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**Position Paper**

# **Learning Languages in Middle Schools**

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## Learning Languages in Middle Schools

### What should serve as the foundation for world language instruction in the middle grades?

Instruction in world languages in the middle grades should focus on the goals articulated in the 5 C s of the national student standards, *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*:

1. **Communication:** The language classroom s focus on communication provides students with considerable practice and feedback on speaking before an audience; learning to listen and read for overall meaning; learning to use context clues and make inferences to interpret something heard, read, or viewed; and working with a partner to accomplish a task.
2. **Culture:** Rather than just learning about differences, students learn what is similar across different cultures. Students look into specific practices and products of a culture, and then examine the perspectives behind them, understanding historical and philosophical influences.
3. **Connections:** Learning to use a language requires something to talk, read, and communicate about. In a world language class, the content can encompass, literally, the whole world. In middle school courses, connections to social studies, math, science, the arts, and other disciplines create a meaningful context for the language learning. Students are more engaged when they can talk about something worthwhile.
4. **Comparisons:** Students learn to use language, both their native language and a new language in a world language class. An awareness of the structure of language occurs when looking at a language that is not one s native language. Similarly, the universal elements of culture become clearer when studying other cultures in relation to one s own.
5. **Communities:** Language learning should prepare students to use this communication skill throughout their life. Students use tools of technology to learn and communicate, exchanging information with people from around the world and accessing information on the Internet that is not available to those who only speak English. Students begin to realize the resources in their own community, region, state, or nation represented by speakers of other languages - an economic and cultural resource.

## Why teach languages in middle schools?

Instruction based on the national student standards summarized above aligns with the beliefs of The National Middle School Association (NMSA) in its position paper on middle level curriculum.

***The NMSA believes the following conditions should be phased out of middle school programs:***

- Curriculum consisting of separate subjects and skills taught and tested in isolation from one another
- Content judged to be more important than the process by which it is learned
- The excessive use of lecturing, rote learning, and drill
- The domination of textbooks and worksheets (NMSA)

The national student standards for world languages summarized above focus on learning about what is similar across cultures, making connections between disciplines and comparing one's own culture to that of others. The role of textbooks and worksheets is de-emphasized as students learn to use language in real-life situations, and the teacher as facilitator replaces the teacher as lecturer. Therefore, including language learning in the middle grades curriculum can and should play a positive role in replacing outdated and ineffective instructional practices and providing young adolescents with learning experiences that help them make sense of themselves and the world around them, involve them in rich and significant knowledge about the world, open doors to new ideas that evoke curiosity, the desire to explore, and, at times, awe and wonder, and use the full range of communication skills and technologies in purposeful contexts. (National Middle School Association)

## **Build Basic Skills**

In addition to helping drive change in instructional practices in the middle grades, language learning in the middle school builds basic skills that serve as the foundation for advanced language study and lifelong learning. In every discipline, students must first acquire the skills, knowledge, and concepts that serve as the basis for advanced study in that discipline. What students learn in math, science, social studies, language arts, technical education, physical education, music, as well as a world language, develops students' knowledge and skill in that discipline, to be built on each year in the next course they take.

## **Learn How to Learn Languages**

Students who begin world language courses in the middle grades will develop good language learning skills, such as paying attention to context clues, guessing at cognates heard or read, repeating sounds, making mistakes and learning from them, memorizing high frequency vocabulary for rapid recall in conversation and interpreting, looking for

language patterns that later will be placed in a grammatical framework, and learning to work in pairs and small groups. These basic skills must be mastered if students are to become fluent users of a second language and/or learn additional languages later in life.

### Language Learning Supports Core Values for Middle School Education

Learning world languages in middle schools also supports the goals of the Carnegie Foundation's statement on core values for middle school education, *Turning Points*:

Let us be clear. The main purpose of middle grades education is to promote young adolescents' intellectual development. It is to enable every student to think creatively, to identify and solve meaningful problems, to communicate and work well with others, and to develop the base of factual knowledge and skills that is the essential foundation for these higher order capacities. As they develop these capacities, every young adolescent should be able to meet or exceed high academic standards. Closely related goals are to help all students develop the capacity to lead healthful lives, physically and mentally; to become caring, compassionate, and tolerant individuals; and to become active, contributing citizens of the United States and the world. But above all else, and to enable all these other goals to be realized, middle grades schools must be about helping all students learn to use their minds well (Jackson & Davis, pp. 10-11).

### Build Proficiency by Starting Early

Another benefit of beginning language study in the middle grades is the potential for higher student achievement in the discipline. Beginning an extended sequence of language study in the middle grades or earlier provides students with the opportunity to become proficient users of the target language. Proficiency is developed in direct relation to the length of time of study and the level of immersion in the language. Middle school students are beginning to move from their concrete approach to learning into a more analytical approach. Adult learners of languages tend to want to learn the rules, analyzing what they are learning. Younger learners develop more automatic patterns and responses, absorbing the language without the filter of translation. Middle school is a natural time to begin learning a language, not just talking about or analyzing the language but learning the language by using it. Recognizing this fact, most other countries begin language study by the late elementary or early middle grades (Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian, pp. 6-7).

### Develop the Proficiency Needed in the Work World

Beginning language study in the middle grades or earlier and continuing in an articulated sequence throughout high school will allow students to enter college or the world of work with a useable level of language proficiency:

*Proficiency Levels Needed in the Work World*

	<b>Functions</b>	<b>Corresponding Jobs/ Professions</b>	<b>Who has this level of proficiency?</b>
<b>Superior</b>	<i>Discuss topics extensively, support opinions and hypothesize. Deal with a linguistically unfamiliar situation</i>	Interpreter, Accountant Executive, Lawyer, Judge, Financial Advisor	Educated native speakers; students from abroad after a number of years working in a professional environment
<b>Advanced High</b>	<i>Narrate and describe in past, present and future and deal effectively with an unanticipated complication</i>	University professor of foreign languages -----	Students with masters degrees or doctorates -----
<b>Advanced Mid</b>		Doctor, Sales representative, Social worker -----	Native speakers who learned Spanish in the home environment -----
<b>Advanced Low</b>		Customer service representatives, Police officers, school teachers	Graduates with Spanish degrees who have lived in Spanish-speaking countries
<b>Intermediate High</b>	<i>Create with language, initiate, maintain and bring to a close simple conversations by asking and responding to simple questions</i>	Aviation personnel, telephone operator, receptionist -----	Graduates with Spanish degrees who have not lived in Spanish-speaking countries -----
<b>Intermediate Mid</b>		Tour guide, cashier -----	After 6 years of middle/high school, AP -----
<b>Intermediate Low</b>			After 4 years of high school
<b>Novice High</b>	<i>Communicate minimally with formulaic and rote utterances, lists and phrases</i>	-----	-----
<b>Novice Mid</b>		-----	After 2 years of high school -----
<b>Novice Low</b>			

**NOTES:**

1. The levels indicated are minimal proficiency levels for specific job descriptions and have been established by subject matter experts from a variety of agencies, organizations and companies for whom ACTFL provides oral proficiency testing following an analysis of the linguistic tasks and the responsibilities of the positions.
2. The references to how long it takes to reach certain levels of proficiency were written specifically for the study of Spanish, a Category I language. Other Category I languages include Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, French, Haitian Creole, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Swahili and Swedish. For Category II, III and IV languages, one can expect that it will take longer to reach the same levels of proficiency (Swender).

## What are the characteristics of effective middle school world language programs?

### Languages for All Students

Effective middle school world language programs emphasize meaningful skill development and offer all students the opportunity to take part in language instruction. All students can learn a second or third language if teachers know how to teach to their abilities. Instruction in other languages should not be considered as an accelerated program or reserved for Gifted and Talented programs. Research does not support the use of unrelated criteria to remove some students from the option of learning a language (such as reading scores or academic grades). Interest is the best motivator that will lead to success in learning a language. Middle school philosophy values inclusiveness over exclusivity.

### Program Goals

Effective programs incorporate the following goals into curriculum and instruction:

1. Developing students' ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations
2. Broadening students' educational background through language development and cross-cultural awareness
3. Fostering healthy attitudes about people of other cultures through the interdisciplinary study of language and culture
4. Providing motivation for continued language study so that students can achieve higher levels of proficiency in the language.

### Interdisciplinary Connections

Effective programs also design interdisciplinary or connected learning experiences. Learning a language provides a natural connection to all subject areas in the middle school and should help students understand the relevance of other academic disciplines. Subject areas that are action-oriented and draw on a somewhat limited vocabulary are well suited to instruction through another language. Art, math, and physical education, for example, provide hands-on and manipulative learning to support meaning and to make it easy to check for understanding. Content in social studies and science provides a rich palette for selecting larger concepts, such as the nature of families and communities, or the exploration of environmental issues, allowing middle school students to compare and contrast one culture to another using simple language.

### Curriculum Connects from One Course to the Next

Effective middle school world language programs develop proficiency in a language in addition to English. Therefore, curriculum at the middle school level must impact the curriculum at the high school. Initial experiences in a world language begin the movement from zero proficiency toward near-native level proficiency in the language. Each succeeding contact increases a student's level of proficiency. If initial experiences occur in the elementary grades, students should not repeat the same experience in middle school, but should have the opportunity to continue with more specific study of a chosen

language. The middle school world language program must build on the skills developed in any existing elementary language experiences in the district

Likewise, if sampling of languages occurs in one grade level of the middle school, students should be able to continue study of a chosen language in each succeeding grade level in the middle school.

The middle school world language program should articulate with programs at the senior high level. Students who develop a beginning level of proficiency in using the language through middle school instruction should not have to start back at a beginning level in senior high. This would not be tolerated in any other subject area, such as math, science, music, or technical education, and it must be avoided in language learning as well.

The language curriculum must ripple up from one course to the next, based on what students can do with the language (not based on the exact vocabulary or grammatical structures covered). This will ensure that each level of instruction builds upon the preceding one. In other words, students will be able to function at ever-more sophisticated levels as they move through the language sequence.

### What should one consider when designing and offering exploratory language experiences?

The key factor in designing a middle level world language program is the degree of proficiency in a new language that is the goal of the program. Decisions on whether to offer exploratory, single language, or multi-language courses stem directly from the identification of the language goals of the program.

### Exploratory Instruction

The term *exploratory* refers more to the instructional approach than the scheduling reality. Exploratory courses are meant to be hands-on, immersion in the content and discipline, meaningful experiences that give students real learning and a view to the overall discipline. This is exactly what language courses need to be: meaningful immersion in using a new language and entering a new culture. As such, exploratory courses should be taught by qualified teachers who are fluent users of the language and knowledgeable about the target culture or cultures.

Some practices common to exploratory programs are not instructionally sound and should be avoided. Negative practices include:

- Talking about languages in English
- Learning about cultures in English
- Learning only grammar rules until students are ready to speak
- Learning vocabulary in isolation
- Focusing on abstract data and facts unrelated to students' lives
- Relying solely on the textbook as a teaching resource

## Multi-Language Courses

In exploratory language courses, students often experience several languages before deciding which language to study in a later course that begins a sequence of instruction.

Multi-language courses provide some concrete benefits:

- Multi-language courses are best justified for introducing languages that students perceive as more difficult due to the use of an alphabet that is different from English. This includes the less commonly taught languages, such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, or Russian. When students experience the language and realize they can understand and even read and write the language, they are more inclined to enroll.
- Courses that provide a variety of languages should give students an experience in all the languages available in the district. The goal of a multi-language course is usually to expose students to the languages available to them in order to inform their later choice of a single language to study. If this is the goal, students need to have the multi-language course before they register for the next year's classes, otherwise this benefit is negated.
- If the choice is made to offer a sampling of languages, students could be offered a multi-language option by allowing them to sign up for one, two, or three language courses to sample, perhaps of 9-12 weeks duration each. These language courses could be part of a selection of exploratory options that include other subject areas too, such as Family and Consumer Education, Technical Education, music and art experiences. Rather than requiring specific exploratory courses, students could choose those of interest to them, including the sampling of one or more languages.

The multi-language course meant to allow students to sample different languages should lead to the selection of one specific language to learn as soon as possible.

## Exploring Languages in Elementary Grades

As an alternative to exploring languages in middle school, meaningful exploratory experiences in the languages offered in the district can be provided through brief units of instruction in elementary grades. For example, learning about Quebec in a fifth grade social studies unit on Canada could include a simulation of a visit to Montreal led by high school French students running a restaurant, giving a tour of the city, and taking students on the subway system, all conducted in French. This approach maintains the benefit of providing exposure to the languages from which students will choose and connects with the grade level curriculum, while allowing students to move into sequential language study in the middle grades.

## Single Language Courses

To begin developing proficiency in a language, offer single language courses in middle school. Students can select the language they want to learn as their first language experience. Students usually have personal reasons for choosing a language to study, so it is appropriate to simply offer a choice of languages, rather than requiring exposure to all the languages in a district. Studying the same language throughout middle school, rather than sampling several, makes it possible for students to develop a greater degree of proficiency in that language.

### Make It Worthwhile

Students should receive the most valuable experience from the instructional investment. In order to provide for the achievement of higher levels of proficiency, middle school programs should allow students to continue the study of one selected language at some point. Repeated sampling of a language or languages during the middle school has no significant positive impact on the level of achievement which can be attained in a four-year high school language program. A middle school program can be designed so that students can enroll in a second year course when they enter senior high. With this as a goal, the middle school program should focus on developing language skills similar to what first year high school students achieve in the target language, rather than worrying about covering the exact same language structures and vocabulary.

### What are some key concepts for middle school program design?

1. Planners must determine the goals and philosophy for the middle school world language program before making any scheduling decisions.
2. Scheduling should emphasize continuity versus isolated experiences. The program should be an integral part of the academic program of the school day, providing daily instruction for all students.
3. The initial middle school experience provides one point of entry into the series of courses available to develop proficiency in a second language. Later points of entry also need to be provided, at least at the senior high school.
4. If the district provides instruction at the elementary school level, then the middle school language program should include multiple levels of instruction. Students who have developed some proficiency in the language through instruction in elementary grades need to build on that skill in the next level of instruction, while newcomers to the district who have had little or no prior experience in learning a language need instruction in basic communication skills to function comfortably in the new language.
5. Language teachers should connect with interdisciplinary teams:
  - A. Ideally, language teachers are included in interdisciplinary team teaching. In schools that include the language program as part of the core team planning, language teachers can coordinate their instructional activities with the team plans. Content is selected from the entire interdisciplinary program. Language proficiency develops through practice on and with that content.
  - B. In middle schools with core teams that do not include world languages as one of the basic subjects, language teachers must establish and maintain communication with the core team. Language teachers should incorporate the objectives of the core subjects into their language instruction whenever

possible. Language teachers should participate with colleagues from other subject areas in professional growth activities and should encourage interdisciplinary objectives, in order to teach broader curriculum content in the world language.

- C. In traditional junior high schools with little interdisciplinary activity, teachers and students of languages should provide the school community with an awareness of world languages and cultures in order to broaden the school's perspective and to avoid isolation of the world language curriculum. This can be a model for interdisciplinary, integrated instruction.

### What qualifications do middle school language teachers need to have?

- Teachers who provide world language instruction in the middle school should be highly proficient in the language(s) taught, with a proficiency level in the Advanced range on the ACTFL scale.
- Teachers of languages in middle schools need to be sensitive to the needs of the young adolescent learner.
- Language teachers in middle schools should continue to obtain in-depth training in middle school philosophy and methods, including activity-based techniques that are age appropriate.

### NCSSFL's Recommendation for Middle School World Language Programs

NCSSFL recommends sequential, proficiency-oriented language instruction, which is characterized by learning the language by being immersed in the language and using language to meet survival, social, and academic needs. To begin developing proficiency in a language, middle school students should have the opportunity to take courses in a specific language, rather than just sampling a variety of languages throughout middle school. Because a number of years of study are required to become highly proficient in any language, school systems should provide the longest possible sequence of world language instruction, beginning as early as possible.

Students who develop some degree of language proficiency prior to entering senior high school may be able to begin learning a third language prior to graduation. This model is common in the European Union, where students in most countries begin to learn a second language no later than age 10 (more commonly at age 8), and add their third language typically by age 13 (Education Network of the European Commission).

Language instruction is eminently suitable for middle school students. With the emphasis on using language in communicative contexts, teachers engage middle school students in meaningful activities right from the first day of class. Cooperative learning, paired activities, projects, process writing, visualizing, and the use of portfolios are all an important part of the world language teacher's repertoire.

In a well-designed program, the language teacher will connect with the core interdisciplinary team's curriculum. The language teacher identifies content from the interdisciplinary curriculum that provides the context for teaching and practicing language skills. The language teacher also sequences instruction so that students are practicing previously learned vocabulary and structures as they add new ones.

Goals for student learning are now stated in terms of skills that provide a purpose for using language: interpersonal communication (exchanging information, sharing feelings and emotions), interpretive communication (showing understanding of something heard, read, or viewed), and presentational communication (giving information in written or oral form).

Traditional elements of language such as vocabulary and grammatical structures are taught as a means to be able to accomplish a certain communicative task. Assessment is also experiential and evaluates students' communication in order to provide feedback on the meaning communicated or understood.

This view of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is very consistent with the middle school's emphasis on meaningful, concrete learning experiences. A well-designed world language program will not only support the overall middle school philosophy, but will also provide students with the skills and concepts they need to become proficient users of a second or third language.

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