

An introduction to foreign languages and global learning

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The teaching and learning of foreign languages is inherently global.^[1] Languages are part of the cultural richness of our society and the world in which we live and work. Learning languages contributes to mutual understanding, a sense of global citizenship and personal fulfilment. Pupils learn to appreciate different countries, cultures, communities and people. By making comparisons, they gain insight into their own culture and society. The ability to understand and communicate in another language is a lifelong skill for education, employment and leisure in this country and throughout the world.

Learning a new language provides unique opportunities for young people to explore national identities and become aware of similarities and contrasts between the cultures of different countries, including their own. As the new secondary curriculum Programme of Study states: *“Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupils’ curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world.”*^[2]

Learning to express thoughts and ideas in another language is about learning new ways of thinking, recognising that there are different ways of seeing and interpreting the world, and developing a truly international outlook.

Culture and intercultural understanding

“When you speak a language... many people understand you... but when you speak [their own language], you know you go straight to their hearts.”

–Nelson Mandela

The recently published *Languages for the Future* report asserts that ‘languages are the bedrock of the world’s cultural heritage’, and that ‘every language offers a rich and unique insight into different ways of thinking and living as well as into the history of the myriad of cultures and peoples across the globe’.^[3]



Although there is surface and deeper culture, the two are related. One is often the underlying rationale for the other. Exposing learners to the things they can perceive, the surface culture, in a very real and sensitive way, paves the way for a better understanding of the belief systems that underpin them. Learning about the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebrations in Latin America leads to a deeper appreciation of different cultural perceptions about death, whilst a unit of study on water use in the Spanish-speaking refugee camps of the Western Sahara confronts learners with the realities of daily life in very different parts of the world.

These explorations of culture through the foreign language develop both *intercultural competence*, or a person's ability to relate to and communicate with people who speak a different language and live in a different cultural context, as well as *intercultural understanding*, a person's knowledge and understanding of a different cultural context and their willingness to engage with people who live in that context.

Communicative competence

“Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.”

–Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The fundamental goal of language learning is communicative competence: the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals.

Communicative competence is made up of four competence areas: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. Particularly relevant to the notions of global interdependence and collaboration are the elements of sociolinguistic and strategic competence.

Sociolinguistic competence is knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic and the relationships among the people communicating. *Strategic competence* is knowing how to recognise and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one’s knowledge of the language and how to learn more about the language in context.

Essentially, young language learners aim to make themselves understood, avoiding confusion or offence to others, and to use strategies for noticing and successfully navigating communication breakdowns to restore understanding.

In the development of communicative competence, learners use vocabulary and skills for communication, advocacy, negotiation, compromise and collaboration. The role of communicative competence in conflict resolution is key, as is the place of intercultural understanding at the heart of peaceful relations between peoples and nations.

Critical perspectives and analytical thinking

In the relative freedom from content prescription that teachers of foreign languages enjoy at KS3, it is common for learners to tackle issues such as damage to and care of the environment; children’s rights; fair trade and child labour; conflict and peace.

Their study of language is embedded in a rich, cultural context, often including a historical viewpoint. The use of authentic materials from countries where the target language is spoken, including literature, poetry, songs and films, enhances learner perspectives, encouraging students to examine critically their own values and attitudes, understand the global context of their local lives and develop skills that will enable them to combat injustice, prejudice and discrimination.

A focus on current affairs in countries where the target language is spoken lends an immediacy to language learning, enabling students to acquire an awareness both of the issues that have global reach and those whose interest is more local to the target language country context.

Such knowledge, skills and understanding can encourage young people to make informed decisions about playing an active role in the global community.

There are direct links to be made with the Global Learning Curriculum Framework – 1. Knowledge of developing countries, their economies, histories and human geography. The ‘historic encounters’ and ‘economic and social connections’, together with the fact that French, Spanish and Portuguese, as well as English, are ‘official’ languages in countries in the Global South due to historic and colonial connections, give opportunities for exploring life in different cultural contexts.

Preparation for citizenship in the 21st century

“One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.”

–Frank Smith

The 21st century curriculum needs to prepare learners to live and work in this fast-moving, interdependent, global society. It should enable all young people to become successful learners, opening their minds to the possibilities of study and/or work in other countries.

Language learning and the international dimension

Although a whole school award, the British Council International Schools Award often centres on curriculum and extra-curricular work carried out through language learning. The Connecting Classrooms programme is one example of work that joins classes and schools together for the purpose of developing learning that supports the aims of the Global Learning Programme. Through their involvement, learners should develop their knowledge in the areas of Identity and Belonging, Sustainable Living, Communication and Critical Thinking. Being linked to schools from around the world enables learners to see the world through others’ eyes, dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions, enabling the development of a truly world view.

There are a number of teaching resources freely available that help to explore global issues in MFL.

As the links to resources can quickly become out of date, please visit the DERC Pinterest site, MFL board, as these links will be checked and updated annually.

<http://www.pinterest.com/dercatioe/modern-foreign-languages-resources/>

Further useful links include:

<http://globaldimension.org.uk/resources/item/1554>

<http://www.sciafyouth.org.uk/index.php/teachers-zone/secondary-resources/citoyens-du-monde/>

Citoyens Du Monde is an innovative global citizenship resource for French [S2-6 or Key Stage 3 to 4]. The resource has been built around fascinating video interviews with French-speaking teenagers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC] who talk of their lives and the citizenship issues that matter to them.

<http://www.sciafyouth.org.uk/index.php/teachers-zone/secondary-resources/ciudadanos-del-mundo/>

This resource has been designed to bring the Spanish language to life, whilst helping people learn more about global citizenship, life in El Salvador, and the work of SCIAF.

<http://www.rachelhawkes.com/RPP/Sports/SportsDays.php>

A series of resources for KS3 tutor groups in preparation for representing different countries on school sports days. They include introductions to known and lesser-known languages.

<http://24h-vie-enfant.partage.org/>

An extensive website with authentic information about the real lives of children in different continents of the world.

<http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/ilslit/Flash/index.html>

An interactive site with animated multimedia introducing several aspects of the lives of Spanish speakers in three different continents.

<http://1jour1actu.com/>

Current affairs website for French children and young people.

<http://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/home>

The British Council website offers a wealth of opportunities to schools wanting to globalise their curricula and link their classrooms to others across the world.

References

1 The Global Dimension: A Practical Handbook for Teacher Educators

http://www.ioe.ac.uk/Handbook_final%281%29.pdf

2 The National Curriculum Programmes of Study 2014

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/210969/NC_framework_document_-_FINAL.pdf

3 Report exploring the most important foreign languages for UK citizens of the future

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/languages-for-the-future-report.pdf>