Language or Languages at the Core?
Tara Williams Fortune, Ph.D.
CARLA and The University of Minnesota

Introduction

A striking feature of the ***Common Core Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects (2010)*** is the pivotal role that literacy plays in schooling and the interrelatedness of language, literacy and subject matter learning. College and Career Ready Standards, a precursor to Common Core Standards (CCS), also establish cross-disciplinary literacy expectations that presume shared responsibility among various disciplines for the development of English language and literacy.

In a similar interdisciplinary vein, U.S. educators and policy makers of science and technical subjects have argued for an integrated and improved approach to the study of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) subjects (National Academy of Sciences, 2009). The focus again is one of leaving behind the "siloed" approach to teaching and learning and instead embracing opportunities for interconnections. Also, both CCS and STEM initiatives underscore the need for the U.S. to develop a globally competitive workforce, one that possesses the subject knowledge and communication skills to address 21st century issues.

What is missing from these two documents, however, is an explicit mention of world languages and cultures education as an essential component of a well-designed, standards-based curriculum that aims to prepare a globally competitive workforce. It would seem that learning languages other than English is still viewed by some as a dispensable add-on, a useful supplement once you have accomplished the basics.

How can world language educators promote a shift in focus away from "(English) *Language* at the Core" to "*Languages* at the Core?"

The key is to make sure that we use world languages in a Vygotskian manner, in other words, both as a symbol-based tool for communicating meaning in a variety of ways and for mediating learning in a variety of areas (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011). We take a big step towards this goal when we:
1. make world language the primary medium of classroom interaction, and
2. use our developing second language and literacy skills to further understandings of other disciplines.

Language immersion education and other forms of content-based language instruction in the U.S. provide a program context where the second language is used exclusively for sustained periods of time. For these programs to achieve their multidimensional goals educators must learn to integrate language, literacy and subject matter and are well-served by making connections across subject areas whenever possible. Because of this, curriculum and assessments developed for language immersion classrooms offer a useful lens to consider how world language and culture education can directly support Common Core Language and Literacy Standards and school-based STEM initiatives.

The Global Literacy through Mandarin Immersion and STEM Project

For the past three years, I have worked as part of a team to design an interdisciplinary unit for the Gr. 3 Mandarin immersion classroom. Minnesota currently has seven early total immersion programs in which elementary students receive all core subject and initial literacy instruction in Mandarin. English Language Arts is introduced as a subject in Gr. 3 but all remaining subject instruction still occurs in Mandarin.

In 2009, Hopkins Public Schools was awarded funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Foreign Language Assistance Program for the *Global Literacy through Mandarin Immersion and STEM Project*, a project developed through the Minnesota Mandarin Immersion Collaborative (MMIC). MMIC is a partnership between four Mandarin immersion programs and multiple units at the University of Minnesota, including the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) and the Confucius Institute.

The MMIC curriculum team worked together to repurpose existing *Engineering is Elementary*® *(EiE*®*)* curriculum materials for the unit entitled **"**Just Passing Through: Designing Model Membranes.**"** The EiE® materials were used with permission from the Museum of Science in Boston.

The goal was to model best practice in curriculum, instruction and assessment for the immersion setting given what has been learned over decades from research and the immersion literature, for example:
- Thematic curriculum organized around a focal narrative;
- Use of hands-on activities and extensive use of visual supports;
- Subject matter and task-based language objectives that make a function-form-vocabulary connection;
- Differentiated language objectives for a range of proficiency levels;
- Counterbalanced instruction that draws explicit attention to and promotes use of easy-to-ignore forms;
- Use and assessment of reading comprehension and other learning strategies;
- Real-world tasks with authentic connection to out-of-school community; and
- Learning activities that meaningfully elicit and recycle relevant language.

The MMIC Model Membrane unit makes use of a translated version of the EiE® focal narrative––*Juan Daniel's Fútbol Frog*–as a means for contextualizing STEM subject matter and cross-cultural content, and introduces a new framework for integrating and differentiating language development throughout the lessons. It also gives careful consideration to vocabulary development and distinguishes between receptive and productive vocabulary learning expectations, a particularly important consideration when students are acquiring literacy in a character-based language.

During the course of designing the unit I realized how Mandarin language and literacy served as the nexus for the interdisciplinary learning. It truly was at the core of all other learning!

The unit culminates in an adaptation of the ACTFL Integrated Performance Assessment (2003) that exemplifies curriculum-based evaluation of subject matter, language, literacy and culture learning. Drawing on ACTFL's Integrated Performance Assessment and Communication Standards (2006), the curriculum team developed a comprehensive battery of performance tasks that provide an opportunity to assess language and literacy development at the same time as subject matter learning.
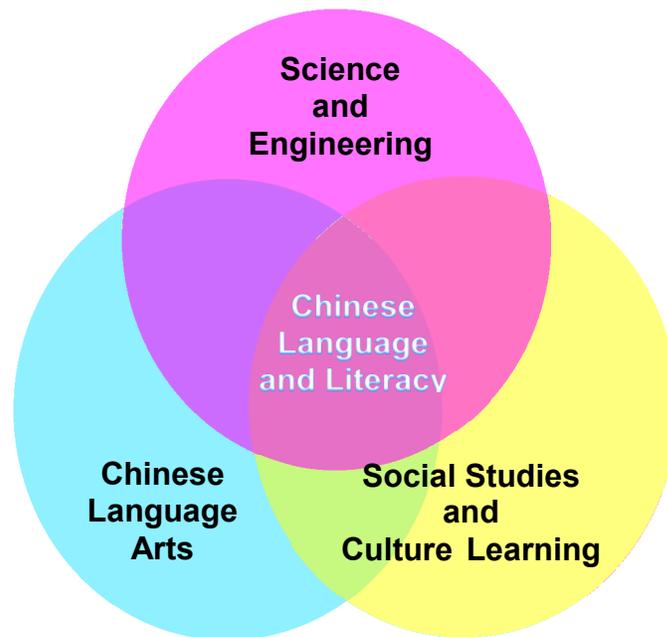
In addition to the development of lesson plans and an interdisciplinary integrated performance assessment, many support materials have been created and are available online to help teachers implement all or part of the unit in their classroom. All materials and lesson plans are available in English and Mandarin. Mandarin immersion programs across the country are encouraged to use and adapt this Model Membrane unit to best fit their respective contexts. We also hope that other language immersion and content-based programs will find the learning activity ideas, handouts and language integration frameworks useful. For more information about the project and to access the unit visit: http://www.carla.umn.edu/immersion/mmic/

More and more, it seems that the future of K–12 world language education in the U.S. will depend, at least in part, on whether it continues to be taught as a separate subject or whether the study of additional languages joins English Language Arts and literacy at the core and becomes a catalyst for more interconnected education that leads to a globally literate society.

To reach this objective, world language teachers need access to thoughtfully designed learning activities and assessments that model the complex task of language and literacy integration into subject matter teaching. Moreover, teacher educators need access to funding to provide professional development experiences that support language teachers ability to effectively implement such curriculum and to carry out research in classrooms to explore if and how

integrated interdisciplinary language curriculum impacts student learning.

Let us hope that with strong leadership and a clear international strategy as outlined in the U.S. Department of Education's recent publication, **Succeeding Globally Through International Education and Engagement (2012),** world language educators will be able to achieve these goals.