

A CAL PRACTITIONER BRIEF

Student Voices

High Schoolers' Insights into
World Language Learning

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Student Voices: High Schoolers' Insights into World Language Learning

by Tom Welch and Nancy Rhodes

BACKGROUND

The vast majority of Americans are monolingual. Even though 21% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), the language skills of these individuals are seldom developed at school or utilized to benefit the multilingual needs of the country as a whole. Furthermore, the number of students in the United States taking language classes has been decreasing in recent decades (Goldberg et al., 2015; Rhodes & Pufahl, 2010).

At the same time, business leaders, politicians, educators, scientists, and parents agree that English alone is not enough to meet the nation's needs in our increasingly globalized economy (Jackson & Malone, 2009; Namahoe, 2021; New American Economy, 2017; Wiley et al., 2016). The Commission on Language Learning (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017) recommends a national strategy to "improve access to as many languages as possible for people of every region, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background" (p. vii) in order to put language education on a par with other subjects, such as math and English, and to ensure that a useful level of proficiency is attainable by all students. The Commission's goal is for every school in the nation, starting with schools with the youngest children, to offer

meaningful instruction in world languages as part of their standard curricula (see also Arias, 2018).

While world languages have been in the curriculum for a long time, schools have long struggled to equip students with the skills to understand and communicate effectively with people of other cultures (Robinson et al., 2006). Past and current challenges include teacher shortages, teacher preparation, student motivation, availability of language offerings for all students, community attitudes towards language learning, and *appropriate methods for helping students learn languages*.

To explore the learner's perspective on the current state of high school language learning, the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSFL), at its November 2020 annual meeting, organized a diverse group of students from across the country to participate in a panel on language learning. The students' observations about their experiences are presented and discussed in this brief.

SETTING FOR THE PANEL

The panel session, entitled "Unlearning to learn: Forging new connections for new language learning possibilities," brought together (virtually) a group of six high school

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students from around the country to share their insights on language learning with approximately 65 NCSSFL members at their annual meeting. Students were guided by a moderator who posed questions but allowed for free exchange of ideas among the students. The audience posed questions in the chat field that were relayed to the students by the moderator. The audience included state education agency personnel from across the United States who have responsibility for world language education, retired educators who have served in these roles, and representatives of organizations whose missions include world language education. This event was one of the positive outcomes of the pandemic challenge, the opportunity for the organization to hear directly from a very diverse panel of students because the conference had to be held virtually. It was, in fact, the first time that the organization had convened a group of students to hear about their observations and experiences in language learning. The students were recommended by NCSSFL members as outstanding language students in their states.

The students on the panel came from various backgrounds and learning environments, from small and large public and private schools, and from different regions of the country. Some had successfully navigated a traditional path for at least a part of their journey. But we also heard other stories—stories of independent learning, stories of reaching out to heritage communities, and

stories of independent use of technology to connect, in real time, with native speakers, friends, and new acquaintances in other parts of the world.

We have eliminated personally identifiable characteristics, such as school names, and have used pseudonyms throughout the article. But their stories are compelling not only on a personal level, but also for the picture of language learning that they painted for the audience that day. We were haunted by stories of the denial of opportunity because of class scheduling conflicts and troubled by stories of frustration with obstacles encountered, but we also heard stories of hope and opportunity.

The language learning situations for these students during the international pandemic varied widely. Ella, a senior, was practicing Spanish with her bilingual family and community members but had not been able to enroll in language classes these last 2 years because of scheduling conflicts. She was planning to take an exam to receive the Seal of Biliteracy for graduation. Jennifer’s junior year Spanish AP class was online through Zoom, with the use of breakout rooms to encourage conversation. Alex’s junior year French 3 class was also fully virtual, with a lot of writing activities and biweekly online cultural assignments. For her senior year, Madison was taking in-person classes at school, but unfortunately could not take Spanish due to a scheduling conflict with a graduation-required class. She practiced Spanish online with friends abroad. George’s Chinese 3 Honors class his senior year was in person; since it was a small class, it allowed for individualized instruction and conversation. Karla had completed Korean 2, continued with self-study Korean for her senior year, completed college-level Japanese 101 online, and was teaching herself German, American Sign Language, and Spanish.





GUIDING QUESTIONS

The moderator asked the students the following questions (most of which they were given ahead of time):

1. What languages have you learned and how did you learn them?
2. What has been your motivation to learn a language, including the culture?
3. What is your current language learning scenario?
4. What are the cultural elements of the language that you see represented? How are they represented?
5. How are you extending your language learning beyond the classroom? Are there particular resources you've discovered on your own?
6. What suggestions would you have for schools to increase language learning?
7. How has COVID changed your learning?

STUDENT VOICES

STUDENT PANEL DISCUSSION

During the student panel discussion, five major themes emerged from the participants' comments: student motivation for language learning, a desired focus on speaking skills, a concern for increasing interactive activities, recommendations for classroom activities, and use of resources beyond the classroom.

Theme 1: Students' motivations for learning languages

What motivates students to study languages? Although language teachers and school administrators often promote the career value of learning a language as a key reason for enrolling, the six students on the panel described a desire for connections as their principal motivating factor. They mentioned new or existing connections with native speakers, including classmates, family members, exchange students, teachers, nannies, and even tour guides abroad as triggering their interest in language learning.

In one case, a student had connections with many native speaker classmates. At a small boarding school in the Northeast, George appreciated the sizeable number of Chinese students at his school. “That’s what keeps me wanting to learn the language—having these kids around that speak Chinese as their native language. That inspires me to keep going and learn more about the culture and not just the language.”

On the other hand, some of the students had limited diversity in their communities and limited exposure to other languages on a day-to-day basis. Madison, from a small, rural high school in the Midwest, described her school as not diverse at all, “so you don’t have as many opportunities to interact with different people and explore and learn about different cultures. Coming from a really small, not very diverse school, it is really hard for students at my school to fully appreciate language learning.” Two new students from Spain entered the school her sophomore year and opened her eyes to another world.

I became really good friends with two Spanish exchange students, and that was what sparked my interest [in the language], because I was obviously immersed in their culture since that’s a big part of what they would talk about with me. I’d even try to talk to their parents and siblings. My friends would share with me the things their families would send over, they’d cook for me, and they’d say, “Yeah, right now in Spain we’d be ready to do this holiday celebration.” They’d make it really interesting, and I’d say, “Hey, that’s interesting! Look what they get to do!” And they’d tell me about how their school system and colleges work—because it’s completely different from the U.S. I was impressed! There are other ways that people do things!

Jennifer, who learned Spanish at home, gave credit to her nanny from El Salvador for motivating her to learn Spanish from an early age.

She helped raise me. At first I didn’t really have a choice! I had to learn Spanish. But I was really good friends with her so I wanted to be able to keep talking to her. She was really nice, I loved her, and she was fun to be around. I felt like I

grew up in her culture, because she just brought it here to our house.

Ella was interested in getting in touch with her roots.

I’m half Mexican, so getting in touch with that culture and having a sense of belonging with my ancestors was my motivation [for learning Spanish]. The language wasn’t necessarily passed down through my family because they did move to the States, and the language got lost, so getting back in touch with it was important. Also, there are a lot of Spanish-speaking people in Arizona, and I like being able to connect with them and help them because not all of them speak English.

Alex was also motivated by family reasons; he wanted to speak French “to be different, to learn something new, and to relate to a family member who speaks French Creole.”

A few students liked that the world language was a challenging subject that they knew little about and liked the “foreignness” of it. Madison offered that, starting freshman year, “I thought this was something that was challenging and was completely new that I knew nothing about.” George also liked the uniqueness of the opportunity and wanted to take advantage of it.

I never knew anyone who took Mandarin and I didn’t think I’d ever get to take it. It’s something I’ve always been interested in; it’s so foreign to me. What drew me to Chinese is that it’s such a [widely spoken] language—I think it’s second only to English in terms of the number of speakers. I wanted to connect myself to the world, and that seemed like the way to go. Once I started learning, I made friends from China [at my school] because we have a large number of Chinese students here.

Many of the students talked about wanting to travel to another country, learn about the culture, and have the opportunity to live with a local family as part of their motivation to learn a language. George expressed his

interest in meeting people from other countries and learning about their cultures.

I had probably the coolest experience I've had with language learning in middle school. I played on a hockey team and got to go to a Quebec City tournament and stay with a local family who I actually still keep in touch with a little bit. Although it's Quebec and not France, the culture is still very different. I remember getting up for breakfast. There was a French baker they knew who lived down the street and they'd give us fresh-baked croissants. It was very cool!

Madison noted that traveling to a Spanish-speaking country "was obviously a huge part of my being interested in the language and wanting to learn more." She traveled to Costa Rica, where the local tour guide broadened her cultural views.

Personally, I really like people from other countries. My tour guide in Costa Rica really had an impact on me. It's interesting because they kind of have a different perspective of your country that your teacher wouldn't have otherwise. He said, "Hey, look—you think you have the greatest country? No, no, no, no, no! You guys are way too fast paced; you don't take time to enjoy life. Look how we do it down in Costa Rica. Come on! There are other places that are just as good, if not better." And I thought, "Yeah, you're right." I kind of forgot that I'm patriotic and I remembered, yeah, there are other places that do it good too!

She was so influenced by the guide's cultural insights into his country and her country that she wrote an article about his influence for her school newspaper.

Karla also liked to meet people from other lands. "Learning about people interests me. So already having that interest in learning about who people are, plus having teachers who are willing to share [their expertise with us], encouraged me to pursue Korean for [7 years]." Karla, like Ella, wanted to be able to use her language to help others. "I want to connect with different people,

especially those not as heard as others—be a voice to help others."

Another motivation for language learning that Karla mentioned was the engaging polyglot YouTuber known as Ikenna, who is learning German, Spanish, and Japanese on his own by connecting with native speaker tutors online.

I want to get to that level. He really inspired me to learn German and Spanish! He makes videos of things like "learning as much Spanish as I can in 26 days" or "rap songs in German" that I really enjoy. And that introduces you to the culture and language and you can pick up words from his videos.

In this case, the medium itself (YouTube) facilitated the transmission of the message because YouTube videos are a magnet for young people.

And most significantly for school language programs, most of the students described a teacher or teachers along the way who sparked and helped maintain their interest in the language. George stated, "My teacher does a really good job" of teaching about cultural topics and focusing the discussions on topics of interest to students. "Specifically, I liked when we discussed what sports we're interested in, because our school is a very athletic-oriented school." Jennifer commented that her teacher "is so enthusiastic about the cultural history of Spain that her enthusiasm is contagious."

NCSSFL audience members were invigorated to hear students' motivations for learning a language. Pam Delfosse (Wisconsin) commented, "Wonderful to hear that your reasons for learning a new language are so deeply personal and based in relationships rather than motivated by future job prospects, etc. Good for us to listen to and understand." Many in the profession acknowledged that we need to shift directions to attract more students to language learning. Jill Landes-Lee (University of Utah) concluded, after hearing the students, that "teachers cannot tell students why to learn a language. Teachers need to facilitate opportunities for students to find their own 'why.'"

“It’s hard to learn a language if you’re scared of making mistakes and getting points taken off. Teachers can correct our mistakes, but not in a judgmental way. We need less pressure in the language class.”

Theme 2: Focusing learning on speaking skills

Students across the country struggle with the lack of relevance of classroom-based language learning, and the panel participants were no exception. Overall, the student panelists were much more interested in learning to speak the language than in learning advanced grammar, memorizing vocabulary that they may never need, or racing through a textbook just to “cover” the material. They expressed a desire for authentic connections with the language, culture, and speakers of the language. They especially wanted a lot more classroom opportunity for unstructured conversation practice.

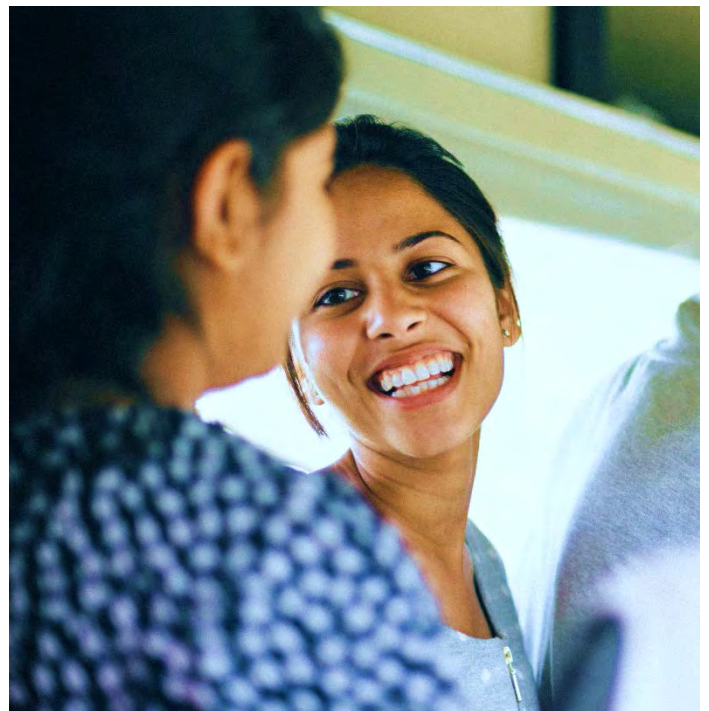
Expressing the feelings of many in the group, Jennifer suggested, “Make it more fun! Make it more conversational!” And she recommended that teachers focus on helping the students get their message across rather than speaking perfectly.

Don’t criticize students if they say something wrong. It’s hard to learn a language if you’re scared of making mistakes and getting points taken off. Teachers can correct our mistakes, but not in a judgmental way. We need less pressure in the language class.

Students emphasized the need to focus on small talk—useful language that they can use on a daily basis—and on topics that arise in the course of students’ daily activities (sports, music, food, etc.) rather than grammar and vocabulary memorization. Alex found that the focus on grammar was more than he needed in order to be able to produce the language. As George observed, “Language is more than flashcards—there are people to

it!” To personalize a unit on food for each student, for example, George related how his teacher asked about their favorite foods:

We’ll learn the vocabulary specifically for that. And there are online resources that we can use to find vocabulary specific to our favorite foods, which is what gets me excited to learn. . . . I also liked when we discussed what sports we’re interested in. . . . Our teacher went around and asked each of us which sports we played and showed us how to write it and say it in Mandarin. My sport is ice hockey. They do play it in China, but it’s up and coming; it’s not the most well-known sport.



With regards to teachers following a sequenced language learning scope and sequence, Jennifer had a recommendation:

There needs to be a shift from linear Spanish learning. Language learning doesn't need to go step by step in one direction. You shouldn't have to start in Spanish 1, then Spanish 2, etc. There should be more options that reflect student interests.

In reference to the teaching of grammar, she commented:

It's challenging, because the more you learn about grammar, the harder it is to actually speak, because there's just so much you have to think about. I almost did better when I was really young and would say things like 'yo sabe' because at least I could speak. Now I'm more inhibited to speak for fear of making mistakes.

In short, the students agreed that current language classes do not necessarily prepare them to speak in ways that would satisfy their motivations for studying the language in the first place. Jennifer commented:

It feels like they're teaching you to be a native speaker rather than just someone who's able to speak the language. The most sensible way to teach language would be to teach someone how to speak, along with the basic language structures.

The students would like to be able to communicate, focusing on interpersonal and interpretive communication skills from the world readiness standards (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) and interact with classmates and native speakers on topics that teenagers like to talk about, e.g., sports, small talk, music, food, school, social activities. This reflects their principal motivation, as discussed above.

Theme 3: Increasing interactive activities, focusing on cultural topics and interpersonal connections

Most of the students preferred authentic activities—not worksheets—to promote conversational skills, including presentations, short conversations, and real-life scenarios. Madison thought the best way to learn a language was to do activities that are more realistic,

...things you're going to need and want to talk about, and to do it in a manner that's not just a worksheet. [Teachers should encourage students] to do presentations, have conversations, and act out something. It's almost like going back to kindergarten! If you go back to kindergarten, that's how they learn. They play pretend, they share things that they're excited about, [and there are a lot of hands-on activities]. If you're learning a new language, you kind of have to [feel like you're] go[ing] back to kindergarten, because that's the level that you're at.

All students would like more interaction with native speakers, whether in person or virtually, to improve their fluency. Ella commented:

Personally, the biggest thing for me that's aiding my progression in Spanish is definitely just being immersed in the culture. Before [COVID], I would go to the Spanish church and go to Spanish Mass and spend time with Spanish speakers. Because hearing the pronunciation helps you phonetically and finding someone that you can speak to and feel comfortable with is helpful. Oftentimes, our pronunciation isn't perfect and so it can hold us back a lot, so finding that person to connect with and help you and guide you is really beneficial.

Karla also benefited from in-person interactions with native speakers—in her case, on field trips with her Korean class to the H Mart, an Asian supermarket.

I believe that field trips are really helpful [to encourage short conversations with people from the culture you're studying]. It's going there and talking to the cashiers or saying in Korean, "Can you please tell me where this is?" Starting up a conversation with someone helps immensely when it comes to going to another culture and being able to speak to them.

There are certainly plenty of opportunities for field trips, at least near urban and suburban areas, where students can practice their language, such as going to ethnic restaurants, where the students can order in the language; to ethnic markets, where students can ask questions of the staff; and to other local businesses that might welcome young people for this purpose. For in-person or virtual experiences, there are an increasing number of opportunities to meet and interact with young people from other countries who want to share their language. There are also opportunities to participate in a language exchange where a U.S.-based student is the language model for English conversation for part of the discussion and their partner is the model for the target language.



Theme 4: Classroom activities that students recommend

Although the students had many suggested changes for language class instruction, they also commented on some classroom activities their teachers used that they highly recommended to foster connections with others and increase opportunities for communicating. Here are a few.

Connect with the world through video pals and e-pals. Allowing each student to practice the new language with a native speaker (through video or text/email) is a great way to build cross-cultural friendships.

TourBuilder. Students loved the “really cool tours of the streets of Madrid in this online adventure” (<https://tourbuilder.withgoogle.com/>). Other resources included Google Earth for games and quizzes, Google Maps Platform, and Google Arts & Culture.

“Charla Miércoles.” One of the student’s schools set aside 30 minutes weekly for conversation (*charla*), “which really activates student learning.” The school offered this on Wednesday (*Miércoles*) because of shortened classes that day.

Harness the power of Zoom. Since students are so accustomed to using Zoom, they recommended continuing to connect through Zoom or similar platforms after the pandemic, such as with native speakers for weekly conversations.

Real-life scenarios. Students participated in a classroom scenario that would be something they would do in a foreign country.

For example, we set up a store and the students would “go shopping.” You’d practice asking, “Where is the changing room?” “How much does this cost?” “Where do I pay for it?” We’d also give presentations about our houses. We’d take pictures and say, “This is our kitchen. This is what I have in my kitchen,” etc. We’d do these scenarios for things that are applicable to our day-to-day lives. (Karla)

Inference-based assessments.

The tests my teacher designs are very interesting. For example, when we’re learning about directions, he’ll

give us a map in Mandarin, and we'll have to define terms on the map . . . and they're not specifically things we learned from the vocab sheet. Because if you go to China, you're not going to understand everything; you'll need to infer and figure out what it means, building on what you do know. So that's what I really like about my course and the assessments: it's not all memorization. You do have to memorize vocabulary just by practicing, but you memorize things you use and are useful to you. (George)

Book reports.

My Spanish teacher assigned fun book reports—not the kind of books we'd read in high school English class, but elementary school K-2-level Spanish books. Our book reports were not like high school analyses, but a basic elementary school type describing what happened in the story. It gave us a lot of practice in writing past tense when we would retell the story. It was a fun activity we did in class. It was difficult, because we didn't know half the words in the book and we had to learn them, but it was really good for us. I got a lot out of it. (Madison)

Teacher-developed board game.

My teacher is really into board games. For our unit on directions, he created a Mandarin game that he projected onto the screen, and we each had pawns and had to move our markers around (go left or right, go two steps forward, four steps diagonally, etc.), trying to get to a goal before getting knocked over by someone. I didn't want to leave the class. The bell rang and we didn't get to finish; everyone said that we had to do it again because it was so much fun. (George)

NCSSFL audience members were enthusiastic about the students' suggestions. NCSSFL member Kathy Shelton (Ohio) remarked that it was “validating that a lot of the practices and ideas and strategies we promote with teachers are what appeal to the learners as well.”

Theme 5: Reaching out beyond the classroom

Driven by their desire for authentic connections, the students regularly discovered resources on their own outside the classroom and were adept at finding them. As would be expected, the use of technology was key. The panelists used music, movies, television shows, YouTube channels, websites, and other resources online to help them learn the language. They mentioned the following

examples of discoveries that helped their language learning.

- **Spanish music on Spotify.** Popular Spanish songs, Spanish rock hits, Latin pop hits, Spanish playlists, 1960s and 1970s Spanish/Latin music (e.g., Formula 5—a Latin band with distinctive originals and familiar covers)
- **Spanish podcasts.** Podcasts in Spanish on a wide a range of subjects, e.g., Radio Ambulante, as well as those specifically for learning Spanish, e.g., News in Slow Spanish
- **TV shows/movies.** Telenovelas on Netflix (which students described as interesting, exciting, and offering practical language); *Casa de Papel* (Money Heist) on Netflix (an award-winning Spanish crime drama television series with Spanish subtitles); various Spanish movies and documentaries
- **Korean website.** Talk to Me in Korean (talktomeinkorean.com), useful to practice speaking with online lessons, quizzes, and dialogues
- **Korean media.** Korean television dramas (K-dramas), K-pop bands, and Korean TV shows with Korean and English subtitles
- **YouTube.** Polyglot YouTuber Ikenna as a motivator for students who want to learn a language on their own; he filmed his 4-month journey to learn Spanish fluently (after failing to learn Spanish in high school) with online tutors, YouTube video watching, Spanish movies, and some reading
- **Duolingo.com.** A free site to learn basic vocabulary and expressions, used for beginning language levels
- **Quizlet.com.** Online flashcards, games, and learning tools for learning vocabulary and grammar and reviewing class material

A factor unique to the past year is the pandemic. Perhaps the students have had more incentive to explore the internet because of all the downtime (see Grose, 2021). Interestingly, students identified some positive effects of learning during the pandemic, including online experiences. Madison noted that “the pandemic has been good for preparing high school students to learn how to self-teach and to work at our own pace.” For those who have always enjoyed working independently, it has been especially beneficial. “It’s given me more time to learn on my own, which is always more fun,” noted Jennifer.

Lastly, some saw self-reflection and empathy as positive outcomes of the pandemic. Madison suggested that “the pandemic slowed down the world and made us re-evaluate how we can do things better. In addition, people are now more understanding and empathetic.”

REACTIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Reactions

The primary reaction of NCSFL members in the audience to the panel was gratitude—gratitude that the students had taken time to join us on a school day and share their views. Another reaction was a sense of awe for the students’ observations, and they quoted the students liberally in the Zoom chat. How fun it was for the students to find that they themselves were being quoted in the chat!

Some of the representative chat comments from the audience and student comments are listed below.

What the educators in the audience said:

Both Duarte Silva (California) and Ryan Wertz (Ohio) agreed that students’ insight about language learning is one that educators “need to connect with on a much more frequent basis than most of us regularly do.” Cheri Quinlan (New Jersey) suggested that “hearing from the learners is so important and can either support what we do or challenge us to think about how we can better support learners. Thank you to all!”

Others wanted to build on what they learned from the student panelists and enlist students in other ways to help promote NCSFL’s mission. Pam Delfosse (Wisconsin) commented, “This [panel] is fantastic! We should have a student advisory board and liaison to NCSFL.” Shuhan Wang (Delaware) added, “To all students, thank you so much for your sharing and insights. We can tell you’ll be movers and shakers of the world to make it a kinder and better place for all! Good luck!”

The NCSFL members were enthralled with the students and noted specific quotes in the chat. Regina Peszat (Kansas) loved Madison’s comment about the difficulty appreciating language learning in small schools that aren’t diverse. Michele Anciaux Aoki (Washington) liked Karla’s comment about finding her own personal motivation. Madelyn Gonnerman Torchin (Massachusetts) liked Jennifer’s comment about the ability to “connect with the world through language.” Michele Anciaux Aoki (Washington) quoted Josh, “The world is

way bigger than your school, your community.” Gregory Fulkerson (Delaware) loved George’s quote, “Language is more than flashcards—there are people to it.” And Kathy Shelton (Ohio) liked Ella’s comment about using “her heritage experience to connect to cultural opportunities such as social events and shopping to practice the language in context.”

The students mentioned a variety of motives for wanting to learn another language, such as family, travel, the broadening of horizons and the desire to establish personal connections. None of these motivated students mentioned fulfillment of a graduation requirement as a motivating factor. While the students’ comments are compelling at face value, it is also worthwhile to listen on another level. We must not merely hear what students say but go deeper and listen to what they are telling us and consider the implications.

What the students said:

- School can get in the way of language learning. Several of the students commented that inherent limitations that resulted from schools’ master schedules made it difficult or impossible for them to continue with traditional class work. However, it’s also important to note that the conflicts for these motivated students did not mean that they abandoned their study of the language. They found alternatives to classroom instruction.
- Discrete grammar tasks and what feels like constant (though well-intended) correction are inhibitors to progress. Students often felt that they were being held to unrealistic expectations when it came to classroom interactions.
- Many traditional classroom practices are unmotivating. Students often cited arbitrarily assigned vocabulary as having little practical use for them beyond practice at memorization.
- Students appreciated their teachers and the activities in their classes that were enjoyable, especially tasks that helped them make connections with others and increase their opportunities for communication.
- Using a variety of technology applications, students found resources on their own to meet their personal needs. Some of the students talked about their teacher encouraging them to learn on their own outside of the curricular boundaries of the class.

Implications

The rich discussion by the student panel suggests a number of implications for the language education field. It was clear from the reaction of the educators in the audience that these suggestions merit full consideration.

- The profession has not been successful in teaching students to be emerging, independent language users. Helping students fulfill a credit requirement has not been the same as producing users of the language. This is often happening independently.
- The power of the schools' monopoly on credits is still in force but weakening. Currently there is little in the way of competition for credentialing of the high school language courses. However, with the shift toward proficiency rather than mere credit accumulation, this dominant model is increasingly changing. In the future, students such as these six and others will have alternative ways to demonstrate the fulfillment of requirements. The Seal of Biliteracy, for example, attests to learning that may not be tied to classroom instruction but is recognized at graduation. Little attention seems to be given to that reality in the profession or at the preservice level.
- Alternatives to help students meet personal language learning goals are available. Language learning is a deeply personal endeavor. Over and over the students talked about the lack of *personal* relevance in their classroom. They consistently voiced the desire to learn language skills that they could use to communicate with people they wanted to communicate with about topics that were of interest to them. They also showed that it can be done.
- Whole-class instruction, the model found in the vast majority of classrooms around the country, cannot adequately deliver what motivated learners are after. This is not to say that the students didn't appreciate their teachers or the ways the teachers tried to make their instruction interesting. But many of them indicated in their own way the fact that what they were experiencing in their classroom was simply not meeting their personal language learning needs.

Students are finding the resources they need on their own. It's remarkable how easy this was for them compared to the experiences of students even

a decade ago. In follow-up conversations with the students, we asked about the level of encouragement and support for these personal endeavors that they had received from their teachers. Not surprisingly, it wasn't 100%. Once again, there was no attempt to fault their teachers. Students and teachers alike realize that the current practices in language classrooms are still geared to whole-group instruction and assessable "progress," with personal support mainly restricted to support for the classroom curriculum.

- The pandemic has given us a glimpse at some possible future directions. The students each spoke of the way the pandemic had impacted their learning experiences. We have seen very clearly that opportunities for learning do not have to be tied to seat-time or even geography.
- Alternatives to the traditional classroom-based model exist. Students want their learning to be highly personalized to meet individual goals, and their ability to choose materials on their own can address this preference.
- While the students all expressed appreciation for their teachers, their comments also indicated the rapidly changing nature of language learning and the need for teachers to make significant change.

“As these students told us through their words, they are embracing new directions and resources to go beyond merely responding to language instruction and become emergent language learners and speakers.”



CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have attempted to hear not just the students' words, but the meaning of what they were saying to the professionals who were listening in. What recommendations can we derive from their comments?

- Student motivation for learning a language (not just responding to instruction) is to be found in their individual and personal desire to connect more deeply—with the culture, with the speakers of the target language, and with resources within the culture. **To meet the learner's needs, teachers need to retool in order to reduce whole-class instruction and group pacing.**
- Students expressed a desire for learning centered in active and personal participation. Whether in-class games or, more often, individually discovered resources, activities that met their personal language needs were highly sought after and prized. **Helping students identify and use resources beyond the curriculum will give students some of the requisite**

tools for continuing their language learning journey after the classroom experience ends.

- Students chafed at the idea of always having the learning process dominated by explicit or implicit assessment of their learning. In current classroom practices, students are normally assessed on where they come up short in the teacher's expectations. Instead, these learners want to be seen as emerging users of the language, with support and encouragement based on where they are and where they want to go, rather than where the teacher thinks they should be. **There is a very real need to re-evaluate assessment and its role in the classroom.**

The NCSSFL student panel offered a unique opportunity to listen to what a variety of high school language learners from around the country had to say about their pursuit of language proficiency. As we continue to focus on the goal of helping emergent users of new languages, we must not only have a commitment to practice actively

listening to their words, but also ensure we are also hearing what they are saying to us.

The pandemic has underscored many of the weaknesses of our current approaches. When “school” had a veritable monopoly on language learning opportunities, there was little pressure to close the gap between teaching and

learning. As these students told us through their words, they are embracing new directions and resources to go beyond merely responding to language instruction and become emergent language learners and speakers. Our challenge is to understand this fundamental shift and, as a profession, seize the opportunities that are opening to guide language learning in new and different ways.

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About the Authors

Tom Welch, educational consultant, is a former French teacher, high school principal, and state foreign language supervisor at the Kentucky Department of Education. He currently advocates for increased opportunities for learning unbound by traditional limits of time or place.

Nancy Rhodes, CAL senior fellow, served as CAL's director of foreign/world language education for 18 years and currently works to develop teacher capacity to improve student language proficiency and academic performance.

About CAL

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1959. Headquartered in Washington, DC, CAL has earned an international reputation for its contributions to the fields of bilingual and dual-language education, English as a second language, world languages education, language policy, assessment, immigrant and refugee integration, literacy, dialect studies, and the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children. CAL's mission is to promote language learning and cultural understanding by serving as a trusted resource for research, services, and policy analysis. Through its work, CAL seeks solutions to issues involving language and culture as they relate to access and equity in education and society around the globe.

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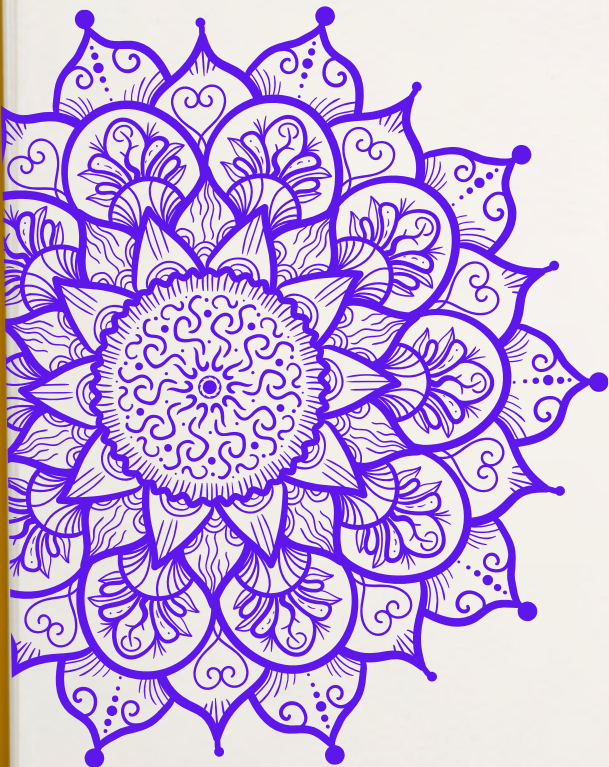
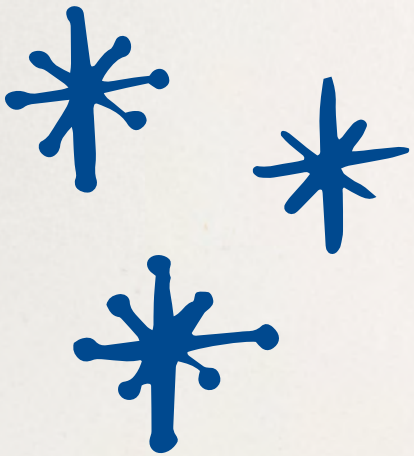
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