

Language Learning in Other Countries: Success Abroad, Success in Texas

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Overheard in a Paris café:

Giselle: *I'd love to visit Austin on my next vacation, but I'm nervous because my English isn't so great. Maybe I'll just go to Québec.*

Thierry: *Aw, you don't need to know how to speak English to go to Austin, Gigi! Everyone in Texas speaks more than one language. There will be tons of people there that speak French.*

How many times have you heard similar statements made in Texas about countries whose inhabitants readily speak English? Wouldn't it be great to know such assertions could be made about Texans' ability to use languages other than English? What makes language learners in other countries so successful? What information can we glean from other countries that will contribute to the growth of our own language programs and the proficiency of our students? This paper takes a look at some of the features of language programs around the world, examines these features with regard to language programs and policy in Texas, and offers some suggestions on how to best capitalize on some of the most successful aspects of language teaching and learning, both here and abroad.

Other countries' language learning success has been documented. In Europe, for example, the amount of time spent learning languages allows most students to attain communicative competence in at least one language other than their native tongue, and sometimes two or three (Bergentoft, 1994). Eight characteristics of successful programs outside of the United States have been identified, most recently in a report by the Center for Applied Linguistics (Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian, 2000): an early start; a well-articulated framework; rigorous teacher education; comprehensive use of technology; innovative methods; strong policy; assessment; and maintenance of heritage, regional, and indigenous languages. As this paper examines those traits leading to language learning success in other countries, it becomes clear that Texas LOTE programs have numerous parallel characteristics. It is natural, therefore, to think that similar degrees of achievement in student proficiency are attainable.

In order to personalize this *Communiqué*, six individuals who successfully learned a foreign language in a country other than the United States were interviewed. Data from their responses is included throughout the text as anecdotal evidence. Those interviewed were educated in Chile, France, Lebanon, Mexico, Russia, and Spain. All are fluent in at least one language other than their mother tongue. Of the six, three are now world language teachers. Interestingly, most of the items mentioned as contributing to the respondents' *personal* success in language learning echo the characteristics identified in the report by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL).

Successful Language Learning in Other Countries: How Texas Measures Up
In late 2000, CAL released a report entitled *Foreign Language Teaching: What the United States Can Learn From Other Countries* (Pufahl, et al., 2000). The report was based on data collected from 19 countries who responded to a survey about language education at the elementary and secondary levels. The report takes into account information from select comparative education reports and offers advice on how the successes of other countries can inform U.S. language education.

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Eight standout characteristics of language instruction in other countries are identified and elaborated upon in the CAL report and in this *Communiqué*. Texas shares many of the qualities that other exemplary language programs exhibit and has programs or policies in place that fall in line with the eight characteristics that are described. Any differences may lie in the degree to which they are advocated, implemented, or required in one context or the other. Areas for growth in Texas can be identified, but also important areas of strength. Following are brief summaries of the eight characteristics identified by other countries, followed by anecdotal data from the above-mentioned interviews and commentary on how language education in Texas compares with regard to each characteristic.

An Early Start

Beginning language learning early boosts proficiency (Norden, 2001). The trend in 16 of the 19 countries surveyed by CAL is to start foreign language education in upper elementary school at the latest, with seven countries starting by age 8. Many countries also offer or require a *second* foreign language at the elementary level.

Of those interviewed for this *Communiqué*, four specifically alluded to the commencement of learning other languages early in their schooling. The interviewee from Mexico began learning English in kindergarten. The Chilean respondent said most children begin learning English in elementary school. The interviewee educated in Lebanon mentioned how learning languages early in life facilitated “later learning of other languages.” (She speaks Arabic, French, and English fluently.) The French interviewee referred to the fact that language learning begins at age 6 for some, age 11 for most, and that a second foreign language is introduced at age 13.

In Texas LOTE education, an early start is becoming increasingly important. A variety of early language learning programs are being implemented in the state, including Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES), full or partial immersion, dual-language or two-way immersion, and FLEX (Exploratory Foreign Language) programs. One example is the Garland ISD, where they have a FLES program for grades 1-5 in 42 of 58 schools. The remainder of the campuses will complete delivery of FLES programs through 5th grade by 2004 (Maples, 2002).

Advocacy for and interest in early language learning is on the rise in Texas. For example:

- The National FLES Institute of Texas has been held annually in Dallas at the Hockaday School since 1994, and enrollment has increased by over 400% since its inception (National FLES Institute of Texas, 2002).
- Numerous Texas school districts have applied for and received the competitive Federal Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) grants which in recent

years have favored proposed programs with a focus on early language learning (United States Department of Education, 2002). Many of the grants received by Texas districts have been for dual language or FLES programs. For example, Richardson ISD received funding for its distance-learning elementary school program in 2000, and Belton ISD received one in 1999 for a program that bridges its elementary, two-way bilingual program to secondary school programs (Joint National Committee for Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies, 2002).

- Recognizing both the importance of starting early and staying long and the benefits of knowing a second language, parents and other concerned citizens in school districts around the state have mobilized to establish early language learning programs in their local districts. Not all have been successful, but the impetus is there.

Nevertheless, early language learning programs in Texas are not yet common and many students in Texas do not begin learning a LOTE until they are in high school. While interest in these initiatives abounds, the support system for a comprehensive early language learning program is often lacking. Financial resources, teacher training, and a stalwart commitment to such a program are among the elements needed. Research has shown that starting language study at a young age and staying the course through high school leads to higher levels of proficiency (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1997).

A Well-Articulated Framework

A well-articulated curriculum framework provides local language programs with a common reference source and thereby helps to ensure cohesion and consistency. Several countries in the CAL study cited the use of either a national or international-level framework in the development of their language programs. Many European countries use *Modern Languages. Learning, Teaching, Assessment: A Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe, 1996) to streamline language instruction policy and programs. The Council of Europe expanded its framework and developed new activities and resources for its members such as the *Language Policies for a Multilingual and Multicultural Europe* project and the *European Language Portfolio*, used by learners to record their language skills.

None of those interviewed for this *Communiqué* referred to curriculum frameworks by name; however, some elements of curricular structure were mentioned. The interviewee from Lebanon mentioned that in her experience, the school used a French curriculum rather than a Lebanese curriculum developed locally to teach French as a foreign language. Five of the six

interviewees said that culture was not really a formal part of the curriculum in their programs. The French respondent described the situation as one where there is no formal framework for teaching culture but that “it depends a lot on the teachers... I think they are just asked to teach English. They are free, then, to speak about what they want.” There seemed to be some level of frustration with this lack of structure; for example, the respondent from Russia mentioned the “fossilized” nature of teaching about culture in his country, noting that the methods currently used perpetuate stereotypes and don’t allow for critical analysis.

Texas is on par with the European countries mentioned above in that it has a well-articulated framework in place, *A Texas Framework for Languages Other Than English* (SEDL, 1997). This document serves as a resource for curriculum developers and teachers as they implement the state standards, the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Languages Other Than English* (TEKS for LOTE). Produced through a collaborative process by classroom teachers, district supervisors, higher education professionals, and representatives from business and the community, the *Framework* is tailored specifically to the needs of Texas teachers and students and is designed to facilitate the development by local districts and campuses of standards-based materials appropriate for their context. The framework provides Texas teachers a common ground from which to plan their standards-based curricula.

Other countries have used general frameworks (such as the one developed by the Council of Europe) as a springboard to develop language-specific curriculum guidelines and expand their policy on less commonly taught or rarely addressed languages. By way of comparison, the Texas Education Agency’s newly revised *Español para el hispanohablante* (Blanco, n.d.) is a good example of how Texas has provided expanded information on implementing state policy. Offshoots of *A Texas Framework for LOTE* in the areas of early language learning, the use of technology in the LOTE classroom, or inclusion in the LOTE classroom would also be useful resources for Texas teachers of LOTE.

Rigorous Teacher Education

Common sense says that teachers who receive rigorous training and extensive in-service support are set to strengthen foreign language education. CAL’s report describes rigorous, specialized, and competitive academic programs that make the foreign language teaching force in many countries not only well educated, but well respected. The academic programs for preservice teachers in many countries last at least five years; may require intense study of several academic subject areas; include extensive, specialized training tailored to the needs of language teachers; or

necessitate study and/or work abroad in order to meet program requirements. One result of all of this education and training is that the teaching profession enjoys a good amount of prestige. Getting into a post secondary teaching program can be quite competitive, and teaching positions are relatively well compensated.

With regard to professional development for experienced educators, teachers in other countries have some inservice advantages that Texas teachers might envy. Some teachers, such as those in Germany, have the advantage of one-week of paid inservice training; they may choose their training from a variety of programs offered. Other countries, such as the Czech Republic and China, often send their teachers abroad for language or pedagogy study or bring in native speakers of the language being taught for teacher training.

Many teachers in Texas would argue that neither prestige nor good pay are characteristic of life as a LOTE teacher! Texas teachers do face requirements that show an increasing degree of rigor in the profession, however. For example, in the area of LOTE teacher training, one of the challenges facing preservice teachers has been the Texas Oral Proficiency Test (TOPT) which those seeking certification in French and Spanish must pass. Another example of increased rigor in Texas teacher education is the creation of new LOTE teacher certification standards currently being developed by the State Board for Educator Certification. These new standards and the assessment that will be based on them will incorporate the TEKS for LOTE, requiring beginning teachers to be knowledgeable about the state standards.

In the past, Texas teachers were able to obtain lifetime certification in their field. However, those who have sought certification since September 1, 1999 must now complete 150 clock hours of continuing professional education units every five years to maintain their certification. In this regard, Texas teachers may even surpass their international counterparts in that while professional development opportunities are readily available abroad, they are not necessarily mandatory.

For Texas LOTE educators, inservice opportunities are numerous. In addition to training available at the local and district levels, professional development opportunities include:

- LOTE CED workshops (e.g., TEKS for LOTE and Peer Coaching / Mentoring training)
- Texas Foreign Language Association conferences
- Regional conferences (e.g., SWCOLT, Central States)
- ACTFL conferences and locally-sponsored ACTFL training
- Study abroad programs such as the Texas-Spain Initiative’s Summer Institutes in Spain

- Language-specific association scholarships for professional study abroad (e.g., American Association of Teachers of French)
- National Foreign Language Resource Centers' summer programs

Comprehensive Use of Technology

Various uses of technology enhance the language learning experience. Many countries surveyed in the CAL study mention the positive impact of technologies that give students access to information, such as Internet web sites, large databases, and media programming in multiple languages and that allow increased (electronic) interaction with other language learners and native speakers of languages being studied. Our counterparts abroad may have a language learning advantage in at least one technological area: media broadcasts. Many television shows and much of the music broadcast abroad, especially in smaller countries, is in another language.

None of the *Communiqué* interviewees mentioned the use of technology in discussing their language teaching and learning experiences, save the respondent from Mexico who connected motivation for learning languages to the country's need for technology. (Due to their ages, most of the respondents would not have had access to high-tech tools in their own language learning experiences.)

The comprehensive use of technology is an important goal in Texas education overall. There is a state-funded Center for Educator Development dedicated to technology (Technology Applications CED), an annual conference for instructional technology sponsored by the Texas Computer Education Association which attracts thousands every year, and Internet-connected computers in 93% of Texas schools, 2% above the national average (Education Week, 2002). In foreign language classrooms specifically, more and more teachers are availing themselves of the innumerable LOTE pedagogy and target-language resources available on the Internet. Language labs and LOTE software have become more sophisticated and interactive. E-mail, listservs, and chat rooms are being used by students and teachers of LOTE alike to communicate in authentic ways both with one another and with native speakers. While some LOTE programming is available on Texas TV and radio and through the Internet, these resources are likely underutilized. They are not necessarily accessible to *all* language learners as the only LOTE used may be Spanish, or programs may only be available through cable or satellite television.

Innovative Methods

Innovative language methodologies energize language programs and make them more interesting to students. Sample innovative methods mentioned by the various

countries in the CAL study were categorized into those that integrate language and content learning, those that employ communicative teaching methods, those that focus on language learning strategies, those that build on first or subsequent languages, and "other." Some countries have schools where a foreign language is the language of instruction in more than one subject area, and the use of communicative teaching methods is widespread. The CAL report connects increased student proficiency to the use of communicative teaching techniques in countries such as Denmark, New Zealand, and Peru. A few of the countries surveyed also noted that teaching students to be aware of and responsible for their own language learning is an important component of language instruction. Some other successful methods mentioned by countries in the study include building on students' native or subsequent languages, using nothing but the foreign language in the classroom, modular teaching (grouping students by proficiency level rather than by grade or age), and project-oriented learning.

Several of those interviewed for this paper mentioned non-traditional teaching and learning strategies that worked well for them. With regard to integrating language and content, there is the earlier cited example of the respondent in Lebanon who learned French by using the actual curriculum from France rather than a locally developed one. Numerous communicative and/or student-centered teaching and learning methods were mentioned as being helpful. The respondent from France said he learned vocabulary best by "using stories, songs, or whatever interested me." He also mentioned the benefits of seeing films and listening to music in the language being learned, especially when those experiences were followed-up with teacher explanations. The use of role-play was key to the respondent who learned English in Mexico. The respondent from Chile felt that having lots of opportunities to use the language in writing and conversation had greatly helped her. Communicative teaching methods were advocated by the Spanish respondent who thought teachers in his country are "still too much into grammar and not so much into giving 'real' chances of using the language." Perhaps the best example of communicative language learning is seen in the Russian respondent who had no formal training in learning English but "simply learned the language through communication." He felt that he achieved his high proficiency level by learning "real language and culture, which was impossible to find in the textbook."

Innovative methods cited by many countries as being instrumental in the success of their language programs are often ones that are being used and/or advocated in Texas, too. For example, Texas places importance on integrating language and content instruction, as

evidenced by the TEKS for LOTE “Connections” program goal. To reach this standard, students are to use the language to make connections with other subject areas because reinforcing what students are learning in other classes makes both that subject matter *and* the language being learned more relevant to them. Interdisciplinary programs in Texas are limited, though immersion programs provide a good example of learning language through content.

Studies in the U.S. also show there is a correlation between the use of communicative, student-centered activities and increased student proficiency (Savignon, 1983), and in Texas, many foreign language teachers are strong advocates of instruction which allows students to communicate in real-world ways. In addition, the TEKS for LOTE which are stated in terms of student (not teacher) expectations, lend themselves to student-centered language teaching. State policy additionally supports innovative teaching methodology. At the state level, there is widespread support of Spanish for Spanish Speakers and dual language programs that build upon the skills of native speakers. (See below for more on this subject.) Project-oriented learning is also gaining respect as evidenced by the publication of *Great TEKSpectations: Innovative Learning Scenarios for the LOTE Classroom* (LOTE CED, 2001), a collection of instructional learning units designed to guide teachers and students through theme-based, product-oriented language learning experiences.

Strong Policy

The educational goals and needs of language learners often depend on administrative policy and planning (Sajavaara, 1994). Several countries surveyed by CAL mention the great impact that language and education policies have on their foreign language programs, affecting everything from languages offered to the minimum required number of instructional hours (which affects at what age a student starts). Also of great importance is the status of foreign languages within the school curriculum. Many countries designate foreign languages as a core subject, making it compulsory for all students to learn at least one other language. Survey respondents note that public policy support is crucial to the strong standing of languages in their educational systems.

Among those interviewed for this *Communiqué*, almost all alluded to the fact that language learning was a required part of their education. This does not necessarily mean it was tied to public policy since several of the respondents went to private schools. Nevertheless, the fact that great importance was placed on learning languages in their countries of origin is evident in certain comments. The French respondent, for example, felt there was a general cultural pride in

being bilingual in France, and the respondent from Lebanon felt that the cultural value placed on knowing languages was key to the success of language education in that country. The respondent from Mexico put it well: “You grow up with an understanding that it is essential to learn another language.” It seems likely that at some level, public policy regarding language learning contributed to these sentiments.

A key component of Texas achievement in LOTE education has also been its strong policy. At the state, regional, and local levels there is advocacy for LOTE programs that has often resulted in favorable policies. In recent years, state-level mandates have led to the adoption of the well-received state standards, the TEKS for LOTE; to the publication, *A Texas Framework for LOTE*; and to the establishment of the LOTE Center for Educator Development, which provides support to LOTE educators. Still, Texas could take a lesson from other countries in the adoption of more revolutionary policies, such as the National Policy on Languages in Australia which resulted in the offering of languages at the elementary school level in nearly the entire country, or the “three plus” policy of Israel, which requires students to learn three languages (Hebrew, Arabic, and English), plus additional languages.

While LOTE has in years past been a part of the core curriculum, it is at present a part of the enrichment curriculum. The passage of Texas House Bill 1144 (in 2001) may help in changing this status. This bill mandates that beginning with freshmen in 2004-05, the current *recommended* program (which requires a student take at least Levels I and II of the same language) will become the *required* program for all students. Such a requirement could help LOTE make its way back into the core. Two years may not seem like much compared to the many years of compulsory language courses required elsewhere, but it is a starting point.

Assessment

Assessment plays an undeniable role in the success of language students. While most assessment in the countries surveyed takes place at the course level, many countries have regional or national exit exams at the secondary level. Students are motivated to do well in all subjects included on such exams since their performance will determine whether or not they will further their education at the university level. None of the *Communiqué* interviewees overtly mentioned assessment as playing a role in their success as language learners. However, since languages were required courses for most, assessment certainly played a part in their matriculation.

In Texas, a state-level oral proficiency assessment in Spanish was developed and field-tested with Level III

Spanish students in 1994. In 1995, the state legislature determined which subject areas would be assessed state-wide, and LOTE was not included. No funding was available to follow-up on the oral proficiency assessment project. Assessments that determine Texas LOTE students' proficiency levels at different points in their academic careers are an important goal for the future.

Maintenance of Heritage, Regional, and Indigenous Languages

Several countries surveyed by CAL have bilingual policies, official heritage language programs, or special schools that use an indigenous language as the medium of instruction. Helping students maintain their first language may strengthen language education by encouraging student achievement in more than one language and by bolstering local language resources. Placing sanctioned value on heritage, regional, and indigenous languages is important to their linguistic upkeep and also can advance the cause of the peoples that use them. Canadian policy recognizes the importance of their languages and cultures beyond English and French; official heritage language programs are in place for nearly half of the provinces and include not only native American languages, but also languages of immigrant communities such as Ukrainian. Strong support for Maori and other South Pacific island languages is evident in New Zealand's preschool immersion program, where students may choose to attend a bilingual program or special native language schools after they exit the preschool program. None of the individuals interviewed for this *Communiqué* mentioned maintenance of languages as a part of their personal language teaching or learning experiences.

Texas also has policy and programs in place to safeguard its native and heritage speakers of Spanish. There are Spanish for Spanish Speakers (SSS) courses throughout the state which allow native speakers of Spanish to get credit for and build upon their knowledge of Spanish. State level support for these programs is evident in the development and publication of documents such as *Español para el hispanohablante* (Blanco, n.d.) and the forthcoming LOTE CED professional development module tailored specifically to the needs of SSS teachers. Programs that support the heritage, regional, or indigenous languages of populations other than those that use Spanish is less prevalent in Texas due to the smaller numbers of native speakers (and teachers) of these languages.

Pardonnez-moi, Where Do We Go From Here?

When it comes to language teaching and learning, Texas is not so different from its international neighbors after all. Yet our language skills lag behind. So how can we best use and/or expand upon the successful practices we have in common with countries that produce fluent

speakers of multiple languages? How do we grow in those areas where we need improvement, comparatively speaking?

Become a Motivational Force to be Reckoned With

Generally speaking, one could argue that students in other countries are intensely motivated to learn a language in addition to their own. Evidence of this lies in the commentary of those interviewed for this *Communiqué*, all of whom imply or state outright that motivation is a key factor in the success of language education in their countries of origin. Motivation is multifaceted, including the job market, academic expectations, a taste for travel, pride, social gains, cultural values, a global society, the wish to pursue higher education, and the desire to understand the deluge of media available in other languages. In the European community, for example, it is often a matter of geography that motivates the learning of another language, since one might easily live within a short distance of several other countries where another language is spoken.

How can you determine what motivates your students? Ask them! The media is a great place to find a wide variety of resources that will be interesting to students while simultaneously increasing exposure to other cultures and new technologies. Develop a survey to give to your students to see what sorts of media they are interested in. Do they like to surf on the Internet? read a newspaper? watch movies? listen to music? watch TV? play video games? chat in chat rooms? talk on the phone? Try to incorporate their interests into a lesson plan. If you find their motivational level to be higher as a result, survey them on other issues and use the information as you plan your lessons.

Do Your Part to Increase the Profession's Prestige

In many countries, teachers seem to enjoy a level of prestige that is not always present for teachers in the United States. They may also receive relatively better pay. What can be done to "up" the prestige of the teaching profession in Texas? One option is to apply for National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certification. NBPTS offers World Languages Other Than English National Board Certification at two levels: early childhood/middle childhood and adolescence/young adulthood. Certification is based on a set of propositions and standards that describe what teachers should know and be able to do. The process involves compiling a portfolio of student work, classroom videos, and intense analyses of classroom teaching and student learning. There are also written exercises that assess subject matter and pedagogical knowledge. (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002) Once certified, teachers are sometimes able to renegotiate their salary. To date, at least Austin ISD,

Corpus Christi ISD, Round Rock ISD, San Antonio ISD, and Waco ISD all offer financial incentives to teachers who are National Board certified.

Why not enlist a colleague and seek National Board Certification together? You can work together as peer coaches in observation cycles to refine classroom methods for the video tapes, consult one another as you compile student work and other necessary materials, and study together for the written portion of the certification.

Rally for What's Right

Policymakers in Texas could set a historical precedent by initiating and supporting LOTE interests such as early language learning programs and making LOTE a part of every student's education. How can *you* increase the number of LOTE advocates in your area? You might start by canvassing for opinions on and interest in a LOTE cause you would like to forward, such as a FLES program in your district. You may not even know where your peers outside of education stand on LOTE issues. Preaching to the choir and decrying the status of our discipline to one another is less effective than advocacy and action. Surveying the situation outside of your traditional circle gives you the opportunity to convince the undecided or sway the unconvinced.

Conclusion

Initially, the notion of Texas foreign language students becoming competitive with the multilingual inhabitants of other countries in the realm of language proficiency may seem somewhat idealistic. But when the characteristics of successful programs identified by CAL and others are taken into consideration, it is clear that Texas has similar traits and tools at its disposal. It stands to reason, then, that consistent use of these tools and persistence in applying them could lead to significant enrichment and growth in language teaching and learning and thus to proficiency levels akin to those of our international neighbors.

In the past, we might have thanked the kindly residents of other countries who responded when we gestured frantically and spoke loudly in English, in hopes that volume might substitute for language skills. Now we can look forward to taking our turn at impressing visitors to our country by offering them directions in Spanish to the Kimball Museum, by helping them buy tickets to an Astros game in Russian, or by explaining in Japanese exactly what *chicken fried steak* is!

For Reflection

1. Rank the eight characteristics of successful language learning identified by CAL in descending order, beginning with the one you believe is most critical to increasing students' language proficiency. How would you justify your ranking?

2. Select the three characteristics with which you are most familiar based on personal experience, current teaching context, professional reading, etc. What do each of these characteristics mean to you personally and how have your language learning and teaching experiences been affected by them?
3. If you had been interviewed by someone from another country about your experiences learning a foreign language in the United States, what standout experiences would you have shared?
4. Evaluate your current LOTE program with regard to each of the eight characteristics mentioned above. What are your program's strengths? In what areas is growth most needed? Were there any ideas in this paper that you might apply to strengthen your current program?

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