Getting Started with Kindergarten World Language Experience

Language | Program | Teacher | Curriculum

Washington schools that receive state funding for Full-Day Kindergarten are required to provide experiences in a world language other than English. Young children are like sponges when it comes to languages. They soak up the sounds they hear, and their brains and mouths are more receptive to distinguishing and pronouncing new sounds than our adult brains and mouths are. At the same time, we need to be thoughtful about how we introduce new languages into a young learner’s environment because language is so connected to culture and identity. Here are some ideas to help you get started.

**Choosing the Language**

People often ask, “What language is the right language to teach?” In the case of kindergarten world language experience, the answer is pretty simple: the language that makes “sense” in that school and community. Children can benefit from learning any language. The goal ultimately is to create an opportunity for students to learn one language long enough to achieve a high level of proficiency. However, if you’re just getting started, choose a language that will allow you to create a positive learning experience for the children and make them eager to learn more of that language – or another – in the future.

- **Look to the community.** Visit with people in the community who would know how to best approach the speakers of other languages about the possibility of sharing their language and culture with kindergarteners. Follow their lead.
- **Look to the students in the school (and their families).** If you have a large number of speakers of another language, it may be desirable to choose that language for your class’s world language experience. Or, perhaps you would want to choose a totally new language for all.
- **Look to the school staff.** If the school has multilingual staff, perhaps one of them would be willing to support the program by sharing their language and culture. What languages do they know?

**Defining the Program Goals**

It is important to think about the school’s goals for offering this program. The Legislature has asked the state-funded Full-Day Kindergarten programs to provide a “world language experience.” That doesn’t mean that you have to produce fluent speakers of the language. Things to consider:

- What level of proficiency should students aim to achieve?
- In what skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing?
- Is developing cultural understanding and appreciation important?
For most programs focused on providing a “world language experience,” the goals are about developing, not mastering. First of all, you’ll want the students to develop an interest and desire to continue learning languages later in their schooling. The world language experience could also help them learn to listen more attentively and develop awareness of different cultures and different linguistic systems. These are all good goals – and achievable in a program that devotes 30-60 minutes of class time per week to learning languages.

**Selecting the Teacher**

The teacher qualifications for the language program depend on the type of program planned and the goals. For kindergarten world language experience, the school may not be able to hire an experienced teacher, but if the classroom teacher is thoughtful about how to structure the learning experiences, even a novice teacher (like a community member) can be successful. Qualities to look for:

- **Ability to engage young learners is the most important.** There’s no fooling young children. Because language is so tied to identity, if the children cannot make the connection to the person teaching them, they are not likely to engage in learning the language.
- **Being a native speaker does not guarantee a great teacher.** Non-native speakers can be successful teachers if they’ve had an opportunity to live in country and learn how children speak (which is different than how college instructors speak!).
- **Classroom teachers can guide the learning (using language resources).** Classroom teachers may not have the language expertise or the cultural experience, but they know how to work with kindergarteners. It’s important for them to feel confident to share their knowledge and guide the world language learning experiences of the children, especially if the program is making use of volunteers from the community or online media, such as videos and audio recordings.

**Planning the Curriculum**

There are many options for selecting curriculum materials and activities. Some are free. Some cost money. Here are a few guidelines for planning curriculum for successful language learning experiences:

- **Connect language to content.** One of the most powerful lessons from early language immersion programs is that young children acquire the language naturally when it is the medium for learning interesting and engaging content, such as Math, Science, the Arts, or Geography.
- **Use TPR (Total Physical Response).** Young children learn best by doing. Instead of describing what it means to stand up or open a book or write their name, just tell them to do it as you demonstrate the action yourself.
- **Share the culture(s).** Sharing culture is a special gift that members of the community can bring to the classroom. It’s a chance to teach the children how to respect differences and be open to new possibilities.

For more resources on World Language Experiences, visit the OSPI web site:

[http://www.k12.wa.us/WorldLanguages/WorldLanguageExperiences.aspx](http://www.k12.wa.us/WorldLanguages/WorldLanguageExperiences.aspx)