

Issue Analysis: The Need for Foreign Language Instruction in Elementary Schools

ABSTRACT:

Becoming a nation with a majority of citizens fluent in a second language—that is, one which is not native to them— is an important step that the US needs to take in order to function well in today’s global society. In addressing this aim, the nation needs to look to its education programs. Currently, US school systems do include foreign language in their curricula, but they do so later than what researchers of language and brain development recommend for students to gain proficiency in foreign languages. There is a great need for schools to implement foreign language instruction in the elementary schools. Early exposure to foreign languages provides students with a firm foundation in a specific foreign language in addition to providing the foundation for learning additional languages.

By taking the step to initiate early foreign language programs, schools will be attending to both the well-being of students as developing individuals and to the well-being of the nation as a whole. Although the developing of a program for foreign language education in the elementary school requires many funds and resources, much effort and attention on the part of the school, and support from local groups, the long-term results justify the work put into such programs. Successful examples of such programs emphasize the gains that early foreign language instruction provides. In this analysis, the example of Chartiers Valley School District’s foreign language program is presented to show the success achieved by one such program.

INTRODUCTION:

The US prides itself with always being on the cutting edge of the modern world. Yet, as a global power it is lacking a particularly important feature: it does not have a strong bilingual basis. The majority of American citizens are only proficient in one language: English. Data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau shows that 80.3% of the American population speaks only English at home.¹ This statistic seems strange when one considers the extent to which the US asserts its influence globally. The concern is becoming increasingly urgent for US society to direct attention to efforts that foster positive foreign relations. Taking the steps to develop a bilingual society is one of the essential ways to do this. The importance of foreign language instruction calls for starting foreign language instruction for children at an early age. It is most beneficial to expose children at a young age to foreign languages because they are most sensitive to languages at this stage and therefore have an easier time acquiring proficient second language skills during this stage. In addition, it is also very important to youths as they gain an appreciation for other cultures and peoples of the world.

FOCUSING ON THE ISSUE:

The main issue is that students in the majority of United States schools are taught foreign languages too late. Few schools orient their curriculum so that foreign languages are introduced to students in their elementary school years. Most schools introduce

¹ U.S. Dept. Of Commerce. U.S. Census Bureau. 2006 American Community Survey. 2006. 3 Mar. 2008. <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S1601&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_&-_lang=en&-redoLog=false&-format=&-CONTEXT=st>.

foreign language instruction at the middle school level. In her book *Living Languages*, Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa cites Mary Abbot of the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages* in saying that the current average age when most US students begin learning a foreign language is at the age of fourteen years old.²

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM:

The problem is not a lack of foreign language programs in American school systems. It is, instead, that schools' current methods of foreign language inclusion are not well constructed to the best advantage of its learners. Foreign language instruction needs to be initiated at the beginning of a child's schooling, preferably as early as kindergarten, in order for children to acquire accurate language skills, especially in speaking, listening comprehension, and word recognition. When individuals are exposed to foreign languages at a later age they do not have some of the important capabilities, which facilitate efficient language acquisition, like they did when they were young. One purposed reason for children's ability to acquire languages with greater ease is that there is a biological component involved. The idea is that the plasticity of a child's brain is more suited to acquire a language.³ Around the onset of puberty, children's language acquisition abilities diminish.

How do we know this? To appreciate the validity of this argument, one should consider both informal observation as well as formal studies. For instance there is the

² Tokuhama-Espinosa, Tracey. Living Languages: Multilingualism across the Lifespan. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008.

³ McLaughlin, Barry. Second-Language Acquisition in Childhood. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978.

evidence of children who have come into the US with their families as refugees. In most cases, both children and parents come into the states with no knowledge of English. After a few months, it is observed that young children have picked up the language very quickly whereas their parents struggle. In many cases, the children often need to act as interpreters between their parents and English speakers. From this one can deduce that children have an ingrained mechanism that predisposes them to easily make this adaptation to a foreign language whereas their parents cannot. If language was acquired based on necessity, one would assume that adults would pick up language the quickest because they are responsible for providing for the family. Therefore they hold the most stake in acquiring the language of their new home, and doing so quickly, because language is their key to jobs, and conversing with information and service providers to meet various needs (for example, housing, health care, and financial services). Since in reality the opposite is true, one must conclude that there is some neurological basis for young children's advantage over adults in acquiring foreign languages.

Therefore, it is unwise for schools to only provide students with their first exposure to foreign languages beyond early childhood. Proceeding in such a way is to the disadvantage of individuals because the chance of being successful greatly decreases at this stage. It is unreasonable to expect adolescent and adult students to personally motivate themselves and therefore succeed at learning a language when their natural disposition at this stage does not facilitate it but hinders it instead.

Although the emphasis on implementing foreign language education early has existed for many years, many schools across the nation have resisted the idea of initiating such language programs in their elementary schools. Instead, the majority of our nation's

schools wait to introduce foreign languages into the curricula after elementary school, usually in middle school. One such example is the West Jefferson Hills School District which only provides a cursory introduction to foreign languages starting in middle school.⁴ Many reasons exist for this resistance shown by most schools. One reason is that those in charge of school administration are accustomed to their systems regarding foreign languages. A change in these systems would require many changes which would alter the way the schools handles their curricula. Such a large task is a daunting one and requires able personnel to administer to the changes needed to be made as the system is implemented.

STAKEHOLDERS IN ISSUE:

The foremost stakeholders of this issue are children. They are the ones that have the most to gain and the most to loose depending on the success of this risk communication directed towards this problem.

The implications of this risk are that if programs fail to incorporate foreign language learning into elementary schools promptly, more and more children will bypass the age when they are best equipped to acquire a second language without having gained an extremely valuable personal asset: the ability to communication in a language other than their native language.

Children, as the stakeholders, are directly related to the audience that this risk communication will address: the school board. The school board makes the decisions that impact students' lives in terms of what type of educational experience they will have.

⁴ West Jefferson Hills School District. 2007. West Jefferson Hills School District. 17 Feb. 2008. <<http://www.wjhsd.net/curriculum/curriculum.htm>>.

OPPOSING ARGUMENTS:

There are some who hold the opinion that early exposure to foreign language is not essential to the acquiring of a language. Certain studies, such as those done by Catherine E. Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle, have sought to prove that adult language learners or older children are just as able or more so than young children. In their study, Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle rejected the Critical Period Hypothesis on account of their study's results. The results showed that subjects aging from 12-15 years were the fastest in regards to second language acquisition whereas subject between 3 and 5 years of age were the slowest.⁵ However, this study did not reflect long term results which are very important in considerations of language acquisition. The long-term results of early foreign language learning sufficiently support this approach to foreign language education. Furthermore, numerous other studies have convincingly supported the claim that the results are more successful when children are taught foreign languages early. These supporting studies are accompanied by the support provided by informal observations and accounts which add logical evidence. Further reasoning for opposition rests on several questions that opponents often have to introducing foreign languages in elementary schools. One such question regards the possibility that introducing languages at this level, when students are to be learning the basics of education, might cause their development and performance in core subjects to suffer. However, in actuality, many

⁵Snow, Catherine E., and Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle. "The Critical Period for Language Acquisition: Evidence from Second Language Learning." Child Development Vol. 49, No. 4 (1978): 1114-1128. JSTOR. Pittsburgh U, Hillman Lib. 25 Jan. 2008. <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0009-3920%28197812%2949%3A4%3C1114%3ATCPFLA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X>>.

studies have shown that learning a foreign language actually greatly enhances students' cognitive abilities. Another point of opposition that one might confront with those in opposition is the issue of No Child Left Behind. With No Child Left Behind, the belief is that emphasis is mostly placed on getting students to succeed primarily in the areas of math and English. This perspective suggests that the emphasis on core subjects does not permit much time for attention to foreign language instruction. Yet, most do not realize that the government strongly supports bilingual development in US schools. In the No Child Left Behind Act itself, emphasis is placed also on foreign language development. In addition, other government programs have been established, such as the Foreign Language Initiative Act, which promote and provide support for developing foreign language programs at the elementary level.

RISK COMMUNICATION'S ROLE:

Addressing this situation of foreign language education is a very important concern for US society. Having the knowledge of foreign languages plays a significant role in various ways to the well-being of American citizens. However, this concern is taken lightly by most individuals in the US. They do not completely comprehend the importance of having foreign language capabilities, which impacts all members of our society. Many subscribe to the thought that it is not really necessary to know other languages because they rely on the assumption that others throughout the world will know English. Yet, this conception is mistaken because priceless knowledge and ability are lost in not knowing a foreign language, both for one's self and for the nation in which we live.

Thus communication provided on this risk of remaining a predominantly monolingual nation is key to showing the public that there truly is a great need for change in the way the foreign language education is approached in our current society. By presenting a clear and convincing message, based on facts, yet geared towards the interests and concerns of the general public, risk communicators can have a significant effect in drawing people to importance of promoting foreign language learning in our country. By presenting the public with knowledge about what current research says about the best way to learn a foreign language as well as directing them to the specific reasons that bilingualism is essential to our population, risk communicators can disseminate, among the population, the fervor to take action in making the changes needed to increase our bilingual population. The solution that they will find, as a result of the risk communication, is the introduction of early foreign language programs in all of our nation's elementary schools, and they will be motivated to actively support it.

CASE:

A Local Example of a Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) Program:

Chartiers Valley Public School District, a school district in the suburbs of Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, provides an example of the implementation of foreign language education in the elementary school. In 1996, this district created a Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) program for its elementary schools. The idea for the program came from the school district's superintendent of 1995, who believed in the important role played by foreign language education in establishing successful futures for students. The program developed as a university-school district partnership which involved researchers from both Carnegie Mellon University and the University of

Pittsburgh.⁶

The arrangement of the program was such that classes would meet 5 days a week for 20 minutes each day. The way this was done was that a Spanish specialist, a person certified in foreign language as well as elementary education, would work collaboratively with the regular classroom teachers to teach students the language. The language chosen for this program was Spanish. The program was designed so that it could be incorporated into the elementary school's core curriculum. Another important aspect of this program was that attention was paid to trying whenever possible to integrate Spanish into other areas of students' daily education, such as art and music lessons.

The program's success was due in part to the fact that it was thoroughly planned. Multiple considerations were taken into account when this program was being devised. For instance, consideration was given to the level of community support regarding the potential program, whether or not the program would be adequately funded through budgetary authorizations, the availability of certified teachers, which language would be taught, and how the language lessons would be incorporated into students' daily instruction. Furthermore, the program succeeded due to the careful and collaborative planning and evaluation done throughout the process, the gradual program expansion, the attention to progress in proficiency, and the highly competent foreign language faculty and practitioners who were involved.

⁶ Donato, Richard, and G. Richard Tucker. "Implementing a District-Wide Foreign Language Program: A Case Study of Acquisition, Planning, and Curricular Innovation." Eric Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics. Sept. 2001. Center for Applied Linguistics. 17 Feb. 2008. <<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0103implement.html>>.

SOLUTION:

A solution to the problem of the difficulty faced by late language learners in their attempts to acquire a language rests in starting foreign language education in kindergarten. An early start provides individuals with the foundations for foreign language learning by utilizing children's natural predisposition to learn languages with ease. When considering the implementation of foreign language programs in elementary schools, several considerations need to be addressed. How much time will be spent per day in foreign language study, which language will students receive lessons in (the foreign language or English), and will core subjects be taught in the foreign language are some essential considerations that need to be given serious attention. These considerations will be reflected in the type of program chosen for foreign language instruction. There are various options for the type of program a school can use when implementing foreign language education in elementary schools. These different types of programs include immersion programs, Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) programs, and partial immersion programs. An immersion program is a type of language program in which the foreign language is used as the medium through which other subjects are taught. This type of program differs from the more commonly used Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) program in which classes are taught in English with the foreign language being taught for a certain amount of time each day. Partial immersion programs fall in between these previously mentioned types. With a partial immersion program, roughly half of a school's curriculum is taught in the foreign language.

CONCLUSION:

Implementation of foreign language programs into elementary school curricula is an issue that urgently needs to be resolved. The longer it is put aside, the more people are denied a successful experience in foreign language acquisition. Existing models of successful programs, in which foreign language programs were incorporated into elementary school curricula, should seriously be considered in regards to how such programs were successful, what problems or obstacles they faced, and the outcomes of the programs so that local school board members can be convinced and motivated to move forward with their own plans for elementary school foreign language program. In this way, future students will not experience the extent of the frustration or apathy experienced by many current language learners when they have not had early exposure to second language learning.

Works Cited

- Donato, Richard, and G. Richard Tucker. "Implementing a District-Wide Foreign Language Program: A Case Study of Acquisition, Planning, and Curricular Innovation." Eric Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics. Sept. 2001. Center for Applied Linguistics. 17 Feb. 2008. <<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0103implement.html>>.
- McLaughlin, Barry. Second-Language Acquisition in Childhood. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978.
- Snow, Catherine E., and Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle. "The Critical Period for Language Acquisition: Evidence from Second Language Learning." Child Development Vol. 49, No. 4 (1978): 1114-1128. JSTOR. Pittsburgh U, Hillman Lib. 25 Jan. 2008. <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0009-3920%28197812%2949%3A4%3C1114%3ATCPFLA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X>>.
- Tokuhama-Espinosa, Tracey. Living Languages: Multilingualism across the Lifespan. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008.
- U.S. Dept. Of Commerce. U.S. Census Bureau. 2006 American Community Survey. 2006. 3 Mar. 2008. <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S1601&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_&-_lang=en&-redoLog=false&-format=&-CONTEXT=st>.
- West Jefferson Hills School District. 2007. West Jefferson Hills School District. 17 Feb. 2008. <<http://www.wjhsd.net/curriculum/curriculum.htm>>.