

EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING PROGRAMS: REAPING THE BENEFITS, FACING THE CHALLENGES

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The national standards for foreign language learning and the standards developed in Texas, the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Languages Other Than English (TEKS for LOTE)*, have garnered an unprecedented degree of involvement and consensus within the profession. The majority of LOTE teachers welcome these guidelines that emphasize what students must know and be able to do and that are centered around the five program goals of Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Additionally, the *TEKS for LOTE* were written in terms of a PreK-12 program where students “start early and stay long”—a notion embraced by LOTE teachers and key to developing advanced proficiency in a language. Advanced proficiency, being able to truly use and communicate in a language, is every LOTE teacher’s vision for his or her students.

The benefits of early language learning have long been evident to those involved in language education. With recent media coverage on brain and language acquisition research, awareness of and interest in early language learning have increased dramatically. Parents, legislators, business people, and educators have become more interested in instructional programs that allow students to begin foreign language learning at a young age and continue that learning through secondary school. Frequently asked questions related to early foreign language instruction include:

- What kinds of early foreign language programs are available?
- Which program would be best for our district’s children?
- How do we make time for language learning given our current curriculum?
- Where do we find qualified teachers?
- What materials are appropriate and available?
- How do we fund early language learning programs?

This paper does not attempt to answer all of these questions but will describe the types of early language learning programs that currently exist, provide a rationale for implementing a language immersion model, and discuss the program choices that different districts might make according to their varied circumstances.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM MODELS

While numerous factors contribute to the acquisition of a second language—two key factors are *time* and *intensity*. Experience and research show that time is the most critical factor in learning another language (Asher, 1977; Met, 1995; Rhodes, 1983; Texas Education Agency, 1997). Language learners of any age need ample opportunities to experience and practice the language in order to become proficient (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Omaggio Hadley, 2001). Therefore, the most effective instructional programs will provide students a great amount of time on task.

The second factor, intensity, entails personal involvement and meaningful tasks. Children experience language development as both a natural process and a social process. Young children tend to learn languages in the same way they acquired their first language, by experiencing it naturally within

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a meaningful context. Meaningful activities might include singing a song, doing a science project, or role-playing a trip to the store, including the financial transaction. Socially, language develops in communicative contexts that include interpersonal relationships and exposure to the perspectives, practices, and products of the target language culture(s). Therefore, in an ideal early language learning program, the curricular framework will establish thematic centers that are based on the needs of the students and that incorporate appropriate goals for that grade level. This could include topics from the general school curriculum, preferably related to the target culture (Curtain & Pesola, 1994, p. 63).

The early language program models described below vary in the amount of time and the intensity of experiences they provide students, depending on the model's goals.

Exploratory Foreign Language (FLEX)

A FLEX program is basically an introduction to languages that emphasizes cultural awareness rather than fluency. It may include sessions once or twice a week, and the acquisition of few language skills is expected (Lipton, 1992, p. 2).

According to Curtain and Pesola (1994, p. 30) the goals of a FLEX program are:

- To develop an interest in foreign languages for future language study.
- To learn basic words and phrases in one or more foreign languages.
- To develop careful listening skills.
- To develop cultural awareness.
- To develop linguistic awareness.

Because FLEX programs are exploratory in nature and don't emphasize proficiency, we will focus the discussion here on the sequential, continuous program models—Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) and immersion programs for grades K-6.

Foreign Languages in the Elementary School (FLES)

Educators have developed a variety of elementary language programs using the two basic models of FLES—the skills-based program and the content-based program.

Generally, a skills-based FLES program devotes 5-15% of the school day to target language learning, with the instruction focusing on listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Attention also is given to cultural awareness and

understanding through approaches such as role-playing that simulates situations and settings from the target culture; Total Physical Response (TPR), which attempts to teach language through the coordination of speech and physical action; and Suggestopedia, which incorporates non-conscious influences (e.g., décor, music, arrangement of the classroom) to teach language (Curtain & Pesola, 1994, p. 183; Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

A content-based FLES program includes more instruction and practice in the target language than a skills-based program, dedicating 15-50% of the day to activities that support language learning. The content-based program has the same language and culture skills goals as the skills-based FLES program, except that it includes teaching some subject content in the target language. For example, Curtain & Pesola (1994, p. 159) suggest that hands-on science activities offer many opportunities for meaningful exchanges among students and between the teacher and students. They note that hypothesis formulation and reformulation, and the use of graphics and charts in science instruction offer particularly strong opportunities for both producing and interpreting language.

Whether the FLES program is content-based or skills-based, it is best if the program is established as a sequential FLES program. Sequential programs ensure that the language will be taught two years or more and that the classes will meet at least every other day for a minimum of 75 minutes per week with instruction in the four skills and an expected outcome of limited proficiency. Students who complete a sequential FLES program will be able to produce and comprehend meaningful messages within limited communicative contexts. If the FLES program is articulated vertically, linking to secondary programs, students may become highly proficient speakers by graduation from high school (Texas Education Agency, 1997, p. 74).

Immersion

Like FLES programs, immersion programs may be based on different models. They may feature partial immersion, two-way or dual immersion, or total immersion in the target language.

"Immersion" means that the language of communication and subject matter instruction is, at least in part, the target language. Partial immersion programs are conducted in the target language usually 50% of the time or more. In total immersion programs, nearly 100% of communication and subject matter instruction is in the target language. Two-way immersion programs are a bit different, as the student body in these programs includes both English-only

speakers and speakers of a target language. All students participating in a two-way immersion program learn subject matter through both their first and second languages. The amount of instructional time devoted to each language varies by such factors as student needs, program design, and grade level.

All the immersion models share these primary goals:

- **Functional proficiency:** Students will be able to communicate in the target language about topics appropriate to their grade/maturational level.
- **Subject content mastery:** Students will master the subject matter of their school curriculum.
- **Cultural understanding:** Students will demonstrate awareness of cultural differences.
- **English achievement:** Students will show English mastery equivalent to that of their peers in English-only programs.

Students who participate in well-articulated and successful sequential, uninterrupted immersion programs should be functionally fluent *at their maturational level* by seventh grade, a superior achievement when compared to students who are in FLES programs. Students in strong immersion programs will progress this well because they will have experienced hundreds of hours of authentic communication.

RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING THE TWO-WAY IMMERSION MODEL

Both the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* (ACTFL, 1998) and *A Texas Framework for Languages Other Than English* (Texas Education Agency, 1997) indicate that the attainment of an advanced proficiency level by high school graduation depends upon the type and length of the LOTE program implemented, as well as the time devoted to the program by the student and his or her motivation. Generally speaking, one cannot expect a student to demonstrate functional proficiency by eighth grade unless that student is in a long-sequence immersion program. Among the immersion programs described, the two-way immersion model is preferred if a linguistically mixed student population is available and there are two dominant languages. Advantages and challenges of this model are discussed below.

The two-way immersion model inherently addresses the five program goals outlined in the *TEKS for LOTE—Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities*.

Because the target languages are being used for instruction on a daily basis, students are constantly exposed to and must apply their knowledge of the three modes of *communication* (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational).

From what is known about child development, it is ideal for children to have contact with other *cultures* before they begin to perceive the outside world as threatening. At about age ten they develop a concept of “others are different” and categorize these differences by extremes; by middle school, children become more ethnocentric and judgmental regarding perceived differences. According to Kieran Egan (Curtain and Pesola, 1994, p. 67), at the ages between eight and fifteen, children develop initial concepts of “otherness,” of an outside world distinct and separate from the world within, and perceive the separate world as potentially threatening and alien. The two-way immersion model takes advantage of younger children’s openness to and appreciation of the practices, products, and perspectives of other cultures.

Another advantage of the two-way immersion model is that curricular content is taught in the target language. Time is not spent just talking about the language, but rather is used to study the subject matter in the language. Thus students make *connections* to the content of other subject areas by accessing information about them in the target language. In two-way immersion, learners from each language group are on equal footing, coming to see each other as helpmates and resources and thereby gaining mutual respect. In this setting, *comparisons* of linguistic elements, culture, and the influence that the two languages and cultures have upon one another come about naturally and serve to enrich the learning experience.

The holistic learning experience of the two-way immersion program provides children a natural process in which they have interpersonal experiences with members of the target culture/language and acquire an acceptance of diversity in *communities*, both within and beyond the school setting. The fact that their proficiency level in the target language and comfort level with the target culture will likely be quite high by middle school makes it plausible that they will use the language throughout their lives, both for personal enrichment and in their chosen careers.

Two-way immersion programs empower students to become functionally proficient in a second language even as they are mastering the content of the regular school curriculum. When we realize

that communication is the organizing principle for instruction, we will embrace this model that allows children to acquire languages in real life by interacting with others—their peers—and by communicating within a meaningful context, whether the context is the classroom or the playground.

Challenges to Two-Way Immersion Programs

There are, of course, challenges inherent to the development of any new instructional program. The challenges associated with two-way immersion programs are similar if not the same as those related to initiating any type of early language learning program. The teacher with too many students is only one of several factors that have contributed to the failure of early language learning programs in the past. Other causes include lack of commitment to a program for five years or more, lack of support from the administration or community, resistance of the regular classroom teachers to the initiative, failure to accurately assess the program, lack of strong texts/materials, and lack of continuing professional development for teachers. In addition, finding qualified teachers with experience or a background in immersion education is not easy. However, the nature of the two-way immersion model provides unique solutions to some of these challenges.

Staffing shortages. Many school districts in Texas and elsewhere are experiencing a shortage of foreign language teachers. Two-way immersion programs help alleviate staffing problems while allowing teachers to excel in their own fields of expertise. Fluent speakers of the target language teach select subjects in that language and the fluent English speakers teach other courses of the curriculum in English. Thus bilingual education goals are met, since students spend part of the day learning and mastering subject content in English, and the LOTE goals are attained with the same staffing level as a school with a bilingual education program. The two teachers work as a team, coordinating their instruction to meet any district or state requirements. This content-based approach is obviously cost-effective because each teacher is teaching a full class of students and is teaching the content of the curriculum; no additional teacher must be hired (R. Stroempl, personal communication, February 12, 2001). It is, of course, preferable that the native English-speaking teacher involved in a two-way immersion program be trained in second language instruction. However, careful planning and coordination between the two teachers, where only one has skills in a second language, still makes implementation of the model feasible.

Community Teamwork. It is essential to the survival of any new instructional program that all members of the community—administrators, regular classroom teachers, parents, etc.—be continually informed regarding the success of students. A leadership team should provide a public relations network to inform all interested parties regarding a program’s activities, accomplishments, and assessment results. The two-way immersion model promotes second language proficiency for two groups of previously monolingual students and encourages the community to work together, rather than keeping it divided. It is meant to stimulate community support and commitment to the long-range goal of advanced language proficiency for children, support that is necessary for the success of the program. Model programs have shown that successful two-way immersion programs require strong leaders who have a commitment to continuity, such as is provided by having a district language coordinator who can maintain the lines of communication related to long-term goals and program accountability.

Academic fears. Many fear that the foundation curriculum knowledge, which is state-mandated and state-tested, will fail to develop if students are “distracted” from that curriculum by second language learning. These individuals fear that time spent studying another language is time away from “reading, writing, and arithmetic.” Successful immersion programs show this is not the case. Instead, students acquire foundation curriculum knowledge and skills in both languages simultaneously. In fact, students from such programs have surpassed their peers who have not been immersed in a second language. A large body of research shows that, far from slowing student progress, immersion into the target language significantly improves student achievement (Andrade, Kretschmer, & Kretschmer, 1989; Barfield & Rhodes, 1992; Landry, 1973; Lipton, 1992; Rafferty, 1986). Two-way immersion should reassure parents and educators because children receive part of their instruction in their first language.

Funding. Financial issues block the development of instructional programs in some districts; yet other districts with even tighter budgets find ways of financing their “dream” programs. The key factors are leadership, ingenuity, and the commitment of not just a few, but of the entire community. Many of the nearly 40 two-way programs in Texas are partially funded by Title I and Title VII grants. The Helms Dual Language Program in Houston ISD is funded with Title I, Title VII, and Annenberg grants, as well as

contributions from the Shell Oil Company Foundation. In addition, community, university, and business representatives have formed a collaborative partnership in support of the Helms program (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2001). Grant funds frequently provide the seed money for two-way immersion programs, but subsequent success of the program inspires confidence in it. Public confidence in the program can help alleviate some of the concerns and challenges described above. For approaches to solving the issue of funding, see the seven program variants presented in *Lessons Learned* (Gilzow & Branaman, 2000), listed in the Annotated Bibliography.

All quality programs require start-up resources: financial, material, and human. As previously mentioned, immersion programs do not require additional teaching staff, since the language teacher is the regular classroom teacher. In the past, getting materials for language learning programs posed a significant problem since there were few quality materials available. Fortunately, that is no longer true. But even though the quantity and quality of materials have improved, the teaching staff will likely have to create some age-appropriate materials. Technology resources should also be tapped to enhance the program. No way exists to avoid expenses, but clever use of resources and creative grant-seeking can solve many of these problems (Met, 1990; Rosenbusch, 1991, pp. 312-314).

DIFFERENT DISTRICTS, DIFFERENT CHOICES

If your district has a goal of functional proficiency for its students, then it will insist on high instructional quality and a well-designed curriculum such as is found in a well-articulated continuous, long-sequence program. Administrators, educators, and community will realize that the time factor is crucial—both time on task daily and commitment to support the program well into the future.

The customary choice of early language learning programs in the state of Texas has been FLES. Some of these programs are excellent, being well supported by administrators and community and being well staffed by dedicated teachers. However, frequently the teacher-student ratio is impossibly large (e.g., 300:1), contributing to teacher burnout and teacher feelings of inadequacy and disillusionment before the program has had time to grow into its potential (Met, 1990; Rosenbusch, 1991, p. 303). FLES programs both in Texas and elsewhere have been heavily dependent on ingenuity and grant funds to muster the resources

needed to staff and build their programs. Frequently, these programs depend on the resourcefulness of one person who seeks the grant funds to perpetuate the program. One must think “outside the box” to fund such a program—e.g., using video to support talented teachers who can teach the target language to multitudes and training classroom teachers or community volunteers to function minimally in the target language but supportively by leading the in-class activities introduced by the television teacher.

If the majority of students in your district speak English, then the partial-immersion model may be your district’s choice, where half the day students are instructed in the target language and half the day in English. The same staffing advantages hold true as with the two-way immersion model. However, the students in a two-way immersion program have native-speaking peers to reinforce their target language in interpersonal activities and cultural interactions, inside the classroom and out. To provide similar experiences for partial-immersion students, teachers might enlist native speaker assistance from within the community, such as classroom volunteers or presenters.

If the majority of students in your district are native English speakers and there is great support for total immersion, then this model provides one of the best ways for students to attain high levels of proficiency in another language. Parental desire and support for full immersion programs is critical, as are teachers qualified to teach both the language and content of the regular curriculum. Funding is a major issue, as resources are needed to cover both specialized staffing and materials. One difference between the full immersion model and the two-way immersion model is that full immersion students do not necessarily have daily intercultural and linguistic interaction with native speakers. However, creative solutions such as the use of e-mail pals, satellite television, or other electronic resources have recently increased the accessibility of native speakers to LOTE students. The obvious strength of the full immersion model is that students use the target language all day, every day.

As has been maintained in this paper, if your district is composed of a linguistically mixed student population with two dominant language groups, the two-way immersion model is ideal. Students retain and build upon their first language skills while fully acquiring a second language. Their cultural heritage is esteemed and preserved as they simultaneously learn to appreciate and function within another culture(s). Also, two-way

immersion programs “naturally” focus on high academic standards for students of LOTE established by the state of Texas and the nation. Finally, this model fosters the notion of inclusion, as it seeks to strengthen and develop the skills of all students.

Characteristics of Successful Programs

Current successful early language programs share several common characteristics:

- Teachers are highly qualified, have access to appropriate materials in the language being taught, have time to prepare instructional materials where needed, and are offered ongoing staff development and support.
- The program is supported by parents, the school district administration, and the community at large.
- The program’s student population reflects the diversity of the community.
- The program’s curriculum is based on high academic standards (e.g., the five “Cs” that represent the program goals outlined in TEKS for LOTE).
- The program is evaluated regularly.
- The program is open to all students.
- There is good communication and coordination among language and content area teachers.

FOR REFLECTION

1. If you wanted to implement (or expand) an early language learning program in your district, what issues would you need to consider? Which level of importance would the different issues have in your district? For example, would finding a funding source be more important than obtaining community buy-in? Are there issues that are inextricably tied to one another?
2. Which model of early language learning appeals most to you personally? Create an argument to justify its implementation to your school board.
3. Reflect on the early language learning programs you know of. What are the perceived results of these programs? Use the Internet to conduct some comparative research on early language learning programs in Texas and around the nation. (The Center for Applied Linguistics provides an online database of two-way immersion programs at www.cal.org/twi/directory/.)

REFERENCE LIST (With Select Annotations)

- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1998). *ACTFL proficiency guidelines for K-12 learners*. Yonkers, NY: Author.
- Andrade, C., Kretschmer, R., Jr., & Kretschmer, L. (1989). Two languages for all children: Expanding to low achievers and the handicapped. In K. Müller (Ed.), *Languages in elementary schools* (pp. 177-203). New York: American Forum.
- Asher, J. (1977). *Learning another language through actions*. Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions, Inc.
- Barfield, S. & Rhodes, N. (1992). *Review of the sixth year of the partial immersion program at Key Elementary School, Arlington, Virginia*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

- The program provides articulation from elementary to middle school to high school. (Gilzow & Branaman, 2000; Met, 1993)

SUMMARY

The challenges of starting an early language learning program may seem daunting, but school districts across the nation have met the challenges including funding, teacher shortages, and lack of appropriate materials, with leadership, teamwork, and coordination. Parents may provide schools and districts the motivation or pressure to start a foreign language program, but administrative support and commitment to time, funding, sequencing and articulation, program evaluation, and teacher development are necessary for the success of any language learning program.

In the past, we did not have the model programs to inspire our language programs, nor did we have much evidence related to program outcomes. We now have both. We should face the challenges of our language programs intelligently, benefiting from the past to build on our future. Many resources are now available for planning and implementing early foreign language programs. If your district is contemplating building a FLES or immersion program, the planners should consult the resources listed in the reference list following this article. These resources will clarify the points made above, providing details and corroboration.

Curtain, H. & Pesola, C. A. (1994). *Languages and children, making the match*. (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.

The authors designed this book both as a methods text and as a practical guide for school districts and teachers. It is intended for those preparing to teach language at the elementary and middle school level, for practitioners already involved with languages for children, and for teachers, parents, and administrators engaged in the planning or in the evaluation process.

Directory of two-way bilingual immersion programs in the U.S. [on-line database]. (2001). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics [Producer and Distributor].

Educational Resources Information Center. (1998). K-12 foreign language education. *The ERIC Review*, 6 (1).

This issue of *The ERIC Review* was authored by ERIC/CLL staff, researchers at the Center for Applied Linguistics, and other noted experts in the field of foreign language education. It describes the current status of K-12 foreign language education and highlights the benefits of a multilingual population. Topics covered include current trends and challenges in the field, national standards, student assessment, technology, professional development for teachers, and job opportunities for speakers of more than one language. You may view the contents of this publication via the Internet at www.cal.org/ericcll/systempubs.html, or you may order it at no cost by calling (800) 276-9834.

Gilzow, D. F. & Branaman, L. E. (2000). *Lessons learned: Model early foreign language programs*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Prepared for publication by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics and the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, this book describes seven successful foreign language programs that start in preschool or the elementary grades and continue through high school. They include both FLES and immersion programs. *Lessons Learned* is written in clear non-technical language, and can be used by parents, teachers, administrators, and community members who are interested in developing an early foreign language program or who are looking for ideas on how to maintain, enhance, or expand an existing program.

Gilzow, D. F. & Rhodes, N. C. (2000). *Perspectives on policy and practice: Establishing high-quality foreign language programs in elementary schools*. Providence, RI: The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University.

This brief addresses questions frequently asked by administrators, educators and parents. It also includes a bibliography of resources ranging from "classics" to Web sites.

Landry, R. (1973). The enhancement of figural creativity through second language learning at the elementary school level. *Foreign Language Annals*, 7 (4), 111-115.

Lipton, G. C. (1992). *Practical handbook to elementary school foreign language programs (FLES*)*, including sequential FLES, FLEX, and immersion programs. (2nd ed.). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.

Lipton describes FLES programs and models, provides information on planning effective programs, offers suggestions on recruitment and selection of teachers, possible teaching approaches, and ways to address the teaching of the four skills and culture. The author also presents aspects of methodology and lesson planning, discussions of assessment issues, and ways to do the needed publicity. The book also contains many helpful appendices.

Met, M. (Ed.). (1998). *Critical issues in early second language learning: Building for our children's future*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley.

This professional resource book provides valuable insights and information about second language study in the elementary school. Thirteen key issues are thoughtfully explored by the profession's leaders and innovators. Any educator or parent interested in implementing a foreign language program or teaching second languages in an elementary school will want to read this important book. Foreword written by Madeleine K. Albright

Met, M. (Ed.). (1995). Decisions! Decisions! Decisions! Foreign language in the elementary school. *Foreign Language Annals*, 18 (6), 471.

Met, M. (Ed.). (1990). *Elementary school foreign language start up costs*. Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools.

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.

Omaggio Hadley, A. (2001). *Teaching language in context* (3rd ed.). Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Rafferty, E. (1986). *Second language study and basic skills in Louisiana*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana Department of Education.

Redmond M. L. & Lorenz, E. (Eds.). (1999). *Teacher to teacher: Model lessons for K-8 foreign language*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

This is an ideal resource for foreign language teachers, supervisors, and others involved in the development and implementation of curriculum. Created by teachers for teachers, the model lessons show the national standards used as guiding principles in example lessons for K-8 in Spanish, French, German, Latin, Chinese and Japanese classrooms.

Rhodes, N. (1983). *Foreign language in the elementary school: A practical guide*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Richards, J. & Rodgers, T. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Rosenbusch, M. (1991). Elementary school foreign language: The establishment and maintenance of strong programs. *Foreign Language Annals*, 24 (4), 312-314.

Texas Education Agency. (1997). *A Texas framework for languages other than English*. Austin, TX: Author.

Thompson, L. (1997). *Foreign language assessment in grades K-8: An annotated bibliography of assessment instruments*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

This bibliography consists of six sections: 1) assessment instruments; 2) program evaluation instruments; 3) classroom assessment activities; 4) sample assessment instruments; 5) selected resources; and 6) selected commercially available language tests. It also contains an index that lists assessment instruments according to purpose, language, and grade level.

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