IU program exposing youngsters to less commonly taught languages

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In a cluster of plastic chairs at Girls Inc. of Monroe County, a group of girls sat in front of three college students and a white board with a skeleton drawn on it.

The girls, ages 9 to 11, weren’t learning science or even another subject from the school day.

Instead, they were learning a language that is less commonly taught: Arabic.

“I am putting on our raas? asked Indiana University sophomore Drew Szparaga as he placed both hands on his head.

What is this? he added, pointing to the white baseball hat one girl wore. 111210Quba449aa. Say it with me: Quba2275192aa.2403

3710243Quba706aa the girls tried, forming the unfamiliar word for hat.

Often times, lessons are just about letting the students know that other languages and cultures exist, the instructors said. But even more, the lessons teach cross-cultural understanding and spark curiosity.

It’s starting a path for lifelong learning and can be translated to a variety of contexts, said Hilary Kahn, director of IUs Center for the Study of Global Change, which runs the language project with the help of partners both on and off campus.

Bridges: Children, Languages, World is in its ninth year and recently received the Paul Simon Award for the Promotion of Language and International Studies. The national award is given to a group or individual who is outside the language teaching profession but promotes language and international understanding.

It’s a welcomed program and is filling a gap, said Susan Garcia, the project coordinator. She said less commonly taught languages are rarely offered in schools, but the community has embraced them.

Other communities wouldn’t have the same enthusiasm, Garcia said.

This is what IU is good at, Kahn said. 27572219

We have dozens and dozens of languages, many that are only found at IU, so this a way to share that expertise.366406

Partnering with various departments at IU, the instructors are college students, mostly undergraduates, who are studying various languages, Garcia said. The languages taught in the project change each semester and this spring include Arabic, Russian, Mongolian, Zulu, Persian and Chinese for pre-kindergarten to grade 8.

For Lila Raouf, an IU senior who teaches the Arabic class with Szparaga and assistant Brian Fitzgerald, teaching is a way to spread cultural understanding. She said she decided to learn Arabic at IU because her dad is Egyptian, and she never learned Arabic growing up. Raouf said the class teaches her students about other cultures and gives them basic language skills.

Research has shown that learning a second language improves overall literacy, Garcia said.

Yet, each week is unpredictable, said Vesna Dimitreska, the programs language coordinator. She works with the IU students to plan lessons, but said every group of children is different, so the instructors learn to adapt.

To make the classes engaging, Garcia said the instructors blend traditional teaching methods with games to reinforce the lessons. During the Arabic class, the trio of IU students led games of memory and the Hokey Pokey that asked the girls to use words for various body parts.

Afterward, they tried out clothing words.

Both Kahn and Garcia said even with the Simon award, they hope to see the project continue to grow with more students and more locations.

Bloomington is engaged in this, and the award is really for Bloomington, Kahn said. 206

This increasingly matters to Bloomington and IU.
Sparking cultural curiosity
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