

Foreign Language Programs in Elementary Schools



Credit: Center for Applied Linguistics

Introducing Elementary School Children to Foreign Language Learning

It's hard to deny that young children have the advantage over adolescents and adults when it comes to language learning. Across all age categories, young children attain the most success in acquiring a native-like ability to speak a language beyond their native tongue.

With this in mind, we should consider why early foreign language education is not the norm in elementary schools in the United States. Yes, there are some out there, but they are few. Being fluent in a foreign language is a great asset to all of today's society. Bilingualism provides the means of communication between nations, which leads to the sharing of valuable knowledge, information, and experiences.

Therefore it is pertinent for more elementary schools in the US to seriously consider the importance of incorporating early foreign language programs within their own school systems. As more schools begin to make this move to aid the nation in building a bilingual or even multilingual nation, they will be helping not only the young people of our country, but our entire nation as well as the world as a whole. By helping our young people to become fluent in foreign languages, we are presenting them with a priceless key that will open the doors to great knowledge and experience which most of their parents, as monolingual citizens, were deprived of. By making it our priority to build our nation's resource of people capable of fluently speaking an additional language or languages we will be making our nation more open and compatible with the diversity in our world.

The goal of this newsletter is to present support, address questions and concerns, and provide further information to aid our local school districts in taking steps to incorporate early foreign language education programs into our elementary schools.

Special points of interest:

- **Children's Advantages in the Field of Foreign Language Learning (p. 3)**
- **Risk of a Monolingual Nation (p. 4)**
- **Essentials for Success (p.5)**

Kids & Languages



Credit: the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL)

Children's ability to pick up languages effortlessly is an innate ability. Their minds are specially equipped for this job. Between the years of birth and adolescence, children tend to be more successful with language acquisition because their brains are more prone to language development during this time.

One explanation for this is that much of the



Credit: the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)

learning done by young children is related to sounds. Children are particularly attuned to variations among sounds. This characteristic makes them very adept at distinguishing

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between different sounds. In addition, they can remember and reproduce sound patterns with a high degree of accuracy. They rely on imitation in order to help them learn to reproduce the variety of sound patterns exhibited by words within a given language. Since languages, at their very core, are assortments of different sounds patterns, children can grasp them rather easily, even if the language is foreign to their own.



Children Listening to a book read in Korean

Credit: the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL)

Challenges in Creating Foreign Language Programs in Primary Schools

A common concern regarding the idea of creating foreign language programs in elementary schools is the belief that learning a foreign language during childhood would interfere with development of first language skills.

In actuality, this concern does not pose as much of a problem as one supposes. Children’s minds are well adapted to acquiring language skills. It has been noted that children can acquire different languages simultaneously without negative interference occurring. In addition, having the knowledge of another language helps young students see relationships and gain a better overall understanding of their first language.

Another issue posed in opposition of early foreign language programs is the idea that incorporating foreign language instruction at this stage would take away from instruction time dedicated to the basic subjects, such as math, science, and English. Many peo-

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Credit: Fairfax County Public Schools:
Instructional Services

Children vs. Adolescent & Adult Language Learners

Many adolescents and adults are very familiar with the frustrations that accompany learning another language. They might have had multiple years of language study, but even so, they just can’t seem to grasp the elusive ability of fluently speaking and comprehending the targeted language. If they do attain this goal, their language abilities rarely evade being accompanied by non-native accents and other non-native tendencies.

Yet with children it’s a completely different situation. For children, successfully acquiring foreign language skills requires much less conscious effort and confronts many less difficulties.

Why is this so? A major reason is that when learning foreign languages young children do not have many of the obstacles that adolescents and adults face. For one thing, their minds are more flexible. Thus their thoughts and conceptions are less rigid. Because of this, they are not overwhelmed by incongruities seen in the difference between the way one language is constructed and how it functions in comparison to another, as most older individuals are. Furthermore, the majority of things that they are exposed to are new to them so they less strongly distinguish something as foreign. Therefore they do not create their own mental barriers to learning foreign words, pronunciations, and grammatical structures as older individuals tend to do.

By taking a closer look, it is evident that several key factors combine to make young children more effective than adolescents or adults as foreign language learners. Such factors stem from biological, psychological, and situational factors. For additional insight into this topic, see box of “Key Advantages of Children Learning Languages.”



Courtesy of PBS Teachers

Current Standpoint of US on the Issue of Importance of Foreign Languages

The US ranks far below other nations with respect to its bilingual population. A recent survey done by the European Union in order to measure the bilingual populations indicates that 50% of citizens in the European Union speak a second language. In Britain, 30% of the population reports being bilingual while in the United States the figure drops to a mere 9%. These statistics show that the importance of acquiring a second language is clearly underemphasized here in the United States.

This is not to say that foreign languages are not taught here in US schools. The bigger issue is that the way US schools proceed in incorporating foreign language education is not feasible to the best ways of learning a foreign language. The common practice in the US schools is to only introduce foreign languages at the secondary level. However, by this time, students are beyond the ages when language learning comes most naturally. Therefore the outcomes are less successful.

And the end result shows. It is noted that fewer than 8% of American students go on to take foreign language courses in college. This fact further hinders US progress with foreign language education because fewer qualified teachers are available to instruct young students in a foreign language.

The US government has recognized the importance of developing bilingual abilities among its citizens. Advancing the bilingual status of the nation is strongly promoted by the heads of state in Washington. They see foreign language learn-

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Key Advantages of Children Learning Languages

- Children’s brains are neurologically suited to acquire languages
- The way children learn languages is different – there is a greater sound basis to their learning than is characteristic with older individuals and much more of the learning process is done orally
- Children acquire language skills more directly by learning through tangible objects and examples and through more specific contexts
- Children deal less with the hindering effects of self-consciousness, which is much more prominent in the adolescent and adult years
- There are fewer things, such as major responsibilities, to preoccupy children’s minds
- Elementary curriculum does not place very demanding work loads on children, so stress is not an issue; without stress negatively inhibiting thinking, the mind can more easily acquire knowledge
- School is still a new experience for children so they tend to have more interest in it and the things they are doing in class
- Children have more time and fewer distractions
- Children have more years of instruction ahead of them to continue to build on the language skills they are taught



Credit: Fairfax County Public Schools: Instructional Services

“Language and communication are at the heart of the human experience. The United States must educate students who are equipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language.”

(National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999, p. 7)



Credit: Fairfax County Public Schools: Instructional Services

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ple believe that the schools need to devote the majority of school time to helping elementary students build solid foundations in these essential subjects in order for them to have future success in education.

However, multiple studies such as those cited by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), and the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL) have shown that acquiring second language skills early actually improves students' cognitive abilities. Having a diverse assortment of subjects helps students' minds develop to greater depths thus enabling them to grow into more well-rounded individuals. In addition, adding foreign language as a subject amid other core subjects helps to keep the day more interesting for students as they shift between modes of thinking in different subjects.

RISK OF A MONOLINGUAL NATION

Without changes being made in the US educational programs, the nation is likely to remain predominately monolingual. There are several significant implications that accompany this risk for both individuals as well as the nation as a whole:

- Greater tendency towards hostility among nations
- Misunderstandings between nations and cultures
- Inability to share valuable knowledge and ideas
- Greater difficulty participating in global affairs
- Greater difficulty competing in the global economy
- More limited job opportunities
- More limited cultural experiences
- More self-absorbed attitudes as a nation
- Less diversity among American citizens



Credit: the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL)

Elementary School Foreign Language Programs Worldwide

A key fact in the issue of foreign languages, as seen from a global perspective, is that for most people throughout the world knowing a second language is not uncommon. Investigation shows that more people around the globe are bilingual than those who are monolingual.

So why is the US an exception to this norm? A closer glance shows that when looking at nations which are notably bilingual most begin foreign language instruction in schools at the primary level. A survey done in 1962 collected data on 45 countries or regions of the world. Of these, it was noted that in 32 of them second language learning occurred at the primary school level below the age of 10.

Are these two facts coincidental? Probably not. Therefore, why does the US continue to ignore the evidence of successful language acquisition when instruction occurs early? A change needs to be made, and this change begins with US schools making it their priority to initiate foreign language programs at the elementary level.

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ing as key to aiding US security and fostering better relations among foreign nations. In her book *Living Languages*, author Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa cites the common notion that “. . . America’s language limitations and poor communication are to blame for the problems with countries in parts of the world in which the U.S. government participates without a thorough understanding of the culture.”

So our nation must recognize that two very important concerns are involved with in this issue: our nation’s well-being among world neighbors and our young population’s linguistic advancement and increased awareness of other cultures’ importance. This goal is a priority to our nation; therefore it must also become a priority in our schools. Thus, there is a true necessity for school districts throughout the US to make the commitment to the goal of developing the bilingual status of the nation.



Credit: the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)

Benefits of Children Learning Foreign Languages

Exposing children to foreign languages early helps them gain an understanding of different countries, cultures, and peoples of the world. Done at an early age, this helps students establish an appreciation and acceptance of people who are different from themselves.

In addition, when children learn more than one language at a young age it becomes easier for them to learn additional languages in the future, since they have acquired a better understanding of the functions, structures, and differences among languages.

Also , starting children with languages early allows more time for exposure to the language, causing the language to become more ingrained and natural to them. This also allows children to have the benefit of continually building on their learning.

“The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is capable of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension.”
Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading*

- ### **Essentials Needed for a Successful Program:**
- Teachers specializing in foreign languages
* preferably those trained in elementary education
 - Substantial funding
 - Involvement of linguistic specialists
 - Dedicated Staff Members
 - Public Support

Putting Elementary Foreign Language Program into Effect: A Worthwhile Effort



Credit: the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)

People have a natural pull to the idea of being able to speak another language. The thought of it is appealing yet the achievement of this goal is difficult to attain when language instruction has not occurred at a young age. This is not to say it cannot be done. The fact is simply that it is indeed more difficult, requiring more time, conscious effort, discipline, and dedication to reach the goal. Unfortunately, most do not reach this level of desire for acquiring a second language that equals the dedicated effort involved.



Credit: the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)

So why not evade this difficulty by allowing young children the opportunity to take full advantage of their natural language abilities and acquire the necessary skills through instruction when it is most effective? School districts throughout the US need to be called into action. Let's begin the effort to create Elementary School Foreign Language Programs among our own schools districts here in Allegheny County.

Want to Learn More . . . ?

You can learn more about foreign language programs in elementary schools and the need and benefits of implementing them by visiting these websites:

<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/rosenb01.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/earlychildhood/articles/language.html>

<http://www.fcps.edu/DIS/OHSICS/forlang.htm>

<http://laz15.edublogs.org>

In addition, several organizations can be contacted of further information, especially helpful for planning to implement a Early Foreign Language Program within your school district :

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)

700 South Washington Street, Suite 210
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone 703-894-2900
www.actfl.org
Email: headquarters@actfl.org

Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)

4646 40th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20016-1859
Phone: 202-362-0700
www.cal.org/earlylang (Web site on early language learning)
www.cal.org
Email: info@cal.org

National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL)

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Foreign Language Education for Early Ages (FLEEA)

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