

Connection: The Key to Language Education

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Abstract

As language programs are endangered in K–16 contexts due to low enrollments, and for budgetary reasons, it is more important than ever to find enduring ways to help promote the study of languages and to make studying languages enjoyable for everyone. For sustainable language education, we need to focus on and promote the true purpose of languages—connection. This article shows readers how connection can be the focus of any language education curriculum through the use of imagined-communities-based strategies and practices.

Keywords: *imagined communities, curriculum, pedagogy, advocacy*

Introduction

Languages are vital in our lives. Do we need convincing of this? Unfortunately, in the United States, it seems we do. If one looks at the disheartening enrollment numbers in K–12 and postsecondary language courses and programs (American Councils for International Education, 2017; Lusin et al., 2023), it seems that languages do not hold enough importance for students, schools, or institutions. Sadly, some languages (e.g., German and French) are in an even more precarious position than world languages education more generally. The enrollment numbers can be such that programs have been threatened or cut altogether, and schools and institutions, when unable to entirely cut world languages, focus on only offering Spanish, or Spanish and another more popular language. Somehow, there is a disconnect between languages playing a vital role in our lives and what happens when it comes to enrollment in languages other than English in the United States.

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The purpose of this article is not to delve into the importance and benefits of learning a language other than one's first. As we know, there are countless benefits to bi-/multilingualism, and it has been the topic of many articles (see Fox et al., 2019a, 2019b for overviews). Instead, the purpose of this article is to reconnect us with the true *why* behind learning languages and to *operationalize* this why in the classroom. Why is language learning essential? ACTFL says it best in their simple tagline: "language connects" (ACTFL, 2024). Focusing on connection is the key to the success of language education.

Connection and Community Through Languages

As an important part of the language and connection formula, it is necessary to remember that connection is essential for human beings, especially in our global society; it is part of our nature. We are interconnected in so many ways, and what happens in one place is not insulated from another. Positive connection can provide a good future for all of us, and disconnection can put our very survival at risk (Christakis & Fowler, 2011; Laitman, 2015).

What is connection? As defined by Merriam-Webster, connection can take many forms and be as simple as an "affinity," or it can be stronger and denote a "relationship" or "link" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). It all depends on the situation and the person or people involved. How can we measure connection? It can be as simple as a feeling or as complicated as a scientific measurement. Feelings of connection can be measured both qualitatively (like in the author's research) and quantitatively (like in Lee and Robbins' 1995 "Social Connectedness Scale"). Coming back to the idea that "language connects" (ACTFL, 2024), in the case of this article, the idea is that language connects people, and it also can give them a sense of affinity for, or a link to, languages, cultures, and people who speak those languages and are of those cultures. Languages were created to help people communicate with each other and the word communication shares a root with communion – *communis*. This is Latin for "common" and it indicates sharing and relationship (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a).

With the true essence of languages and their use being about connection, we as educators at all levels (K–16) need to help our students, as well as administrators, parents, community members, and businesses, see that languages and language education are important because languages connect us. At a very basic level, focusing on the connecting power of languages is a far-reaching practice for student recruitment, retention, and language program survival at every level (not to mention a benefit for humankind). This can be done through the fostering of imagined communities, which suits all contexts.

"Imagined communities refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of imagination" (Norton, 2013, p. 8). Simply put, imagined communities are connections and feelings of community we form with others through our imaginations. They reside in the person and influence how one relates to others. Without always having the possibility to travel or study abroad, what better way to help students see that languages can connect us than through the power of imagination? Research found that imagination can have tangible results in our physical performance (Hinshaw, 1991), our opinions and behaviors (Petrova & Cialdini, 2008), and our feelings of happiness, love, and connection (Abugasea Heidt, 2022; Poerio et al., 2015). Through the fostering of imagined communities in the classroom, connection and community can be felt by creating believable scenarios that help students imagine themselves using the target language and interacting with target cultures as they learn and use languages authentically (Abugasea Heidt, 2021).

Context

Through a yearlong empirical study, imagined communities has been successfully infused into two suburban, eighth-grade German classrooms in the Northeastern United States (Abugasea Heidt, 2022). The drive behind this innovation was to bolster student interest and retention in German classes beyond the minimum number of years required of students, to keep the German program viable, and to ideally promote a lifelong love of language learning. In the past, the district considered cutting German, and it was still the language with the lowest enrollment when the innovation was first implemented. In nearby districts, German had already been cut, so it was important to prevent the same fate.

Imagined Communities: Strategies and Practices

Imagined communities can be fostered in the classroom without the need for extra funding, which is a bonus for instructors and administrators alike. The only expenditure is in planning time because there are no textbooks or resources that provide a prepackaged imagined-communities methodology or curriculum for instructors. The instructor needs to intentionally design instruction, activities, assignments, and assessments in a way where students need to imagine themselves: using the target language with authentic target-language-speaking communities, engaging with authentic materials and websites used by target language speakers, and participating in authentic scenarios that mimic scenarios target language speakers might face.

Fostering imagined communities is best done using task-based instruction (TBI). In TBI, students use the target language to complete authentic tasks in the classroom; the focus is on the task and the use of the language in a meaningful way, rather than on using traditional learning approaches such as initiation, response, and evaluation (Shrum & Glisan, 2016; Willis & Willis, 2007). Where an imagined-communities-based approach differs from straight TBI is that the tasks are all geared to be meaningful for the students with the intent to help them imagine themselves in the scenario, which helps foster a sense of connection with others from the target language groups. TBI is the vehicle, and an imagined-communities-based approach is the guidance system helping students arrive at the destination of a greater sense of connection with the language, cultures, and people who speak the target language.

An example that might encompass all the above is planning a move to a target-language-speaking city and, in the process, finding an apartment online or from the paper, convincing parents/guardians of the best apartment, and shopping online for furniture and household needs. For older students, this can also include drafting an email to a potential landlord, looking through job advertisements, and writing a résumé and cover letter for a job. In the process, students might create a portfolio or presentation (being provided with just-in-time information that will help them as they work on their projects) and be assessed on authentic activities.

Because of the creativity and imagination needed on the part of the instructor to meet the needs and cater to the interests of different students and groups, it is not possible to offer a one-size-fits-all approach, such as a textbook. As with teaching anything for the first time, planning time is necessary for not only creating scenarios, but creating the accompanying activities, assignments, assessments, and lessons to address students' interests and support their success. Instructors should not let the need for creativity, imagination, and planning deter them from implementing an imagined-communities-based approach. The reward is that students can have an authentic experience with languages and cultures in a

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way unlike other methods and, most importantly, it helps them connect with the languages and cultures on a deeper level than they might otherwise. To capitalize on this, the only thing instructors need to do is to channel their own experiences with languages and cultures and create scenarios that will offer students the opportunity to imagine themselves interacting authentically, and realistically, with the language and cultures—using the language and learning about cultures for real-world purposes.

Sample Scenarios

An example I used in an eighth-grade class is that students are told that their family is moving abroad and they are asked to pick a (target language) city that they are moving to, search apartment listings for that city within the price range given, choose their favorite apartment, and create a presentation for their family explaining why the family should move to this specific apartment. Then, as the year continues, students need to shop online for furniture and household items for the apartment using provided websites and share with the class how they have outfitted their apartments, including how much everything costs and where they purchased their furniture and household goods from. They will also then get to know the transit system in their city by using the transit system's website (or app) to map out how they will get from their apartment to school and various other places they will need to go around the city, such as the grocery store where they will shop for food for their family after reviewing online advertisements and recipes. For all of the tasks, students work on individual products but are able to work together as they complete their assignments. They have class time to use computers and other devices and are provided with links to websites to complete their tasks. They are also provided with physical realia where appropriate (e.g., IKEA catalogs, maps for transit systems, city maps, restaurant menus, and grocery store ads) and with ongoing support to scaffold the completion of their tasks (e.g., just-in-time instruction on necessary grammar points, vocabulary needed, or norms of the culture necessary to understand for the assignment, as well as worksheets with tips on how to best complete the task and what to look out for).

In the postsecondary context, all the above is used, but on a different level. Students can be told that they will be studying abroad, or moving abroad, and they can again pick a city, find an apartment, and outfit their apartment. If they will be studying abroad, they can map out the public transportation to and from their university to the apartment or to the grocery store and some popular restaurants or hangouts. These students can also search the university's website for courses they would take and any other activities they might participate in. For others who might not want to study abroad, they can search job advertisements and write cover letters and résumés. Students can also draft emails to potential landlords inquiring about the apartments they have chosen. Additionally, they can also do research on good restaurants and hangouts and plan some things that they might cook while living there, looking at authentic recipes on websites and grocery store advertisements to choose groceries. These students can also look at restaurant menus and movie theater listings to plan a night out. As in the above secondary-level scenario, at the postsecondary level, students are provided with scaffolds, resources, and materials. One difference, based on students' proficiency levels, might be in the amount and type of scaffolding and the amount of class time used for students to complete the tasks.

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These scenarios foster imagined communities as they give students opportunities to imagine themselves living in the target country and target culture, using the target language to do things that people from that place do regularly. It helps them put themselves into the shoes of what might have before felt foreign to them, seeing that people from the target country live similar lives to their own, just with a different language and different cultural elements. It builds connection by showing similarities and giving students the opportunity to imagine themselves in proximity to target language speakers, doing as they do in their daily lives.

Implementation Guidelines

Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to fostering imagined communities in the classroom, the following guidelines can help instructors plan for their own contexts.

- Create plausible, authentic scenarios that overlay topics, vocabulary, grammar, etc. that students need to learn and use at a given time based on your school's or institution's curriculum. (Research found that the scenarios should be plausible for a person to benefit and connect with most [Abugasea Heidt, 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011].)
- Design activities, assignments, and assessments that revolve around these scenarios.
- Give students guidelines for the activities and assignments but also provide autonomy to allow them to personally connect with the scenario and truly imagine themselves doing the activities in real life.
- Provide just-in-time instruction to help students not only complete the activities, assignments, and assessments, but also help them learn what they need to learn based on the curriculum.
- Make everything, including assessments, authentic. If giving a traditional test, use questions and realia that provide authentic scenarios and target language and cultural material (e.g., an advertisement or authentic recipe).

Outcomes and Future Steps

This approach has been successfully implemented with positive results. Some of the positive outcomes have included (a) students reporting “going more in-depth” in learning about the culture(s) and language, (b) students examining cultures in new ways, (c) students noting an “increase in feelings of connection or ability to relate” to target language speakers, and (d) an increase in feelings of membership with target-language-speaking communities (Abugasea Heidt, 2022, p. 117; see also Abugasea Heidt, 2021). Anecdotally, as it was not a part of formal data collection, a healthy number of the students continued studying the target language beyond the required number of years. Signs that an imagined-communities-based approach is working are that students have fun with the assignments and projects and are interested in continuing their language studies.

To make this approach sustainable, instructors should catalog their activities, assignments, assessments, and lessons, making notes of revisions and innovations for future iterations, especially changes made based on students' reflections from their experience with the activities. Additionally, in settings where there is more than one instructor of a language in a district or institution, it would be helpful for the instructors to work together to plan, create materials, activities, and assignments, compile websites and realia, and design assessments. Once designed, implementation will require recurring adjustments based on instructor reflection and

current students' needs and individualities. This approach is an interactive one, requiring instructors to adjust to their students.

Opportunities

It is important to reiterate that, with proper planning, an imagined-communities-based approach can be implemented at all levels (K–16), in all contexts, and with all languages. We can begin with young children, helping them feel connected with others, with a new language, and with new cultures. This will provide an early opportunity for children to cherish and grow their innate love for languages, cultures, and connection. Additionally, we can provide these experiences for older students, including adults, because, with the right approach, it is never too late to connect and to develop a love for languages and cultures.

Conclusion

Working with and fostering students' imagined communities, especially as they pertain to language-speaking communities, provides students with the all-important *why* behind language learning. Without this *why* being explicit and being catered to, language education will not rise to the place of importance in people's lives that it deserves. At all levels of education, we must focus on providing learning experiences for students that center on the connecting power of languages. We can do this now, within our classrooms, through the use of an imagined-communities approach. We hold the key to connection in our hands, and in our minds, and it is also the key to the success of language education.

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