

Virtual Reality in the World Language Classroom

World language teachers are a special breed of teacher. Consider their motivations for becoming world language teachers. In some cases, traveling and speaking other

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Chatham High School | languages has profoundly changed their lives and they've channeled their passion into a career. In other cases, teachers are from another country, and are passionate about sharing their language and culture with students. One thing is for sure, all world language teachers want to inspire their students to travel and see the world, learn about other cultures, and use their new language to do so. But what if world language teachers could bring the world *to* their classroom?

A Virtual Reality

This is the question Ines Wishart, Spanish teacher at Chatham High School, asked herself as she embarked on the district's Reflective Practice program, which allows teachers to ask an investigative question and then spend 1-3 years pursuing the answer. Ms. Wishart's question was "How can virtual reality (VR) improve language production in the world language classroom?"

As Ms. Wishart's supervisor, it was my role to approve or deny her investigative question in the Reflective Practice program. But when she brought me this question, I felt out of my depth; I had never experienced VR myself. Ms. Wishart had purchased a pair of VR goggles and offered to show me. I put the goggles on and suddenly found myself in a traditional hut in Mexico. I could look up, down, and all around, and completely take in my surroundings. Ms. Wishart said, "Tell me about what you see." I couldn't stop telling her about all the interesting things I was seeing—from the ceiling to the furniture to



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the vegetation. I wanted to tell Ms. Wishart all about this world I was experiencing. She asked question after question, and I was bubbling over with excitement to tell her.

When I finally brought the goggles away from my face, Ms. Wishart's point had been made. Being in the virtual world had prompted me to use an incredible amount of language, and I had learned a great deal about Mexican culture in the process. Imagine the potential with students learning another language. I approved the investigative question and waited with high anticipation to see how the VR goggles could work in the world language classroom.

The Classroom Experience

Ms. Wishart spent a whole year using that one pair of goggles, along with a few pairs

of disposable cardboard goggles, with one of her advanced classes. What she discovered was extraordinary. Students were completely enthralled with the VR experience and were begging for more. A survey of Ms. Wishart's students showed that 90% of students wanted to see more VR infused in their instruction, and 76% said they found it useful for learning Spanish. One thing was clear, students were excited about learning in ways they hadn't experienced before. They left class feeling like they had traveled the world.

Challenges did arise, such as dizziness that some students felt when using the goggles for too long or phones that didn't work with the necessary applications. But Ms. Wishart recognized that this was uncharted territory, and there would be some bumps along the road.



At the end of the year, when Ms. Wishart presented her findings to me, we could envision how impactful these goggles could be. Her teaching had grown and matured in ways she never imagined. Students were having fun in world language classes in new ways. I knew I needed to find a way to bring these goggles into every world language classroom. But I also knew it would take a lot of money to achieve this goal.

Funding a Dream

With fingers crossed, I wrote a grant to the Chatham Education Foundation (CEF), a non-profit organization that supports the School District of the Chathams. I wrote about what had happened on a small scale, and made a plea to broaden the goggles' reach. We were so fortunate that the grant was approved; the enthusiasm Ms. Wishart and I had for bringing the world to our classrooms through VR was now contagious. That summer, 250 VR goggles packed my small office, and our journey as a department began.

After distributing the goggles to the teachers (packing them in plastic bags and numbering them for each room), we needed to build the teachers' enthusiasm for this new tool. What better way to get them excited about it than to let them try the experience for themselves? So at one of our first meetings of the year, Ms. Wishart and I guided the world language department through the process of downloading a free application to their phones, and then using the goggles to experience the amazing process of stepping into different places around the world.

The teachers explored the Great Wall of China, Mayan Ruins, or an underwater environment. They were as startled as I had been by the clarity of the visuals, which provided a true feeling of being in that other place. The teachers knew they wanted their students to experience this feeling, but we



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still faced the question of “how” to use the tool instructionally. During two subsequent department meetings, Ms. Wishart demonstrated games, scavenger hunts, escape rooms, and travel diaries—all using the VR goggles to bring the world to the Chatham High School world language classes.

Changing Instruction

Ms. Wishart emphasized the need to plan ahead for VR lessons in a way that teachers hadn't done before. Searching for great VR resources, being well acquainted with the scenes students would see, and designing lessons that would promote engagement and a high degree of target language usage all required significant front-end planning. Once the students were in class interacting with the VR activities, however, the teachers found that the experience was worth the advance planning.

With the instructional tools in hand, teachers were ready to amplify their instruction with VR. After nearly one full school year of integrating VR into world language instruction at Chatham High School, students have experienced trips to cities, ruins, museums, and landmarks—all without leaving the classrooms.

What are the main reasons to bring VR to your classrooms? First, VR raises student engagement. It's very unlikely that a student would opt out of a VR experience when presented to them. In the same way that I couldn't help but answer Ms. Wishart's questions when I "traveled" to the Mexican hut, the students find themselves *speaking* the target language without really focusing on language *production*. In the excitement of the VR experience, students find themselves communicating without thinking about complex grammatical skills that can bog down communication. They speak more freely—just as they would if visiting another country. Second, VR lends itself nicely to a differentiated environment because students can proceed at their own pace as they work through a scavenger hunt or escape room activity. With a clear roadmap of what they need to find in each virtual scene, students can progress at a pace that is low stress and highly engaging. Finally, VR provides students with meaningful learning

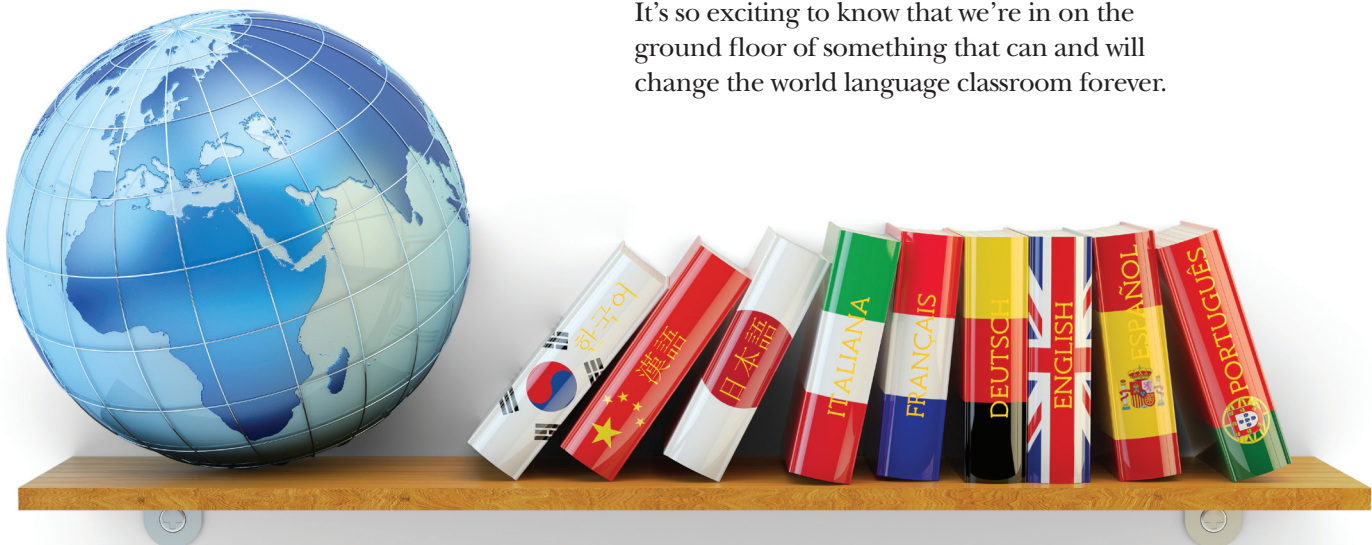
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experiences in a hands-on environment. When learning is meaningful, it's also memorable.

Powerful Technology in Its Infancy

We are so proud and excited to know that one day, students will look back at their Chatham High School world language experience and remember those big, clunky, goggles they used when VR was in its infancy. It's so exciting to know that we're in on the ground floor of something that can and will change the world language classroom forever.



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