

BY DOUGLASS CROUSE

Languages for Specific Purposes in the 21st Century



It was a problem any language educator would envy: After studying Spanish for the equivalent of five years, many of Cristin Bless's high school juniors hungered for more. But after Advanced Placement (AP), the menu of challenges ran out.

Bless considered creating a business course in Spanish. Her school, Castle View High School in Castle Rock, CO, puts a priority on developing students' 21st century skills set, so it seemed a natural fit. But once she spoke with educators and advocates in the Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) field, Bless conceived a broader vision: Why not offer a Spanish language class on leadership?

With her administrators' blessing, Bless began crafting a proposal in April 2011 and sent out Google Docs surveys to gauge the interest of students—as well as their parents—who might enroll in the class. The idea was warmly received and in January, after a year of detailed planning, the course kicked off.

"In the 21st century, the world has shrunk. These students may well be working with and for people who speak other languages and who come from other cultures," says Bless, who is also President-Elect of the Colorado Congress of Foreign Language Teachers (CCFLT). "Students are more willing to work hard at something when they see those connections outside the four walls of the classroom. They want to be able to take what they learn in school and apply it to real life."

The ultimate expression of the Connections goal area of the National Standards for Learning Languages (i.e., "Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information"), LSP courses have long been learner-centered, with a focus on helping students discover and practice the types of language they need to meet their specific professional goals. Traditionally, most LSP learners have been college students and adults. But Bless and a small number of other teachers around the country are finding ways to also connect younger students with the work worlds they might one day inhabit.

Among those who have encouraged K–12 teachers to pursue such projects is Mary Risner, an LSP pioneer who serves as Associate Director of Outreach and Business Programs at the University of Florida's Center for Latin American Studies.

“I loved Cristin’s idea of calling the course ‘Spanish for Leadership’ because that can bring in students interested in developing these skills for any profession,” Risner says. “Teachers who are doing similarly innovative things need to have a voice so these ideas get out there.”

Creatively designed LSP courses offer students real-world opportunities to practice language and navigate culture in the context of a specific field. While many to date have focused on the use of Spanish in fields such as business, health, and social work, Risner and other proponents are working to help expand both the number of languages and professions. In the critically important field of STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics], for example, more and more people are discovering ways to connect related professions with language learning. LSP courses in Arabic, Chinese, German, and other languages are continually being added at all levels.

“I’m always looking to post more things about what people are doing,” says Risner, who keeps in touch with the LSP community through Twitter and other social media. “Some of the journals on business languages have articles with examples of what’s being done in class. The model is there; you just adapt it to your language. Sometimes teachers are already doing career-related things and just need to frame it differently.”

In the eyes of business and government, the need for such initiatives is great, says Jim Vanides, Global Education Program Manager for Sustainability and Social Innovation at Hewlett Packard Company. He is also the author of a post on the Digital Learning Environments blog that is widely cited in LSP circles: “4 Reasons Why ‘Global Fluency’ Matters: An Open Letter to 6th Graders Everywhere.”

“Global fluency is the new résumé differentiator,” says Vanides. “Yes,” he writes to the 12-year-olds who make up his intended audience, “the ‘standard language of business’ within the company I work for is English. However, many of my colleagues are fluent in at least three languages, and they can be ‘friendly’ in one or two more.

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But it’s more than just ‘learning a foreign language.’ Global fluency, by my definition, is the ability to understand and collaborate across the complexities of language, culture, and multiple time zones.”

He urges students to view all subjects “in a global context” and cautions them that using Internet-rendered translations isn’t enough. “If you rely on Google Translate, you may be surprised, confused, or embarrassed,” he says. “So go ahead and explore your ‘talking dictionary’ and online translation tools—but know that what you will need is ‘meaning,’ and this requires vocabulary and experience combined.”

President Obama has consistently spoken of the need for prioritizing STEM education—a concern shared by many other national, state, and local government and business leaders. “Our nation’s success depends on strengthening America’s role as the world’s engine of discovery and innovation,” he told a gathering of CEOs, scientists, teachers, and others in 2010. “And that leadership tomorrow depends on how we educate our students today—especially, in science, technology, engineering, and math.”

You can never start too young in helping students make connections between language and those highly valued STEM subjects. At Amana Academy in Georgia, students in grades K–8 combine Arabic with a special emphasis on scientific discovery. Topics are linked from year to year at the eight-year-old charter school. For example, kindergarten students examine the life cycle of frogs and ants through exposure to songs and key words, with a focus that shifts to life in rainforests the following year and the components of plant and animal cells by fifth grade.

Language teachers combine the school’s Expeditionary Learning model—a collaborative approach that puts an emphasis on hands-on activities and educational outings—with the National Standards and Georgia state performance standards.

Eman Maamoun, an Arabic teacher who translated the state language standards into that language, says students get added exposure in Arabic to concepts first presented in their other classes.

“Our work in Amana is teamwork,” she says. “Since we all share the grades, we need to communicate, agree, and collaborate before anything is introduced to the students. So we plan everything together and everyone adds to the big picture.” The ultimate goal, says Maamoun, who chairs the newly formed Georgia Association for Teachers of Arabic, is to give students an early start developing and honing the skills they will need as adults.

“Amana is trying to create a global student,” she says. “This is why we focus on the environment, the Expeditionary Learning, and the Arabic—to push for a student who will have all this in-depth knowledge and go places. I want my students to be fluent in Arabic, but also more confident to work in any job in the future.”

Similar language and professional goals are in place at Bless’s school, which is composed of four academies. There, some sophomores reach Spanish 5 by starting their study in middle school and taking two course levels each year as freshmen and sophomores. “But in their junior year,” Bless recalls, “many of them would ask, ‘Where do we go from here?’”

In searching for a supplement to AP courses, she attended a Centers for International Business Education & Research (CIBER) conference at Florida International University specially designed for K–12 teachers. There, she met Ann Abbott, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign whose Spanish language courses on entrepreneurship and community-based learning give students opportunities for local and international outreach.

Global fluency is the new résumé differentiator

Abbott has an average of two educators contact her each week seeking information about service learning and languages for specific purposes—evidence, she says, “that there’s interest out there . . . but also a need for more outreach and education.”

One deterrent to starting new programs is the natural tendency to question whether one’s level of content knowledge is up to the task, Abbott says.

“When people think of Languages for Specific Purposes, they think they really have to know a lot about the particular field. They’ll say: ‘But I’ve never worked in the business world!’” she says. “Our best approach is to say, ‘Yes, it’s about the specific content area and the vocabulary that goes with it. But in every professional context there are certain activities you’ll always have to do. It could be an intake form for a doctor’s office or a business form asking about marketing material.’”

That’s what makes the title of Bless’s course so appropriate. “If we’re preparing our students for professions in the 21st century, they need to have some basic leadership skills, to be able to work with people who have different skills, and to learn and be able to teach themselves technological skills—even if students don’t know what they want to be when they get older,” Abbott says. “We know in this world that people often change jobs and career paths.”

Margaret Gonglewski, Associate Professor of German and International Affairs at George Washington University, began teaching her “German Business” more than 12 years ago at the suggestion of a colleague. Given Germany’s status as the

largest economy in the Euro zone, it makes particular sense, she says.

Since then, interest has grown steadily in the course, which has an enrollment cap of 15 and requires that students enter with a minimum proficiency rating of Intermediate.

“Students have gotten more pragmatic and ask, ‘What will get me a job when I get out?’” Gonglewski says. “I didn’t want to make this a correspondence, how-to course. You have to get to know Germany as a strategic location and know where the industries are. There’s still a lot of emphasis on literature in some upper-level language courses, so there’s often a neglected aspect of the culture that students don’t know they’re missing.”

Students kick off their year with a unit on applying for a job, with discussion topics including how to identify and capitalize on one’s strengths. Gonglewski touches often upon cultural contrasts—job candidates in Germany including photographs with their résumés, for example. This year, students ended the unit by visiting a German cultural center and interviewing live with native speakers.

Teresa Kennedy, Professor of Bilingual, ELL, and STEM Education at the University of Texas at Tyler, has incorporated science materials into her language classroom since 1985. In addition, she served for more than 11 years as Director of the International Division of the Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE) program, which gives students and teachers opportunities to participate in international hands-on, earth science-related investigations.

Kennedy believes strongly in the marriage of language learning and content area study and offers simple advice to language teachers interested in adopting content-based instruction: “Walk down the hall, introduce yourself to the science teacher, find out what they’re teaching and weave some components of what they’re covering into your own classroom curriculum.” She suggests similar steps to incorporate other subject areas.

“To me, it makes sense that whatever is happening in the language classroom is piggy-backing off what’s being taught in students’ other classes,” she says.

Integrating elements of earth science—such as weather and climate—are a good place to start, Kennedy says. But whatever the topic, she cautions instructors to go through a careful fact-checking process to ensure they are presenting sound information and concepts.

“The most important thing is to connect to the science that is already being taught,” she says. “Teachers shouldn’t go beyond their own knowledge and capabilities. There’s a lot of potential—if they are not working together with the science teacher in their school—that they could encourage misconceptions about science that could interfere with future learning of concepts.”

Science teachers also may have contacts in professional fields who speak other languages and would be willing to come talk with students about how they use languages in their work. Linking up with ESL teachers—who teach diverse subject areas as routine practice—offers an additional advantage.

“Foreign language teachers tend to focus on social language skills while ESL and

Learn More About Languages for Specific Purposes

4 Reasons Why “Global Fluency” Matters—An Open Letter to 6th Graders Everywhere
tinyurl.com/vanides-blog

Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBER)
ciberweb.msu.edu/

Mary Risner on Twitter
<https://twitter.com/LangForCareers>

National Science Teachers Association (NSTA)
nsta.org

National Security Education Program (NSEP)
nsep.gov

Works to enhance American security by “increasing our national capacity to deal effectively with foreign cultures and languages”

Network of Business Language Educators (NOBLE)
nble.org

Offers resources for business language materials, intercultural competence, and international business education

Network of Business Language Educators (on Facebook)
tinyurl.com/facebook-noble

Scholarship and Teaching on Languages for Specific Purposes
tinyurl.com/ayldznh

A report on the state of LSP education published in March 2013

Video: Are We Prepared for the Jobs of the Future?
tinyurl.com/byae2r6

Video: Don Quixote’s Lessons for Leadership
tinyurl.com/stanford-video-leadership

bilingual teachers are covering academic content,” Kennedy says. “I think that’s why you see a lot of teachers who bridge both—to get the best of both worlds.”

Connect to Make it Work

For teachers eager to experiment or even start their own courses, connecting with experienced peers is key. Social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn offer LSP-minded teachers ideal ways to exchange ideas.

Bless, who had little background in business, found the process of educating herself exhilarating. With support from Abbott, Risner, and others in the LSP field, she tailored her course to rely primarily on Internet resources, resulting in no additional costs for her district.

With each new resource on a given topic—how to write a résumé, proper business etiquette, how to look for a job—she created digital files for later use. One prized discovery was a video that a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business uses to teach leadership qualities through an analysis of Don Quixote.

Recently Bless started a new unit in which students analyzed episodes of the TV show, “The Apprentice,” as a basis for articulating the makeup of an effective project leader. “Each week we’ll have a different project with a different project leader who can put the skills we talk about into practice,” Bless says. “For example, ‘Are we following through on each step of our project? Are we listening to team members’ feedback?’”

Bless plans to use Skype to allow students to talk with professionals from other countries, many of them people she met during overseas experiences. They include a lawyer from Argentina and an employee at the U.S. Embassy in Uruguay. Also on the list of invitees is a member of her host family from her time as an exchange student in Mexico: the former mayor of Guadalajara who recently became governor of the Mexican state of Jalisco.

While specialized language courses were part of the vision at her high school when it started seven years ago, it doesn’t necessarily have to be built in for teachers to discover how to do this. Bless sees ways for educators anywhere to apply LSP thinking to their classes. Instead of students brainstorming the traits of an ideal boyfriend or girlfriend, they could discuss the qualities of a team leader or salesperson, for example. A unit on business could also include identifying differences between phone numbers and street addresses in the United States and Spanish-speaking countries, or how to correctly arrange Hispanic last names in office files.

“I’ve learned so much as a teacher this semester,” Bless says. “Students will ask advice or what a particular résumé should look like. . . I say, ‘Let’s go online and see what’s there.’”

She is already seeing students imagine their place in the professional world. One student interested in medical science has begun researching Doctors Without Borders. Another, an aspiring engineer, told Bless he wants to be able to work with people who might think differently than he does. A classmate has already contacted a theatre school in Spain in the hope of securing an internship, using the résumé she developed in class as part of her intended application packet.

In June, Bless and her students will head to Costa Rica, but they will go beyond more typical travel abroad activities in order to put their skills into practice. Their schedule will include a service project in which the Colorado teens will partner with Costa Rican peers to bring enrichment classes to younger children; opportunities for each Castle View student to interview with someone in their field of interest; and a visit to an organic chocolate farm to see up-close how the business works.

Douglass Crouse is a contributing writer to The Language Educator. He also teaches French at Sparta Middle School in Sparta, New Jersey.

EXPLORING STEM RESOURCES

Dr. Teresa Kennedy at the University of Texas at Tyler here shares a few of the many available links to science materials and programs which provide easy integration into the language classroom. These are funded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

NASA

Bright Lights Big City
earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/Lights/

International Space Station
spaceflight.nasa.gov/realdata/tracking/
spaceflight.nasa.gov/station/
www.nasa.gov/externalflash/ISSRG/

Mysterious Atmosphere
teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlnasa/units/EarthAtmos/

Robin Whirlybird Adventures
rotored.arc.nasa.gov/

S’COOL
scool.larc.nasa.gov/

Space Place (in Spanish)
spaceplace.nasa.gov/espanol/

The Story of a Little Rock on Mars
www.suekientz.com/little_rock/

NOAA

El Niño
www.pmel.noaa.gov/tao/elnino/spanish.html

Nighttime Lights of the World
mapserver.ngdc.noaa.gov/cgi-bin/public/ms/poster/viewer

NSF

Cielo y Tierra Spanish-Language Radio Series
tinyurl.com/cielo-y-tierra

Einstein's Messengers, LIGO Documentary (Spanish Subtitles)
www.nsf.gov/news/mmg/ligo_sp.jsp

Other Programs

(with funding from NASA, NOAA, and NSF)

The GLOBE Program
www.globe.gov/teaching-and-learning/materials/languages

GLOBE at Night
www.globeatnight.org/

Windows to the Universe
www.windows2universe.org/