision of world readiness for a world in conflict cannot be realized unless our language programs are also effective in moving learners toward proficiency. Most states in the US have adopted standards for world language learning that are based on the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). The concept of world readiness was added in 2015:

"Learners who add another language and culture to their

preparation are not only college- and career-ready, but are also 'world-ready'—that is, prepared to add the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to their résumés for entering postsecondary study or a career."[1] Most readers will be familiar with the themes or goal areas of these standards as "the five *Cs*": communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities.

The benefits of language learning do include enhancing college applications and job prospects. However, the benefits should also begin immediately, and they should involve an adaptable set of skills that can transfer from context to context and extend beyond the context of work into other aspects of life. Consequently, we need to apply the concept of world readiness in a way that is both expansive enough to address the current world challenges and specific enough that it is actionable. To that end, there are objectives that show how the five *Cs* can be developed in light of this more robust view of world readiness, which will be illustrated with specific classroom activities.

Communication
All learners will develop learning strategies and confidence in their ability to learn languages.
Learners who persist will develop sufficient communicative competence to use their target language in professional and interpersonal contexts.

Communities
Learners will be able to engage with local and global communities that speak and value their target language.
Teachers will be able to cultivate a supportive network among stakeholders in the "ecosystem" of the program and support learner engagement in relevant communities.

Cultures
Learners will develop not only cultural knowledge but also intercultural competence as a flexible skill set that can be transferred to other languages and contexts.

Connections
Learners will be able to apply their knowledge and skills from other disciplines in their language learning and draw upon their language learning in other contexts.

Comparisons
Learners will be able to bring their own cultural identities into the learning process and develop their ability to understand and relate to other cultural perspectives.

Implementation of the World-Readiness Themes
As you may be thinking, we want to be able to incorporate these goals and strategies into our pedagogy without derailing the existing curriculum and classroom practices. These recommendations do not require an extensive overhaul of your existing syllabus, lesson plans, and materials, though it will be easier to integrate these activities and practices if you are already teaching for proficiency, you are familiar with task-based and content-based instruction, and

you know how to cultivate intercultural competence (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). One important step is a strategy from culturally responsive teaching: work with your class to come up with a statement of class norms for participation and showing respect to each other. The following activities can all be adapted to use various communicative modes at various proficiency levels.

Connections and Communication in the News

Initially, even in a more traditional language course, you might add a recurring practice of discussing current events to your weekly routines. You can simply open up a website that offers news stories in the target language on your computer, display it on your screen, and help your students to identify some of the topics that they see in the headlines and excerpts. Then, you can explore various activities that encourage your learners to transition from interpretive reading to other communicative modes as they compare what they have found and report back to you.

You can give intermediate learners a list of authentic headlines in English and ask them to work in pairs to find news stories on your chosen websites that deal with those topics. Along the way, the learners will be able to develop a sense of what issues are considered newsworthy and how

these issues are presented in the media of different countries. They can begin to develop the digital literacy skill of thinking critically about the source of their content and the author's point of view. Meanwhile, you do not need to express any political viewpoints at all.

However, you can model ways of responding to others' viewpoints with curiosity rather than judgment or disdain: "I see. Tell me more about why you see it that way." Give them a "tool kit" of useful phrases for expressing surprise and disagreeing politely in the target language.

Culture and Comparisons in Ambiguous Images

Another way to stimulate interaction and reflection without requiring a high level of proficiency involves using images. You can provide learners with an image from the news that can be interpreted in different ways. My Serbian teacher in Belgrade did this with an image of a very thin Bosnian man standing in front of a crowd on the other side of a barbed-wire fence that appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine. Ask learners to simply describe the picture, using language that is appropriate for their level. Let them read a related news story you provide or search for stories that relate to the image.

In my graduate course on teaching intercultural competence, I show two

contrasting pictures of the Iranian judge, activist, and author Shirin Ebadi, one in which she is in *hijab* (her hair is covered with a headscarf), and then one in a business suit with her head uncovered and a United Nations symbol behind her. You could put students in pairs; give them two pictures representing the same person, place, or situation; and ask them to trade descriptions in speaking or writing, without looking at each other's images. Clearly the discussion of a controversial image could become far more complex than your learners can handle in the target language, but you can manage this by controlling the tasks. In this case, you would want learners to use their intercultural skills by asking appropriate questions, seeking more input to help them interpret what they see, and thinking critically about the context and meaning of the image. It is entirely appropriate to ask them to reflect on this activity in English, but we are still aiming for 90% target language use in the classroom, so I would assign this for homework.

Communities and Connections in an Interview Project

Interviews can be a valuable opportunity for discovering the experiences and perspectives of others. They can be conducted with an invited guest in your classroom, via Zoom, or outside class with members of your students' families or communities. They can report back in the target language even if the interview is conducted in English. Keep in mind that authentic communication can be taking place not only during the interview itself but also when the students are preparing their questions, with you or in small groups; when they report back to you and each other on the interview, in speaking and/or writing; and when they compare what they found with other students' interviews.

Your guidance and feedback in regard to politeness, appropriate questions, and interpreting the answers can help them to adapt their behavior and shift their perspectives. Even if you are training soldiers, like our alumna who teaches Korean at the Defense Language Institute, they will need to negotiate expectations with a host mother in Seoul long before they need interrogation techniques. The topics do not have to be controversial; the point is not to find or foment conflict but to communicate openly and successfully, without conflict, and then to think critically

about what they have learned.

Notice that these activities allow the learners to engage with individuals and authentic material from the target culture in their own classroom and local community. Even images can serve as cross-cultural stimuli that help learners to develop communicative and intercultural competence.

We need to resist the usual tendency to think of the opportunities to use language and intercultural skills as far away or far in the future. The learners can and should be honing their ability to relate to people with different cultural values and beliefs now, with their teachers and classmates. In other words, we can begin preparing learners to reduce conflict in the world by modeling and cultivating cross-cultural understanding and respect in our own classroom communities.

Conclusion

World readiness is not a threshold to be reached and left behind. We cannot predict the exact circumstances in which learners will need and want to use the

"Learning an additional language inherently asks us to grapple with the perspectives and practices of people who are not part of our own cultural groups. "

competence that they develop through language learning or the level of proficiency that will be required. We can, however, anticipate that they will need to continue learning and adapting over time in order to cope with rapid change and promote peace in the future: "As with other important disciplines, the study of languages is a long game. We are preparing for new linguistic technologies, emergent languages and uses of language, international alliances to come,

unpredictable migrations, and global conflicts and collaborations that have not yet arrived" (Walkowitz, 2023).

You have an opportunity every day to prepare your learners to face global challenges. The particular steps you take in order to do that will vary depending on you, your learners, and your context. We cannot fully prepare learners for every crisis. Nevertheless, expanding our view of world readiness in language learning may indeed help us to prepare the bridge

builders and peace makers who will reduce and resolve conflict in our world.

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Link

1. *www.actfl.org/educator-resources/world-readiness-standards-for- learning-languages*

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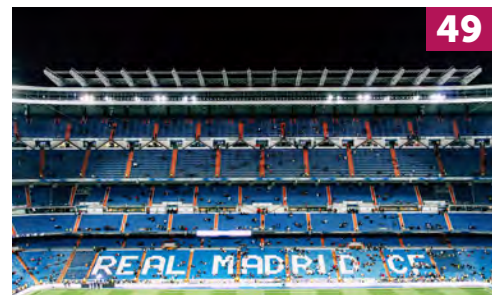Destigmatization
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Contents

Features

24

29

49

Adapt to Survive

"Learning another language is the key to intercultural adaptability."

As conflicts spread across the globe and their consequences reverberate at home, we should recognize how much more interconnected our planet is than ever before. Here in the US, where immigrants have come not only to share their cultures, philosophies, and customs but also their biases and fears, we live in a microcosm of the world, so we need to be even more tolerant and welcoming of intercultural differences. However, we are failing to provide students with the most basic of 21st-century skills—the ability to adapt to and understand different ways, ideas, and words.

Learning another language is the key to intercultural adaptability, as Amanda Lanier so deftly explains in this issue (page 43)—it is not the language itself that confers the greatest benefit on the student, it is learning how to adapt to and embrace another culture through understanding its language. This is a transferable skill that will serve students well in an ever more rapidly changing world where the ability to adapt is about the only skill we can be sure will be needed.

Cheap travel and the incredibly powerful communication devices that we all carry with us have created a scenario where you would expect the demand for language learning among young students to be sky high, but enrollments on language courses at universities and colleges have been declining. The news that West Virginia University is planning to close its World Languages Department and replace foreign language classes with apps due to the "low and declining" student interest in their language programs came as a shock to many of us, but it may just be the first

public university to make such a move unless we start retooling the language-learning pathway from school into college.

In contrast, Middlebury Institute has just launched a new short course, The Russian Political Mindset in the Context of War, taught in Russian for intermediate-level speakers, which is bound to attract a lot of interest—although few students will have the foundations necessary for it.

The uncomfortable truth is that most American students leave school or college with minimal levels of second language proficiency despite years of classes, whereas students from most other countries graduate proficient in two, often three, languages. By allowing this to continue and not delivering a 21st-century education, we are putting young Americans at a painful disadvantage to their international peers.

The traditional argument that English speakers don't need to learn another language does not stand up when we recognize the additional benefits that learning a second language brings with it. Nor is it valid when we take into account that although English may be a lingua franca, hundreds of millions of people communicate in other languages.

So, what can we do to encourage more Americans to become proficient in other languages?

From the success of dual language programs here and overseas, we can see that we need to start earlier, devote more time to multilingual education, and make it more interesting.

Of course, financial, staffing, and time constraints need to be taken into account, but a creative approach using content-based language teaching may overcome some of these hurdles.

Learning a second language is not a luxury. In our global village, it could be the key to survival.)(

Daniel Ward, Editor