

A Model for Community-based Language Teaching to Young Learners: The Impact of University Outreach

Martha Nyikos & Vesna Dimitrieska

Indiana University, Bloomington

Abstract

A primary challenge given to university foreign language departments and Title VI National Resource Centers is to increase interest and participation in foreign language learning, with particular emphasis on less commonly taught languages (LCTLs). Given that many LCTLs in high demand by the US government, including Arabic, Chinese, Persian and Turkish, rarely find their way into the school curricula, this article offers a successful ongoing community-based model of how one university-town partnership addresses advocacy with programming for pre-K-grade 9. Non-native and heritage undergraduate language students who volunteered as community language teachers found the experience invaluable to their pedagogical development. Teacher education programs or language departments can employ this approach to community-based teaching, by providing free, sustained language teaching in existing community centers. This article offers guidance for how to start and expand such a program.

Introduction

This article offers ways that committed teachers, language departments and teacher educators can partner to develop a community language outreach plan and carry it out with tremendous success. We show how, over the last five years, we have reached over 200 youngsters per year in our local community with our mostly volunteer-powered program. This program, *Bridges: Children, Languages, World* was established specifically for teaching less commonly taught languages (LCTL) to youngsters at community centers such as the YMCA, Girls, Inc. and the local public library's children's department.

This initiative ultimately became an award-winning program, recognized by the 2014 Senator Paul Simon Award.

Establishing sustainable and engaging community outreach from colleges and universities is a complex challenge (Reese, 2008). Yet there are good reasons to support the growing movement to bring early language learning into elementary schools and community centers through outreach programs. Early language learning is widely recognized as providing the basis for lifelong interest and motivation for sustained engagement with language, and in this case, for less commonly taught languages. Research points to many positive benefits of an early start, including positive attitudes toward diverse languages, cultures, and ways of life that last into adulthood (Baker, 2014; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010; National Network for Early Language Learning).

A key focus with younger children is on the affective side of learning--to hook into and grow their affinity, awareness, and motivation to continue learning languages at a developmental stage when children's wonderment can readily be harnessed. Besides attitudinal and social benefits, cognitive advantages of learning another language include greater executive control (Bialystok, 2011), multi-modal processing and greater mental flexibility.

Broadly speaking, two strong influences converge to establish early language programs. The first impetus is on the political, policy-making level, where pending legislation in Congress also supports sustained partnerships and model programs. Specifically, the *Foreign Language Education Partnership Program Act* (currently H.R. 2170) aims to increase the capacity for building model programs for less commonly taught foreign languages. It advocates development of articulated curricula for these languages through partnerships. Its aim is to contribute to ensuring the continuity of student progress in proficiency from kindergarten through grade 12 in at least one foreign language, aiming for a high level of proficiency by grade 13. Though H.R. 2170 has not yet been enacted, another similar initiative on the federal level has taken the form of STARTALK grants which support critical languages. Capitalizing on the success of the Bridges program, teacher grant recipients from various states came to our

university in summers 2011-2013 to learn more about how to teach youngsters in non-traditional community settings. This federal grant gave us the opportunity to extend our outreach to secondary and university teachers and teacher candidates to learn how to design their own community outreach program for children.

The second strong influence on the establishment of early language programs is at the grassroots level. In our community, there were parents who recognized the importance that language plays in the future skill set of their children as globalization expands (Berdan & Berdan, 2013). Parents were important initial advocates for early language teaching (Tabrizi, 2009), and continue to be important proponents as we have moved toward sustainable programming.

These two influences provided the impetus for us at the local level to seek out the support of both university and community resources in setting up a viable language program that serves diverse community youngsters. We were fortunate in having a Title VI National Resource Center at our university, under whose sponsorship we were able to expand a program we entitled *Bridges: Children, Languages, World*.

History

Starting with the initiative of an American graduate student who had approached the local public library about teaching Arabic to youngsters, the Bridges community outreach program has evolved into a program with multiple language departments and community center partners. The Bridges Arabic program for youngsters started in 2006 in cooperation with the Near Eastern Languages Department, and by 2008, five other language departments sent volunteer undergraduates to teach in the program.

This program's mission is the development of world language instruction programs for children, specifically emphasizing less commonly taught languages (LCTLs). Bridges utilizes communicative teaching to immerse children in a different culture and language through free play, authentic stories, games, music, dance, and crafts to help them acquire vocabulary and communication skills in a target language.

Currently, during the academic year, *Bridges* delivers programs in Arabic, Chinese, Dari, Mongolian, Russian, Swahili, and Zulu. During the summer, a STARTALK federal grant helps sustain the momentum with Arabic, Chinese, and Turkish. In 2013, over 240 young learners in our community participated in Bridges programs, helping our young students get one step closer to a culturally and linguistically diverse world through learning about LCTLs and cultures. Our various Bridges language programs are taught to youngsters once a week at several community centers in our town by university students who volunteer to teach the LCTLs they are studying. In a three-way partnership with the university's school of education, language departments, and the Title VI National Resource Center, these undergraduates are taught valuable teaching strategies and tools, which are then applied in a variety of settings.

Getting started

Citing research they had read about child language development and economic globalization, several community parents voiced their wish to have their children exposed to a different language in the pre-school years. This grassroots parental interest evolved into a plan to deliver free language instruction to children in our community who normally would not have access until middle or high school. We needed a location, teachers, good supervision, and belief in our mission to advocate for our program. We wanted to deliver high-quality language teaching using best practices, with careful guidance to the potential volunteer teachers, while being responsive to the missions of various community centers.

With these factors in mind, we developed a needs assessment checklist followed by a resource checklist which we formulated into questions to guide us in separate interviews conducted first with language departments (Table 1, Appendix) and subsequently with community personnel (Table 2, Appendix).

The starting point in establishing a community program is to ask two very basic questions:

- (a) Which commonly or less commonly taught languages are we ready to offer to a community site?
- (b) Which community site(s) would be best suited for what we have in mind?

These simplified needs assessment checklists can be used as a guide for language departments (working in tandem with community centers) who may want their students to participate in language teaching. Many colleges and universities have existing language clubs with interested students who could be mentored to teach once a week at a community center or in an after-school program at a local elementary school. The following concrete points can serve as a guide to starting such a program.

Figure 1: Steps for Establishing Partnerships with Community Sites via Advocacy

Step 1:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding personnel • Developing a vision
Step 2:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing contact with community centers
Step 3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting undergraduate college students
Step 4:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orientation and initial pedagogical training
Step 5:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coteaching, debriefing, and ongoing training

Step 1: Finding Personnel and Developing a Vision

University and college teachers can start by formulating a tentative vision and steps for implementation, first focusing on what can be reasonably offered. A close analysis of the results of the Needs & Resources Assessment Checklists (Table 1 & 2, see Appendix) will help formulate the vision and facilitate realistic planning.

Consultations with fellow teachers regarding goals for students and those in the community who are to be served will clarify the mission.

The first step which enabled us to launch a language program for children 5-14 years of age in our community was identifying interested personnel. We agreed that quality and pedagogical soundness are paramount if youngsters and parents are to continue to come. As the director of world language teacher education in the school of education, the first author was in close contact with the director of a campus Title VI National Resource Center involved with international affairs. The coauthor, a doctoral student in our language education program, was recruited to be the language coordinator. It was important that the language coordinator have training in language pedagogy to provide training and input to teachers or language students (heritage speakers) who might volunteer to teach a language. The next step in establishing the base was to seek on-campus or secondary school outreach organizations to assist. Through the on-campus Title VI center whose mission includes community outreach (Legislative look, 2007), we forged connections to other language departments and centers which were interested in helping us set up language programs at one or more community sites.

Why community centers?

Community sites such as the local public library, Boys and Girls Clubs, and the YMCA have their set infrastructure and funding sources. Children who attend these community centers are usually open to new experiences and their parents tend to be very supportive. The community sites generally have basic arts and crafts supplies and toys available for creative activities and use.

One such site in our program was a gymnasium where the focus of the language program turned to frequent use of sports equipment, use of the wide space for cultural and vocabulary games and dancing. Our goal has been to be as site-responsive as possible, taking advantage of available resources. This flexibility had its fruition in melding our vision with the goals of the community site. For example at the gymnasium site, we have taught folk dances, using the target

vocabulary for counting, actions and directions. Other sites have offered kitchens where simple food preparation led to vocabulary lessons for fruit, vegetables, and shopping, as children learned the terms for ingredients and simulated open air market purchases followed by process words for food preparation and eating.

Step 2: Establishing Contact with Community Centers

In our case, following our own needs and resource assessment, we initially approached the local public library's children's section to ask about their goals and policies for their drop-in playroom or other areas and if language learning would fit with their vision. They agreed that on Saturday mornings they would welcome one or more volunteer teachers to teach Arabic in a play-based manner and that it must remain an unstructured situation, so as to fit with their intended approach for that space. In this way, the *Alef-Ba* (Arabic for A, B, C) program was born. Public libraries have a mandate to demonstrate inclusivity and diversity so the introduction and teaching of different cultures, customs and languages is a perfect fit.

Other ideal sites could include the local public library, community centers, churches, or schools. Gaining access to community sites in reasonable proximity was therefore our next step. We realized that how we first made contact was exceedingly important for garnering enthusiastic community support. A list of suggestions follows.

Figure 2: Suggested Sequence for Establishing Community Partnerships

1. Become familiar with the mission and priorities of the community center.
2. Find out attendance figures for the center's children (number and ages).
3. Contact the director/outreach coordinator: introduce the program's vision briefly.
4. Follow-up email: make an appointment with the coordinator.
5. Present the program's ideas concisely; describe how the university's program-relates to their center's goals.

6. Provide a written summary of language program's plans and approximate timetable
7. Go through the language program's needs/resources assessment checklist.

Diplomacy and sensitivity are vital components to a good working relationship. Being open to questions and flexible to suggestions not only fosters mutual creativity, but it ensures ongoing communication which is imperative if the program is to endure. It has become evident that it is important to be site responsive, designing programs to enhance the mission of the community site, making the needs and interests of children who attend paramount. As noted above, teachers should use strategies to maximize the resources of the community facilities (for example, a gymnasium, a home economics room, church basement, daycare center), and each agency's expectations for the groups of youngsters. Another consideration is the importance of child safety, so all university student volunteers are required to undergo background checks. Program consistency and parental contact are also vital. Many centers have aides who understand the principles by which the center is run and can be of great assistance.

Step 3: Recruiting Volunteer Teachers to Co-teach

Our next step was to recruit undergraduate college students from the local university through their language departments. Our reasoning has been that many students also learn better if they must teach some basic vocabulary and communicative language in a friendly, playful way to youngsters ages 4-14. Thus, students of various LCTLs can be seen as potential volunteers who can form mutually supportive teaching teams—one more advanced student as the lead teacher and one less advanced student as a co-teacher. We were able to also ask some Title VI Area Studies centers on our campus to help in the call for volunteer students. Knowing that such centers have a federal mandate to conduct community outreach was particularly helpful in forming such mutually beneficial partnerships (Carracelas-Juncal, 2010).

If there is agreement with a community center, the next step is to work internally at one's university or college to recruit and train the outreach program's team of volunteer language students. A decision on the minimum proficiency level acceptable for university language student volunteers must be made. Since they will be teaching *novice low* beginners (although there are occasional heritage learners) the proficiency level of volunteer instructors need not be high. For teaching efficacy in largely unstructured environments (e.g., playroom, all-purpose room), teams of two student instructors work best with one volunteer teaching, while the other assists with classroom management, materials distribution, and children's behavior, while showing the children how to participate in language learning (a key need of young learners). A series of workshops for the volunteer language students should include a kick-off orientation offering information on developmental needs of youngsters specifically tied to early language learning for particular age groups (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2010). Volunteers should be given multiple opportunities to try out engaging language activities planned for the children, followed by feedback from the language coordinator.

Step 4: Orientation and Initial Pedagogical Training

The teachers and student volunteers are given methodological/pedagogical training at the beginning of every semester. The training is planned and conducted by the language coordinator from the university's school of education and is based on current needs of the college volunteer instructors and volunteer assistants. Later, the aim of mid-semester training is to further help volunteer instructors develop professionally through structured workshops that focus on teaching mixed ability classes, incorporating immersion approaches as a teaching method, and applying more effective classroom management skills as well as awareness-raising activities. Both training workshops aim to equip instructors with practical ideas, techniques, and strategies that will help them become more effective, flexible, and resourceful teachers who are attuned to the language learning needs of their young students.

Step 5: Co-teaching, Debriefing, and Ongoing Training

The underlying organizational principle is that for every language taught in a community setting, there are two volunteer instructors (ideally pairing one more advanced or near-native and one non-native, less advanced speaker of the language) who co-teach the same group. In addition, for most of the classes there are other volunteer assistants who come from the same pool as the volunteer student instructors. The only distinction between the two is that the volunteer instructors were initially volunteer assistants, before they became instructors (whenever possible). Volunteer assistants help the volunteer instructors in multiple ways. They both use models of communicative teaching and incorporate elements of play, stories, crafts, and imagination in their dynamic instruction.

The weekly protocol consists of several key components. The language classes meet once a week for forty-five minutes. Prior to each lesson, the volunteer instructors send their lesson plan to the Bridges language coordinator (coauthor) and receive comments on the procedures, suggestions for alternative ways of executing the tasks as well as suggestions for additional activities related to the target vocabulary for that particular class (novice low proficiency level). The language coordinator is present for each language class and joins in whenever a need arises. The lesson is followed by a pedagogical debriefing session when the language coordinator meets with volunteer instructors and assistants to share comments and insights about the lesson. Through those informal conversations, the language coordinator works in tandem with volunteer instructors to pinpoint areas needing improvement and guides them in application of suggested changes to the next teaching sessions.

Responsibilities of the leadership and volunteer teams

Professional development of Bridges' volunteer instructors and assistants is the distinguishing aspect of the Bridges project. In order to achieve the success and momentum we have attained, several key administrative/academic positions supply vital guidance and support for the project, including the Title VI center which funds the leadership team for this otherwise volunteer program.

Figure 3: Roles and Responsibilities of the Leadership and Volunteer Teams

Role:	Responsibilities:
Director of Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shares research findings, ideas, and teaching strategies with volunteer instructors, project and language coordinators • Works closely with the project and language coordinators on crafting the mission statement, year-round activities, and possible future professional development endeavors through the project, including grant writing • Provides support and guidance to the volunteer instructors and assistants during pedagogy workshops
Project Coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serves as a liaison with the various community centers, university language partners, and maintains contact with parents • Creates the semester-long schedule of classes • Consults with the language coordinator and the academic director of pedagogy on issues related to orientation, training, and ongoing questions that arise • Organizes and chairs the stakeholders' meeting • Works on advertising strategies • Creates and distributes the Bridges newsletter
Language Coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serves as immediate and ongoing guide to the volunteer instructors and assistants

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assists Bridges' volunteer instructors with lesson planning, execution and application of alternative teaching techniques and tools • Provides support prior to the teaching (i.e. during the lesson planning stage), teaching support (i.e. assisting instructors during the lesson), and post-teaching support (i.e. debriefing sessions carried out immediately after teaching) • Plans and teaches the orientation and training sessions twice a semester in cooperation with the project coordinator and the academic director of pedagogy
Volunteer Language Instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attends the pedagogical training workshops twice a semester • Creates lesson plans and classroom materials and submits them to the language coordinator prior to teaching • Co-operates with the co-teaching partner and volunteer assistants in the process of lesson planning and delivering the lessons • Participates in post-teaching debriefing
Volunteer Assistant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attends the pedagogical training workshops twice a semester • Reviews lesson plans prior to coming to class • Assists volunteer instructors during classes • Participates in post-teaching debriefing

Learning and development tools

The Bridges project has provided supplementary learning and development tools for the volunteer instructors and assistants as well as the students and their parents. First, through the use of an online course management system, Bridges volunteer instructors and assistants have access to all the orientation and pedagogical training materials, templates and samples of lesson plans, general and language-specific resources for individual and group learning, as well as articles related to issues of second language acquisition, immersion, and child language and brain development.

Second, the Bridges website (<http://www.indiana.edu/~global-bridges/>) is an invaluable resource for parents, volunteer instructors and assistants, community centers, and anyone interested in the Bridges project. The site itself provides detailed information about the schedule of classes, updated lesson plans for the current semester as well as for previous semesters through its bank of lesson plans, links to articles and publications related to learning and teaching a second language, especially a LCCTL, and links to general and language-specific resources for out of class language learning and development.

Third, the Bridges newsletter is a publication that aims to keep the people involved in the Bridges project informed and updated about its latest activities, developments, and future endeavors. With its online and hard copy version, it is widely distributed among the students and their parents, campus-wide language partners, community centers, and the general public.

Evidence of Impact

Feedback from Young Participants

Youngsters attending Chinese classes through Bridges frequently express how enjoyable those classes are. Among the aspects they enjoy the most are learning calligraphy and how to write Chinese characters, preparing and tasting Chinese food, and learning about the zodiac animals. Students of Russian have come to love animated figures such as Cheburashka, since the target language was

introduced to them with authentic children's cartoon characters in an engaging and meaningful way. Teaching Arabic music and folk dancing with simple steps and directions explained in Arabic with active participation have worked especially well with young girls. By engaging in activities that incorporate cultural elements while teaching the target vocabulary, students' learning curve has risen as well as their motivation to learn about a culture that is very different for most of them.

Students at another community center became acquainted with the sounds of Hausa and Zulu. By engaging in songs and games that aim to target the vocabulary of those two languages, other cultural products, practices, and perspectives can be optimally introduced (Kramersch, Cain & Murphy-Lejeune, 1996). Students at the main local library enjoyed taking both Arabic and Chinese classes through the Bridges project. Chinese instructors reported success in bringing down the affective barrier to this complex language by introducing active Chinese circle games using shuttlecocks, puppetry with panda figures, and the Monkey King legend. A very clear indication of student engagement was often demonstrated by the reluctance with which children would leave to go home.

Feedback from Volunteer Instructors

Many of the Bridges volunteers hope to teach English abroad. In their feedback, most undergraduate volunteers expressed the belief that the Bridges program had helped develop crucial skills and experiences. Their responses indicated that the most valuable experiences had been learning how to interact with young students and tailoring the class to their needs. A frequent recommendation to new instructors is to resist the urge to "to cram kids' heads full of vocabulary." The need to take age into consideration was repeatedly emphasized as was the importance of finding ways to present the lessons in game-like fashion. The volunteer instructors were strong proponents of activities with clear language goals which engage the children physically in movement, dance, and games.

Volunteer instructors were passionate about the languages they taught, expressing this commitment to the program in many different ways. They felt that the Bridges program had provided them with an opportunity to combine two things they most enjoyed: language and teaching. They particularly felt that creating, revising, and implementing lesson plans would be a valuable skill set for use in the future. As one Russian instructor reported, “It’s the craziest, most rewarding thing to see kids want to learn the language that I’ve more or less been obsessed with for years. With the more common languages it’s almost as if it’s just expected that they learn them, but with the less commonly taught languages like Russian, every child has a story for why they want to learn it, which makes things much more interesting.” All volunteer instructors related that the mood of each class was characterized by laughter, active engagement with the language, and high spirits.

Parents’ motivation and gratitude

The parents of the children attending language classes through the Bridges: Children, Languages, World Project have different motivations for bringing their children to the various community sites to attend one of the classes in a less commonly taught language. One reason parents cite is an urgency for their children to be exposed to a language and culture that is very different from their own. By doing so, many believe they are supporting their children in becoming more open to other cultures and preparing them to be global citizens of the world. Another motivating factor cited by parents is a personal connection to one of the Bridges LCTLs and continuation of their familial traditions.

Moreover, some American parents who have adopted children from China or Russia express a strong desire for their children to gain insight into their language and heritage—often a heritage with which the adoptive parents have little connection. By bringing them to these classes, they are enabling them to be more aware of their roots and traditions. A third compelling reason why some parents bring their children to the Bridges classes is that those community sites offer a welcoming, safe learning atmosphere where their

children can meet and play with other children who share similar interests and/or heritage.

Participating parents are grateful to have their children receive instruction in one of the less commonly taught languages. As they come to pick them up, they express how valuable, memorable, and rewarding learning a foreign language is. Moreover, they very frequently express their gratitude to the volunteer instructors and assistants for their volunteer teaching, as their children are given an opportunity to learn a new language free of charge.

Feedback from the Community Center Representatives

Due to the nature of the project itself, Bridges has approached community centers that serve and work with student populations of often lower socioeconomic status. By reaching out to students who, in their everyday circumstances, probably could never afford to learn a new language, the program achieves its goal of being inclusive by making language instruction available to all the students in the community.

Community site coordinators have been extremely satisfied with their collaboration with Bridges. The sole fact that they have welcomed Bridges classes for multiple semesters in a row shows that they recognize and appreciate the value of being part of a project of this kind. Some of the community site partners request a language that is closer to the background and heritage of some of their students. For example, at one center that serves predominantly African-American and low income students, the requested language is Arabic due to its connection with northern Africa. Some other community sites have been interested in exposing their students to a variety of LCTLs throughout the different semesters rather than to one language alone. A community center representative expressed her satisfaction: “The instructors are creating child-friendly activities, including incorporating drawing, movement, dance, and interactive activities.”

These voices underscore the varied but positive impact of the Bridges instruction in LCTLs in the various community sites. Bridges

classes make a difference in the lives of the students who are learning these language and in the lives of their parents, volunteer instructors and assistants, community centers, and the community overall.

Conclusion

In this paper we have given steps on how to establish and foster a community-based early language program through advocacy (Reese, 2008). We have sought feedback from both the volunteer language teachers as well as the young student participants to gauge our impact and further develop our program. We have presented our model as a concrete example of a successful award-winning program that language professionals might follow.

This type of community engagement emphasizes collaboration among school partners and sites, practical training for participants and reciprocal benefits through culturally rich language teaching, as student instructors learn to work with youngsters who are very open to novel ways of expressing ideas in a new language.

In an era of globalization, it is vital for universities to be responsive to the ever-changing linguistic and cultural needs of their communities, particularly the vital need to introduce language learning (LCILs or more widely accessible languages) as early as possible. By strengthening their commitment and ongoing support to community outreach, universities can link the pedagogic, linguistic and organizational skills of their students and faculty with their communities to promote language learning for transnational communication and connections.

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Appendix

Table 1: Needs & Resources Assessment Checklist for University/College Representatives

1.	Are there a sufficient number of undergraduate/proficient volunteers to make offering a language viable?
2.	How will recruitment of volunteers take place?
3.	How many hours per week and on what days of the week is scheduling feasible? For what length of time are volunteers available?
4.	Can students' teaching practicum in community settings be incorporated into coursework?
5.	Can some academic points/credit be given for volunteer teaching?
6.	Is there a pedagogical coordinator available to train, guide and support volunteer teachers?
7.	Can someone act as the liaison to coordinate volunteer teacher scheduling with community centers?
8.	Can a plan be developed for establishing ongoing communication

Table 2: Needs & Resources Assessment Checklist for Community Site Representative

1.	Do the mission/policies of the center complement that of the language program?
2.	Which language(s) might draw the greatest response?
3.	Is a survey viable to find out parent/student interest/preferences for a particular language?
4.	Can the community site give an approximate number of children who might attend, their approximate age span, and whether accompanied by parents or not?
5.	What site personnel are available for support/consultation for undergraduate teacher volunteers?
6.	What physical spaces are available and most appropriate for language teaching?

7.	What concrete teaching support (whiteboards, games, supplies) can the center supply?
8.	Does the community center have aides and volunteers who will be consistently available for implementing the lessons or giving support in other ways?