Growing up in Macedonia, Vesna Dimitrieska began learning English at age 11. “I loved the very first class I took,” she says. Learning a new language wasn’t threatening; it was an adventure.

Now Dimitrieska, 36, is the language coordinator for the Bridges: Children, Languages, World project and helps bring that love of language to Bloomington-area children. Bridges classes are free and taught by Indiana University language students, who volunteer their time. “They make the classes fun,” says Dimitrieska. “It’s a very nonthreatening, friendly environment. There are games and stories, so the children don’t feel they are actively learning, but they are.”

Project Coordinator Susan Garcia says the program “fills a need and narrows a gap” in the teaching of foreign languages. “In the United States we don’t emphasize a lot of the less commonly taught languages, and even when we do teach foreign language, it’s often not until middle school,” she says. “But the best time to start language instruction is at a very young age, as early as preschool.” Bridges offers instruction in languages including Arabic, Chinese, Mongolian, Russian, and Zulu to children as young as age 3.

This spring, the Center for the Study of Global Change, which administers the program, was awarded the 2014 Paul Simon Award for the Promotion of Language and International Studies. (The award is named for the late senator from Illinois, an advocate of language learning.)

“The Global Center swears by its responsibility to reach far beyond the Bloomington campus, and we are extremely proud that the now award-winning Bridges program exemplifies this commitment in its innovative and collaborative community programming,” says Hilary Kahn, director of the Global Center. One of 11 federally funded Title VI area studies centers in the School of Global and International Studies at IU, Bridges is supported by IU’s School of Education, several other Title VI centers, and three community partners — Banneker Community Center, Girls Inc. of Monroe County, and Monroe County Public Library.

Garcia says the classes aren’t intended to make children fully proficient in the languages they study. “Our goal is to foster a love of learning language at an early age,” she says. “Bloomington is an especially receptive community for this program because people here understand the value of learning about other cultures and looking beyond themselves to better understand the world.”

For more information about Bridges visit indiana.edu/~global/bridges or call 812-855-1638. — Carmen Siering