Elementary Foreign Language Instruction: Teacher and Student Perspectives

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Elementary Foreign Language Instruction: Teacher and Student Perspectives

by

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August 1, 2008

A thesis submitted to the

Department of Education and Human Development of the

State University of New York College at Brockport

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Education
Elementary Foreign Language Instruction: Teacher and Student Perspectives

by

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APPROVED BY:

[Signatures and dates]
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

The globalization of the economy and increased immigration in the United States calls for increased foreign language study. As of 2005, less than 10 percent of Americans "can speak anything other than their native language fluently" (Conan, 2005). On the other hand, eight out of ten European students are conversational in a second language (Conan). In certain areas of the United States, the inhabitants learn a second language due to necessity because of large immigrant populations such as Miami where others learn a foreign language by choice or through family exposure. Christian, Pufahl, and Rhodes (2004/2005) highlight the "cultural richness of the many immigrant and indigenous communities in the United States" (p.29) to utilize in schools.

I am curious how students benefit from elementary foreign language instruction because the United States is in need of increased foreign language opportunities in its schools in order for its people to successfully communicate and understand diverse cultures. The United States Department of Education declared 2005 as the Year of Languages to increase national awareness of the importance of foreign language learning (Cutshall, 2005). Thus, the United States government is aware of the importance of multilingualism.

The New York State Learning Standards for Languages Other Than English consist of two standards based on the development of communication and "cross-cultural skills and understanding" (New York State Department of Education, 1996).
As stated in the standards, the learning checkpoints may be reached anywhere in the K-12 continuum even though most schools offer foreign language instruction at the intermediate and high school levels (New York State Department of Education, 1996). The New York State Learning Standards for Languages Other Than English include the area of foreign language learning in elementary school but few students have the opportunity to receive foreign language instruction at this level; six percent of U.S. schools offer an elementary foreign language program (New York State Assembly, 2007).

As of 2006, only four school districts in the Rochester area offered elementary foreign language instruction before fifth grade (New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers, 2006). Four school districts in the Syracuse region offered foreign language instruction before fifth grade while the Buffalo area offered more access to elementary foreign language programs with ten school districts (NYSAFLT, 2006). In 2005, there was more access to elementary foreign language programs before grade four in the Albany, Long Island, and New York City regions (NYSAFLT, 2006). The possible higher populations in these regions could contribute to the higher number of elementary foreign language programs but it is still surprising that cities with diverse language populations such as Rochester, Buffalo, and Syracuse offer little access to elementary foreign language programs.

Research Questions

For the small percentage of schools that offer elementary foreign language instruction, my overarching question is concerned with what students gain from these
programs. More specifically, what are second, fourth and sixth grade students' perceptions and attitudes towards learning Spanish in elementary school? What are foreign language teachers' perceptions of the nature and quality of foreign language programs in elementary schools? What types of learning activities do students at second, fourth, and sixth grade levels experience?

Rationale

As a teacher certified in childhood education and Spanish, I am interested in how students benefit from elementary foreign language programs. I student taught in an International Baccalaureate elementary school that offered Spanish. Students seemed to enjoy learning a second language at the elementary level. The pressure to focus on reading, math, and science as a result of No Child Left Behind influences elementary schools to concentrate on content areas that require standardized testing which does not include foreign languages (Edwards, 2004). Consequently, foreign language instruction, along with art and music are often sacrificed. During the second half of my student teaching placement, I taught in an urban dual language setting where I expected language learning to permeate everyday instruction. In a typical dual language program, students develop their first and second languages. On the contrary, the teachers focused on English language arts and math and placed little regular emphasis on Spanish language development which was a native language for some students and a foreign language for others.
Definitions

Numerous foreign language programs exist at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The focus of this research is on a popular model of foreign language instruction for elementary students: Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES). There are three types of FLES models: Sequential FLES, FLEX or exploratory FLES, and Immersion (Lipton, 1994). FLES programs emphasize understanding of a foreign language holistically and communicatively. Moreover, FLES programs are typically based on national and state learning standards and are usually embedded in the general education curriculum in addition to separate foreign language instruction.

The distinction between language learning and language acquisition is also important when investigating foreign language education. Sandra Fotos (2004) defines language learning as “formal instruction on rules, forms, and vocabulary” (p.267) and defines language acquisition as “an unconscious process similar to the way children learn their first language” (p.267). Essentially, language acquisition occurs in a more natural manner than language learning which involves more formalized instruction.

Study Approach

This qualitative exploratory case study investigated student and teacher perceptions of how students benefit from FLES programs in one school district in a mid-sized city in the northeastern United States. The qualitative nature of the study was appropriate because it allowed for elaboration during interviews to obtain desired
information. Because I did not intend to compare numerical data such as test scores, a quantitative approach was inappropriate. Also, my research questions focused on student and teacher attitudes and perceptions of elementary foreign language programs, so a qualitative case study was appropriate.

To collect data, I used student focus group interviews, a teacher interview and field notes to document observations in classrooms. The teacher interview attempted to determine teacher attitudes and opinions on how elementary foreign language instruction affects students. An elementary teacher was asked about FLES students' motivation, interest, verbal communication, written communication, fluency, cultural knowledge and awareness. Student focus group interviews aimed to uncover attitudes about elementary foreign language instruction of students in the elementary program.

I used an interview guide to ask questions to three focus groups of 3-5 students in second, fourth and sixth grade at a school with a Spanish FLES program. The conversational interview was audiotaped. I asked the teacher to rank the students whose parents granted permission to participate in this case study into three groups of Spanish language development: low, average, and high. From these three ability groups, I randomly selected 2-4 students from each grade by drawing names out of a bag, depending on how many students returned permission forms.

I conducted an audiotaped interview with the elementary Spanish teacher. The interview questions focused on students' motivation, interest, verbal communication, written communication, fluency, and cultural knowledge and awareness. The teacher's perceptions and insight were useful in answering my research questions.
Lastly, I conducted a series of observations in the second, fourth and sixth grade classes. The field notes from these observations were useful in determining what types of learning activities students experienced at each of the three grades. I used a field note template for each of my three observations at each grade level. Comparing my field notes from each grade level helped me gain insight on how similar and different the student experiences were throughout their elementary foreign language learning experience.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss research on the current state of Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) in the areas of 1) National, state, and local government influences on FLES programs; 2) Availability and access to FLES programs in the United States; 3) Benefits of FLES programs; 4) Economic and global necessity of FLES programs; 5) American attitudes towards learning a foreign language; 6) Opportune age; 7) Language learning theories; and 8) Essential FLES program components. This review of literature highlights the condition of U.S. foreign language programs in elementary school and its importance in moving the United States towards a higher degree of multilingualism.

Legislative and Federal Influence

The United States government influences the state of foreign language programs. Throughout U. S. history, foreign language education experienced uneven periods of emphasis and value. Edwards (2004) describes the current perception of foreign language as a “national security crisis, not a language problem” (p.268). The lack of emphasis of foreign language in “basic education” is not a new concept in the United States (Edwards). Although No Child Left Behind (NCLB), passed in 2001, focuses on math, reading, and science at the expense of foreign languages and art, the lacking emphasis on foreign languages is not unusual (Cutshall, 2005). Between 1898 and 1958, few FLES programs existed but 1958 marked a surge in FLES programs with the passing of the National Defense Education Act as the United States entered
the Cold War (Lipton, 1998). As early as 1894, the National Education Association (NEA) recommended that elementary schools offer foreign language instruction (Lipton, 1998). The surge of FLES programs in the 1960s soon declined because of “insufficient planning, inappropriate goals, unrealistic promises, lack of materials, unqualified teachers, and inadequate time allotments” which hindered the long term and constant success of FLES programs in the United States (Pesola, 1988, p.2). Additionally, financial difficulties and education budget cuts in the 1970s resulted in the decline of FLES programs offered as they were deemed considered an unessential component of elementary curriculum (Lipton, 1998). Between 1978 and 1998, more FLES national organizations and advocates emerged and led to another increase in FLES programs (Lipton, 1998). After September 11, 2001, there was “greater attention and awareness regarding the learning of languages and knowledge of other cultures” (Edwards, 2004, p.268). In 2002, a Senate subcommittee reported that the Untied States’s lacking foreign language abilities “have adversely affected agency operations and hindered U.S. military, law enforcement, intelligence, counterterrorism, and diplomatic efforts” (Edwards, 2004, p.269).

The up and down popularity of FLES programs has occurred since the first programs were established. NCLB promoted support against FLES programs. In the first negotiations of NCLB, the United States Administration and House versions eliminated Foreign Language Assistance Programs (FLAP) and small FLES programs like Star Schools and Javits (Edwards, 2004). However, the Senate saved foreign language education and deemed it as a “core academic subject area” (p.270) shortly
after the House and Administration eliminated funding (Edwards, 2004). O’Toole and Hughes conducted a study to determine how foreign language programs changed during the two years following the passing of NCLB by administering 165 surveys to school districts throughout the northeastern United States. O’Toole and Hughes (2006) reported that 22% of school districts eliminated one or more grade levels of foreign languages, 39% of school districts scaled back one or more of their grade levels and 24% of school districts reported the elimination of foreign language teaching positions.

Also, they found that some schools experienced increases such as a 10% increase in the number of languages offered, 20% increase in years of foreign language study, and a 27% increase in foreign language teachers hired. Still other schools experienced decreases like 13% decreased language offerings, 11% decreased years of study, and 16% hired fewer language teachers (O’Toole & Hughes, 2006). The timing of NCLB and changes in foreign language programs are expected because of schools’ focus on high stakes testing areas thus resulting in reallocation of resources and time.

High stakes testing and accountability associated with NCLB emphasize the need for proficient English language learners; language becomes an obstacle for teachers instead of “a social and academic asset” (Azzam, 2004/2005, p.7). Teachers focus on content areas that require tests and often cannot find time to incorporate foreign language instruction into their already overscheduled days. NCLB’s “emphasis on reading, testing, and teacher credentials, combined with severely
inadequate funding, appears to have shortchanged foreign language programs in some school districts” (Edwards, 2004, p.270). The local control over the implementation of NCLB can negatively impact foreign language education and budgeting priorities because school districts feel the pressure to focus on content areas that require national and state testing instead of foreign language programs (O’Toole & Hughes, 2006). Moreover, Met (2001) suggests that NCLB actually widens the achievement gap because it does not address the importance of communicating in languages other than English. For example, one high school student responded to a survey about his FLES experience, “It was actually really pointless. I was young and I didn’t know much about the world but I knew that it was really stupid. I mean if they couldn’t bring teachers in there to teach us all the time then it meant it was pretty pointless” (Heining-Boynton and Haitema, 2007, p.164). This particular student recognized that the low frequency of foreign language instruction meant that other subjects were more important which decreased his interest and motivation to learn the foreign language.

Many attribute the low prevalence of foreign language programs to their cost. The United States spent less than 1/6th of 1 percent of the overall Department of Education budget on foreign language instruction in 2003. In other words, for every one hundred dollars spent by the Department of Education in 2003, only 15 cents went to foreign language education (Cutshall, 2005). Congress increased foreign language funding for higher education, the Department of Defense, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but cut Foreign Language Assistance Programs (FLAP)
which provides support for foreign language programs in elementary and secondary schools (Edwards, 2004). NCLB’s emphasis on math, reading, and writing should include foreign languages in order for the United States to demonstrate the value and necessity of learning a foreign language (Christian, Pufahl, & Rhodes, 2004/2005). Edwards (2004) highlights the inconsistencies in foreign language funding.

In 2006, President George W. Bush created the National Security Language Initiative which combines the efforts of the Department of State, Education, and Defense, as well as the office of the Director of National Intelligence to improve foreign language capacity in the U.S. (Robinson, Rivers, & Brecht, 2006). The Department of Defense needs speakers that are fluent in Arabic, Central and South Asian languages, Chinese, Farsi, Indonesian, Korean, Kurdish, Philippine languages, Russian, Serbian/Croatian, Spanish, Sub-Saharan African languages, and Turkish to “facilitate trade, diplomacy and collective security” (Robinson et al. 2006, p.457). The need for “coordinated policy-making” by paying more attention to primary and secondary levels of language teaching is necessary to meet the national language needs (Robinson et al., 2006, p.458). The national goals to make the United States a more internationally educated and linguistically competent country are unachievable unless federal goals are accompanied by federally funding of state programs.

Availability and Access of Foreign Language Instruction in the United States

The low prevalence of FLES programs in the United States does not allow many students access to elementary foreign language learning opportunities. Met (2001) highlights the disparities in equity and access to foreign language programs in
the United States because more than two thirds of elementary schools do not offer foreign language learning opportunities. Of the school districts surveyed in O'Toole and Hughes's (2006) post-NCLB study, 15-17% offered foreign language programs for K-4 learners but over 90% of school districts offered foreign language programs for grades 8-12. Of the elementary schools that provide access to foreign language instruction, one-half are private institutions. Only one quarter of public institutions offer foreign language instruction at the elementary level. Urban schools that educate high-poverty students tend to focus their resources on basic academic needs instead of expanding programs offered. The money and resources required for elementary foreign language programs increases the linguistic divide and typically leaves urban students trailing their suburban peers (Met, 2001).

Even though less than one-third of students have access to elementary foreign language instruction, not all take advantage of elementary foreign language programs (Met, 2004). According to Cutshall (2004), only 6% of U.S. students study a foreign language in grades 1-6. To highlight international access, a survey of 19 countries reported that 16 required foreign language instruction by upper elementary school (Met, 2001). The U.S. does not require foreign language instruction in elementary school. The small number of elementary students learning a foreign language transfers to higher education. Cutshall (2004) reports that less than 10% of college students major in a foreign language and those that do choose French, Spanish, German, or Italian while the majority of the world’s population speaks Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Russian.
Benefits of Elementary Foreign Language Learning

Met (2001) describes the United States’ foreign language efforts as “barely able to produce students who have enough fluency in a language other than English to be polite tourists” (p.37). Many researchers agree and propose significant cognitive, and academic benefits for children who learn a second language at a young age compared to monolingual children such as the ability to creatively solve complex problems and intellectual flexibility. Also, researchers suggest that learning a foreign language in elementary school is beneficial for foreign language learning later in life.

For instance, Robinson (1998) cites one study by Foster and Reeves in 1989 which compared sixth grade students in an FLES program with English-only sixth grade students and found that FLES students outperformed their English-only peers in metacognitive processing and analysis, synthesis, and evaluation on an assessment developed to measure cognitive processes of Bloom’s taxonomy.

Moreover, students who study a foreign language at a young age are said to have a higher degree of mental flexibility, divergent thinking, and metalinguistic awareness (Met, 2004). Also, students who study a foreign language at a young age shift more easily between letters and symbols, and obtain higher scores on verbal intelligence tests (Met, 2004). Vygotsky (1962) describes the function of language as a “mediator that guides thought processes and shapes individuals socially” (as found in Robinson, 1998, p.37). When one systematically learns a second language, the brain is working harder at perceiving, intaking, storing, and recalling (Robinson, 1998). These processes are beneficial to one’s development and learning and produce
more creative and better problem solving students than students who do not study a second language (Stewart, 2005). Learning a second language at a young age expands “cognitive abilities, creative thinking and problem solving skills, and adaptability” which are transferable skills to other academic areas (Stewart, 2005, p.14).

A study of a foreign language also increases one’s native language development and understanding. Redbord and Sachetti (2003) suggest that “as a child acquires language structures in the second language, he or she is continuously scaffolding, connecting, and comparing these new structures to what is already known” (p.1). Children compare and contrast their learning of a second language with their knowledge of their native language to construct meaning and make sense of both languages simultaneously. The American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (2008) suggests that knowledge of a second language enriches and enhances students’ understanding of their native language. In addition, Stewart (2005) suggests that “being a dual language child allows that child to participate in two social worlds and become more attuned to subtleties of communicative interaction” (p.14). Learning and using two languages potentially creates more opportunities for communicating with people that speak a language different than their native language which also enhances understanding of cultural gestures and movements associated with conversation. The ACTFL (2008) agrees that learning a second language increases understanding of and appreciation for other cultures.

Although many teachers believe foreign language instruction competes with other subject areas, one study found that there were no negative effects on content
area test scores or standardized achievement tests when students were taken out of class for foreign language instruction. Also, language learners outperformed their non-language learning peers on standardized achievement tests and gained foreign language skills in addition to general education skills (Met, 2004). For example, an immersion school in Fairfax County, Virginia reported that their students scored equally high or better than comparison groups on achievement tests and remained high academic achievers throughout their academic experience (Stewart, 2005). Stewart (2005) claims that elementary foreign language programs align with NCLB's high outcomes for all children. Instead of diverting attention from high-priority subjects, foreign language learning is linked to higher scores on reading and math assessments even for high-poverty students (Met, 2001). Essentially, students who have access to and participate in an elementary foreign language program experience cognitive, academic, and linguistic benefits.

A main component in many FLES programs involves culture (ACTFL, 2008). FLES programs expose children to various cultures and identifies language as a way to communicate with diverse peoples. Not only do students in FLES programs benefit cognitively, academically, and linguistically, they also have the potential to gain a greater degree of cultural sensitivity when teachers utilize the cultural approach to FLES. The cultural approach emphasizes learning a second language through learning about the cultures that speak the language. Stewart (2005) highlights FLES students increased understanding of geographical and cultural perspectives “that enhance learning in social studies, science, art and music” (p.14). Heining-Boynton and
Haitema (2007) report that ten years of data suggests FLES instruction has a positive impact on students’ perceptions of different cultures, speakers of languages other than English, and how foreign language affects their education. Essentially, the increased appreciation and awareness of other cultures is a benefit of FLES programs.

Economic and Global Necessity

Many researchers highlight the need to learn a second language like Arabic, Chinese and Japanese due to the changing role of the United States in the global economy (Cutshall, 2004). Cutshall (2004) points out that the language of the client or customer is the international language of business, which is not always English. Therefore, students in the United States will need to learn a second language in order to communicate with or compete against peers from other countries where they may live and work. For example, government offices and agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Association, and the State Department require language proficient professionals (Met, 2001). The world’s multilingual society requires its inhabitants to be multilingual if they want to be successful because more than half of U.S. professionals work in a multilingual environment where they are “linguistically unprepared to do so” (Met, 2001, p.36). According to Cutshall (2004), more than 200,000 Americans lose out on jobs every year because they are monolingual.

Lastly, the changing demographics of the United States and increased immigration from Mexico, the Philippines, Korea, China, Taiwan, India, Vietnam, and Cuba highlight the linguistic diversity in the communities where Americans live and
work (Azzam, 2004/2005). Students who learn a second language have the ability to learn a third language more quickly than monolingual students so if U.S. schools produce graduates that are proficient in a foreign language, the U.S. could more easily train these students to meet unforeseen linguistic needs as they arise in local, national, and international realms (Met, 2004).

**American Attitudes Towards Learning a Second Language**

According to Cutshall (2005), Americans generally exhibit a negative and defeatist attitude towards learning a second language which traces back to “the fact that the person didn’t start early enough, didn’t have enough time devoted to the language” (p.24) or experienced difficulty when learning a second language in the past. According to Azzam (2004/2005), Americans view foreign language learning as a luxury instead of a necessity which decreases motivation to learn a second language. The increased number of speakers of languages other than English in the United States should provide reason for the study of foreign languages. In the 2000 United States Census, 18% spoke a language other than English at home which increased from 14% in 1990 and 11% in 1980. In the 2000 National General Social Survey which contained demographic, behavioral and attitudinal questions, half of the respondents that identified themselves as speaking a language other than English spoke Spanish (Robinson, Rivers and Brecht, 2006). Although I was unable to uncover research studies on this topic, the current U.S. involvement in the Iraq War and the controversial issue of immigration in the United States may further divide feelings toward foreign languages and people.
Age can also influence attitudes towards learning a foreign language. According to Piaget (1952), children 10 years old and younger are more open to different things and people as they move from egocentrism to reciprocity (as found in Robinson, 1998). Also, as students age, their perceptions of themselves become less positive as a result of socialization which affects their motivation in school (Robinson, 1998). Therefore, younger children welcome foreign language learning better than their older peers. Heining-Boynton and Haitema (2007) conducted a ten year study on students’ attitudes towards foreign language in elementary school. This two part study found that high school students that had elementary foreign language instruction viewed it as a beneficial experience but also found that interest in learning a foreign language decreased over time in both males and females (Heining-Boynton & Haitema, 2007).

Opportune Age

According to Robinson (1998), children are naturally more open to linguistic and cultural differences and exhibit interest in learning about diverse peoples of the world before age eleven. Elementary students are more enthusiastic about learning a second language and come to school with more openness to different experiences which enhance foreign language learning (Schrier, 1996). As of 2000, students in the United States typically started learning a foreign language at age 14 while Australian and Thai students started at age six and German, Italian, and Spanish students started learning a foreign language at age eight (Christian, Pufahl, & Rhodes, 2004/2005). Crawford (2004) suggests that children between the ages of two and six are in an
active period of language acquisition. Thus, children in the United States typically start learning a language after their developmental language learning peak.

In contrast, Crawford (2004) points out that adults may experience a greater degree of difficulty when learning a second language and have a more distinct non-native accent, but there is not a point when language learning declines drastically. Although children are more able to learn a foreign language through acquisition and motivation, adults are not drastically less able. Stewart (2005) suggests that younger children are “less inhibited trying to speak and understand a new language” and are more able to pronounce the second language than adult learners (p.14).

Motivation to learn a second language may vary by age. Sung and Padilla (1998) conducted a study that examined the motivation of 140 elementary students and 451 secondary students towards learning Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Sung and Padilla found that elementary students were more motivated than secondary students to learn a language related to their ethnic heritage. Also, Sung and Padilla (1998) conclude that students appear to be more motivated to learn a foreign language when they have studied it longer.

In contrast, Heining-Boynton and Haitema (2007) surveyed elementary and secondary students about their attitudes towards foreign language study and found that for both male and female students “the liking of the teacher and the subject matter, the continuation of study, and the external use of foreign language showed a steady decline” (p.164). Younger students are more enthusiastic and more motivated to learn a foreign language; their motivation and interest decreases as they get older.
(Heining-Boynton and Haitema, 2007). A female high school student from the same study indicated that she entered middle school with a higher language proficiency than her peers who did not have FLES and stated: "elementary school is really what has really opened my eyes to Spanish and made me think that, 'Hey, I really enjoyed speaking it. It's really fun,'" (Heining-Boynton and Haitema, 2007, p.164). The variability among teaching practices, curriculum, programs, and learning experiences are also factors that influence young children's motivation to learn a foreign language.

Language Learning Theories

Various language acquisition and learning theories exist regarding foreign languages. Reviewing different language theories is useful when investigating how children learn foreign languages. For example, Chomsky's (1972) cognitive approach hypothesis focuses on humans’ innate cognitive capacity to learn language through formulating rules from sounds we are exposed to instead of mimicking what we hear (as found in Crawford, 2004). Chomsky (1972) suggests that the human mind tries to establish principles for each language system to make sense of what is heard and interpreted. Chomsky's hypothesis also relies on universal grammar, or the “set of principles that determine grammar the mind may construct,” (p.180) and the belief that heredity influences the languages individuals can learn (Crawford, 2004). Moreover, Chomsky proposes that language is a "creative activity" (p.100) and an open-ended process rather than a closed system of behavioral habits (Chomsky,
Introspection encourages a person to understand the sound-meaning relationship in Chomsky’s theory (Chomsky, 1972).

In contrast, Skinner (1957) hypothesizes that humans internalize a fixed set of language responses for all of their life experiences (as found in Crawford, 2004). Skinner’s behaviorist theory suggests that all language learning can be attributed to learning and reinforcement. On the other hand, Vygotsky’s theory of language development suggests that thinking and speaking are interconnected because “linguistic signs are used to organize, plan and coordinate one’s own actions” through social activity (as found in Brooks & Donato, 1994). Vygotsky (1962) also emphasized that children acquire language at a very young age so there should be purposeful early language experiences (Foley, 1991). The Vygotskian framework includes the belief that thought and language grow together “in an intertwining pattern” (Schinke-Llano, 1993, p.122).

Case studies of language development of feral children, neglected or socially deprived children, and other children who failed to develop language at an early age suggest the existence of a critical period in language learning. The critical period hypothesis proposes that introducing a language after puberty when the left hemisphere of the brain is lateralized “impairs the capacity for natural language acquisition” (Crawford, 2004, p.187). Krashen criticizes the critical period hypothesis because he argues that the brain lateralization plasticity ends around age four which indicates that children acquire language while adults learn language because of their increased brain development (Scovel, 2000). Krashen theorizes that fluency in a
second language cannot be learned but must be acquired, putting children at an
advantage over adults as language learners. Scovel (2000) also points out that the
emergence of accents occurs after puberty but no other area of linguistic competence
is different between children and adults.

It is clear that various language learning theories exist and contradict each
other, but most agree that there is a natural order in which children master grammar in
their first and second languages which may be acquired at different points in time
(Crawford, 2004). Cummins's (1979) overarching theory of language learning
consists of concepts like common underlying proficiency which suggests that
language skills inhabit the same part of the brain and serve as reinforcements for each
other. According to another component of Cummins's language learning theory, his
interdependence theory suggests that children who master their first language will
perform well in a second language environment (as found in Crawford, 2004).

Krashen also highlights the importance of quality, not quantity of second
language exposure as the brain receives intelligible messages in a foreign language
and "has no choice but to acquire the language" (Crawford, 2004, p.189). Krashen's
focus on function over form suggests that foreign language input must be just beyond
the competence of the listener in order for language acquisition to occur. Krashen also
draws on the notion of an affective filter composed of negative influences such as
anxiety, low self confidence, and lacking motivation which can get in the way of
comprehensible input getting through; adults are typically more hindered by the
affective filter than children (Crawford, 2004).
Ultimately, the process of language learning is complex and although solid theories exist, they do not always align. The context of foreign language learning, such as formal education at any level, is an additional variable in this complicated equation. My personal theory of language learning combines elements of various language theorists but I most identify with the work of Krashen; student attitudes result from the concept of an affective filter which influences language acquisition. I agree with Krashen’s focus on comprehensible and meaningful input. I believe that every student is capable of learning a second language to some degree.

**Essential FLES Program Components**

FLES signifies the “overall term for all types of foreign language instruction in the elementary and middle schools (K-8)” (Oregon State Dept. of Education, 1995, p.5). There are four main programs under the umbrella of FLES: sequential FLES, immersion FLES, content-based FLES and FLEX. Sequential FLES programs focus on introducing one foreign language for two or more years of study with an emphasis on the development of language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing in addition to cultural understanding. On the other hand, immersion FLES programs consist of teachers and students using of the foreign language throughout all or part of the instructional day. Content-based FLES programs include the teaching of a content area from the regular school curriculum in a foreign language. FLEX, or Foreign Language Exploratory programs include the introduction to one or more languages with few language development goals or expectations (Oregon State Dept. of Education, 1995). Variation among FLES models occurs frequently. All FLES
programs should include 75 minutes of instruction per week with foreign language learning every other day. FLES programs represent almost half of all U.S. foreign language programs at the elementary level. Ultimately, FLES programs aim to help children develop a strong background and understanding of a foreign language and culture.


Although national and state foreign language standards exist, each school typically creates an individual curriculum based on these standards. Various delivery methods exist but each program should include essential components like focusing on content, articulation and alignment, effective teaching methods, appropriate technology use, student assessment, funding, professional development, and advocacy (Gilzow, 2002). Similarly, Schrier (1996) cites seven essential components to an elementary Spanish program: “students’ needs, elementary school curriculum, school district’s philosophy, National Foreign Language Standards, community interests,
parents’ concerns, and teacher’s abilities” (p.516). Furthermore, Tucker and Richard-Donato (2001) suggests that elementary foreign language programs, specifically Spanish, need to be incorporated in the general curriculum and expand into and correlate with middle and high school programs. Essentially, elementary foreign language programs should be based on state and local standards, the age of the students involved, the teacher’s ability, school resources, parent and community goals. Also, elementary foreign language programs should include effective teaching strategies, appropriate assessment, and professional development for the teachers involved. The elementary foreign language program should provide a foundation for middle and high school foreign language learning.

The National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Language Programs developed a list of best practices for second language instruction which include: extensive use of target language, meaningful and purposeful communication opportunities, skill using activities, appropriate allotment of time devoted to listening, speaking, reading and writing, cultural instruction, student centered teaching, effective error correction use, assessment aligns with instruction, activities require a range of thinking skills, variety of materials and learning experiences, establishment of a comfortable learning environment, and continual professional development for teachers (Oregon State Dept. of Education, 1995). Ultimately, a mix of approaches and practices will vary by school, program and teacher.
Summary

In summation, the necessity and benefits of learning a foreign language are evident in the United States. According to Edwards (2004), the American people lacking foreign language capacity resulted from the general international isolation of a majority of the American people, limited study abroad beyond Western Europe, and limited foreign language study. The international isolation of Americans refers to the minimal immersion of Americans into foreign cultures and nations. While the international isolation of Americans and the limited study abroad experiences are difficult to address, foreign language study is a controllable component that can improve the foreign language capacity of the United States. The history of FLES programs in the United States has been rocky and is perceived as an additional stress on school districts that are overwhelmed by standards and mandates. International, national, state, and local changes call for an increase in foreign language learning to increase the language capacity of the United States. Although the most opportune time for children to learn a second language is debatable, studies suggest that introducing a foreign language in elementary school aligns with development and is most beneficial for the students' foreign language acquisition.
CHAPTER 3: APPLICATIONS AND EVALUATION

Assumptions

Prior to interviewing the elementary Spanish teacher, I assumed she was familiar with the school’s Spanish program goals throughout the elementary grades. I also assumed that the students would understand the questions I asked during the focus group interviews and that my observations would provide a window into the types of learning experiences in an FLES classroom. Lastly, I assumed that I would receive sufficient parental consent so I have a large enough sample from which to randomly select.

Questions

I designed this exploratory case study to gain insight on my research questions: What are students’ perceptions and attitudes about Spanish elementary foreign language programs? What are second, fourth, and sixth grade students’ attitudes towards learning Spanish in elementary school? What are teachers’ perceptions of the nature, quality, and goals of foreign language programs in elementary schools? Interviewing teachers and students provided insight on one school’s FLES program. This case study investigated these questions for one particular school; my attempts to answer these questions may differ based on school, region, and state.

Participants

The elementary school offers Spanish foreign language education from grades pre-kindergarten through six. The school district educates approximately 34,000
students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade at various locations. This case study focused on one elementary school within this district. The district educates a diverse group of students: 65% African American, 21% Hispanic, 12% White, 2% Asian, Native American, East Indian, and other. Approximately 88% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, 17% have special needs and 8% have limited English proficiency. In addition, 50% of the district’s schools are at a 90% poverty rate or higher.

One teacher and 3-5 students in each second, fourth and sixth grades from an urban elementary school in a midsized northeastern city will participate in this case study. Each class consists of traditional students and students with learning disabilities. The small number of elementary Spanish teachers in the area contributed to my selection of this teacher to interview as well as a recommendation from a SUNY Brockport faculty member.

The student participants were eligible to participate in a focus group based on the receipt of parental permission form and consent (See Appendix F). After receiving parental permission, the teacher ranked the students into groups of overall Spanish language development: low, average, and high. I randomly selected 3-5 eligible students by drawing names out of a bag from each of the three selected grades to participate in the student focus groups.

All students in this elementary school are eligible to participate in this FLES program. Half of each class attends Spanish class for approximately one hour per week for the first twenty weeks of school while the second half attends Spanish class
during the second half of the year. Grades 1-6 attend Spanish class each year; the goal of the program is for students to build on their Spanish language development each year. The Spanish teacher taught at this school for eight years as the only Spanish teacher.

The confidentiality of all participants was ensured because I did not ask for the names of the students who participated in the focus groups and I did not record the name of the teacher whom I interviewed. I gave each student participant a pseudonym which I used to take notes during student focus group interviews and to code responses when listening to audiotapings of the focus group conversations. All completed data collection instruments and field notes will be saved on my personal computer during the case study.

Instruments

The student focus group interview guide consists of six questions (See Appendix A). I will read the Statement to Students (See Appendix E) to the students prior to starting the focus group interviews. The students will be asked to answer the series of questions as part of a small focus group consisting of 3-5 students in the same Spanish class. The purpose of the student focus group interviews is to gain insight on how FLES students' perceptions and attitudes are towards learning Spanish in elementary school.

The teacher interview consists of nine questions regarding FLES student attitude, interest, and motivation towards learning Spanish, their verbal, written, and oral Spanish communication skills, as well as their fluency, cultural knowledge, and
the FLES program's congruence throughout elementary grades (See Appendix B). The teacher interviews will attempt to answer my research questions because the teacher will express her perceptions regarding FLES programs and how students are affected by participating in FLES programs. The interview will also allow for follow-up and clarifying questions.

During my classroom observations, I recorded field notes on the types of learning experiences in the second, fourth and sixth grade elementary Spanish classes from which I interviewed students. To avoid restricting or over-focusing my attention on particular aspects of the classroom activities, I used a simple and clear template for my field notes (See Appendix C). I recorded field notes on three separate occasions at each grade level which totaled nine observations and nine field note records. I anticipated taking field notes on the type of learning activities, content, and teacher practices.

Delimitations

Delimitations to this case study were the small sample size, the inability to generalize for any other school in the district, region, state, and the possible misinterpretation of questions by students. Other schools with similar FLES models may yield different results. The teacher variability at the same or different districts may also affect results. Conducting teacher and student interviews state-wide and nationally would address these disadvantages but is unmanageable for this individual thesis study. Ultimately, this case study provided insight on one school, sample
student groups and one teacher’s approach to FLES which can later be compared to other institutions.

My ability to ask clarifying questions to understand student and teacher meaning was an advantage of this study. Also, ranking students based on ability and randomly selecting participants was advantageous because I avoided interviewing one particular achievement group. Another advantage was the recording of field-notes at each grade level. I was able to see the types of learning experiences that potentially influenced focus group interviews. Through observations, I was able to see how the student teacher’s interview answers align with practice. Ultimately, my data was triangulated through teacher and student interviews as well as my own observations and corresponding field-notes.

Data Analysis

Student focus group interview data was analyzed by transcribing the audiotaped conversations and interview notes. I compared and contrasted the responses at each grade level by organizing question responses into a chart. I counted the number of frequently occurring words and phrases such as “culture” or “vocabulary” for each grade’s focus group and as a whole. I then analyzed the similarities and differences within and between grade levels.

I analyzed teacher interview data through a transcription of the audiotaped conversation along with interview notes. Similar to the student interviews, I analyzed teacher interview responses from the transcription into frequently occurring themes. Because the teacher interview data cannot be compared between two teachers, I
reported the interview responses rather than compare and contrast them with another perspective. However, I compared and contrasted the student focus group trends with teacher responses by analyzing student and teacher transcripts.

I analyzed my field-notes by organizing learning experiences by day and grade into a chart to see similarities and differences. Also, I organized my field notes into content, teaching practices, activities, and any other prevailing trends in the three classes. I compared my fieldnotes with student and teacher responses to see whether or not the three observations at each grade align with student and teacher perceptions.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter includes data gathered from the teacher interview, student focus group interviews and observation field notes. The teacher interview, student focus group interviews and observation field notes attempted to answer the research questions: what are second, fourth and sixth grade students’ perceptions and attitudes towards learning Spanish in elementary school? What are foreign language teachers’ perceptions of the nature and quality of foreign language programs in elementary schools? and What types of learning activities do students at second, fourth, and sixth grade levels experience? The teacher interview results provided insight in the following areas: 1) student motivation, interest, and enthusiasm; 2) verbal and written communication development; 3) fluency development; 4) cultural knowledge and awareness; 5) congruency with middle school students; 6) goals for students; and 7) additional comments. Student focus group interview results are discussed using the following emerging themes: 1) mixed feelings towards learning Spanish in elementary school; 2) learning experiences; 3) middle school preparation; 4) pleased parents; and 5) minimal Spanish use outside of school. The observation field notes are summarized in the final section of this chapter.

Teacher Interview Responses

Student Motivation, Interest & Enthusiasm

In response to the first question regarding student motivation, the teacher responded that she perceived her students as motivated. The teacher responded that
younger students were more highly motivated to learn a foreign language than older students. She attributed the perceived decrease in motivation of older students to the distractions caused by social and behavioral issues. Similarly to motivation, the teacher responded to the second question regarding student interest by commenting that her students were interested and enthusiastic. More specifically, she cited that her students made connections with what they learn in Spanish class to the outside world such as television and advertisements. When asked a follow-up question about students' with disabilities participation in FLES programs, the teacher responded that students with disabilities were successful in the elementary foreign language setting. She responded that students with disabilities benefited from entering a foreign language program at a young age because they were less likely to feel self conscious and defeated by their disability.

Verbal and Written Communication Development

In response to the third question regarding her students' verbal communication development, the teacher responded that the students' first language development impacted their second language development. She added that the students generally spoke well and learned proper pronunciation. In addition, the teacher responded that her students' vocabulary grew each year, making significant gains in 4th and 5th grades as they began to analyze words. The teacher also stated that her students were more comfortable communicating when they were younger because older students seemed to feel foolish and embarrassed speaking in front of their peers. Moreover, the teacher responded to the fourth question regarding her students'
written communication skills by saying that she placed “heavy emphasis on literacy skills” throughout the program. She responded that students learned how language works and connected it to their English language development. Essentially, the teacher indicated that written communication in Spanish was developed throughout the students’ participation in FLES.

Fluency Development

In response to the fifth question regarding fluency development, the teacher stated that the students understood Spanish vocabulary words within and out of context and they sometimes “get stuck if they do not know every word in the sentence and can not move on.” The teacher attributed this to her teaching; she communicated that helping the students picture the words and connecting unknown words to English words would be helpful which was something she said she wanted to improve. Additionally, the teacher commented that her students developed both English and Spanish vocabulary with a focus on Spanish. For example, “If they saw ‘doctor,’ they would understand it but other medical Spanish words like ‘medico’ or ‘enfermera’ they learn words like infirmary, medication, medic, so they really practice their words.” Also, the teacher responded that she connected the students’ native and foreign language development by comparing the positioning of words in English and Spanish grammar. The teacher stated that the students reached a high novice level in Spanish by sixth grade. She responded that her students understood more than they could communicate which she attributed to the low frequency and duration of Spanish instruction. She commented “they may not be able to communicate it because I only
see them once a week so the language development is slower but yet the concepts are there.”

Cultural Knowledge and Awareness

The teacher responded that her students developed cultural knowledge and awareness through the FLES program. She taught about different Spanish speaking countries and cultures every year so the students developed a broad cultural understanding by the end of sixth grade. The school annually held a multicultural week but the state math assessment interfered this year; multicultural programming throughout the year replaced the week-long celebration. Lastly, the teacher posited that she compiled multicultural resources to enhance cultural awareness and shared them with the classroom teachers every month.

Congruency with Middle School Programs

In response to the seventh question about the congruence of elementary foreign language programs with middle school programs, the teacher responded that both were fairly congruent. She commented that she based her instruction on the New York State Learning Standards that middle school teachers used. She responded that her fifth and sixth grade students used notebook journals like they would have to do in middle school. In addition, the teacher said that her students had an “edge” in middle school foreign language classrooms because of their superior background knowledge, pronunciation, and confidence.
Goals for Students

When asked about her goals for her students, the teacher responded that her sixth grade students would be able to pass the eighth grade proficiency exam with a score between 70 and 75 or higher. The teacher stated that the students developed auditory recognition, visual recognition, and understanding of grammatical positioning instead of memorizing structure throughout elementary school. The following is a direct quote from the eighth question of the teacher interview.

By second grade, by the time they’re done, they need to be able to count and recognize numbers up to 50. They need to be able to know about 100 words and by sixth grade they need to provide information, personal information, create sentences on their own, if not written, they should have a visualization of what language should look like. So it’s progressively much more complicated. It’s novice-high by the time they reach the end of sixth grade.

The teacher communicated that her goals derived from New York State Learning Standards.

Additional Comments

The teacher added that there was an interest to start FLES programs in this area but funding was lacking. In addition, the teacher emphasized the importance of various, non-stereotypical elements of culture so students better understood diverse people instead of using methods like filling a bag of items specific to one culture and having the students explore it. Lastly, the teacher emphasized that some of her
students could “end up going to college” where they would need to take foreign language courses so “why not prepare them for it.”

Student Focus Group Interviews

The student focus group interviews yielded similar responses across the three grade level samples. Each student responded slightly differently but the overall themes among the three grade levels are presented in this section. The following five main themes emerged: mixed feelings towards learning Spanish in elementary school, learning experiences, middle school preparation, pleased parents, and minimal use of Spanish outside school.

Mixed Feelings towards Learning Spanish in Elementary School

Students across all three grade levels responded with positive and negative feelings towards learning Spanish in elementary school. Most students indicated that they enjoyed learning Spanish in elementary school with statements like, “it’s fun to learn” and “its cool.” Other students indicated that they did not enjoy learning Spanish in elementary school because “it’s hard to pronounce some of the words and you don’t really know what they mean.” The difficulty of learning a second language was the source of the negative feelings towards foreign language learning. However, two students responded that they both like and dislike learning Spanish. One fourth grade student commented, “Sometimes it’s kind of boring. Sometimes it’s fun.” A sixth grade student also responded with mixed feelings by saying “I like it but I don’t like it because it’s hard but in middle school instead of just learning it all new, I get
some background knowledge.” Overall, the students enjoyed learning Spanish in elementary school, recognized its future usefulness and commented on its difficulty.

Learning Experiences

Another common theme among student responses was the content covered and learning experiences in their FLES classroom. Second, fourth, and sixth grade students responded that they learned about multiple units of study through various learning experiences. Clothing, food, family, and parts of the body were common responses. However, the second grade students communicated that they had a hard time remembering what they learned and cited a cultural project on an endangered South American bird. Another trend in student responses was the increased difficulty and depth of content by grade level. For example, second graders responded “counting up to 40” while fourth graders talked about vocabulary units of study and parts of a sentence, and sixth graders added that they learned about culture, “math, science, and social studies” vocabulary, and verbs. Besides stating that they did a variety of things in Spanish class, a second grade student responded that they did a lot of worksheets and a sixth grade student commented that they did a lot of acting words out which “makes it fun because you get to do it and not just sit there.”

Middle School Preparation

When asked how students felt about learning Spanish in middle school, all students responded that they felt more prepared for it. Sixth grade students stated that they thought middle school would be boring and more difficult. The student focus group excerpt below was from the sixth grade sample:
Interviewer: How would you feel about learning Spanish in middle school?

Sarah: Hard!

Mitch: It’s going to be boring.

Interviewer: Why?

Mitch: Cuz in middle school, teachers are evil.

Interviewer: Why do you think they’re bad?

Mitch: Cuz they make you sit in the seat and tell you the same word and if you don’t say it right, they give you an F for the year.

In contrast, fourth grade students responded that they were not sure if they would choose to take Spanish since they might want to learn a different language. One second grade student commented that she “feels like she knows a couple of thing so [she’d] be an expert a little.” Overall, students indicated that they will be more prepared to learn Spanish in middle school than students who did not learn a foreign language in elementary school. They stated that their background knowledge would be advantageous and students that did not learn Spanish at elementary school “are going to have a hard time.”

Pleased Parents

Students speculated about their parents’ perceptions of learning Spanish in elementary school and responded that their parents were pleased. For example, one fourth grade student stated that her mom “thinks it’s good because other elementary
schools don’t teach Spanish.” A sixth grade student responded similarly by saying the following:

My mom learned French and she says that it will help you if you’re going to get a job. She said, she works for a property thing and some people speak Spanish and she has to like understand them if she wants to get them in a building or something. So I think she feels good because then you’ll get some background information on it and you’ll understand it.

As a whole, students did not respond that their parents were disappointed or unhappy with their child’s foreign language learning in elementary school. A few students responded that their parents did not say anything about it so they were not sure how they felt.

Minimal Use of Spanish Outside School

When asked if students spoke, wrote, or learned Spanish outside of school, only one student responded yes. The student who commented she learned, wrote and spoke Spanish outside of school lived with family members that spoke Spanish as their first language. The other students reported that their only interaction with Spanish outside of school was individual practice or watching television shows like Dora the Explorer.

Observation Field Notes

The second, fourth and sixth grade students learned about similar content and through similar teaching practices. Family, food and clothing units were common
topics across all three grades. Second grade students learned about more basic material like colors and beginning food, family and conversation vocabulary. Fourth grade students learned more complex vocabulary and concepts such as the use of possessives and weather and profession vocabulary. Sixth grade students learned about verb conjugations, possessives, prepositions and adjective agreement within family, professions, and clothing units of study.

The teacher implemented Total Physical Response (TPR) teaching strategies where she acted out words and phrases and had the kids mimic her actions. The teacher also utilized worksheets, oral lessons with the large group of students, small student group work and one on one instruction in all three grades. The teacher spoke Spanish and English while teaching and interacting with students. Essentially, the teaching practices were consistent among grades and the level of difficulty in the same subject matter increased with student age.

Essentially, the observed student and teacher behavior aligned with teacher and student focus group responses. The content which the teacher and students mentioned in the interviews was also present. My observations revealed that students were involved, enthusiastic, and interested in learning Spanish in elementary school which reaffirmed teacher and student interview responses.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The teacher interview, student focus groups and observation data provided opportunities for further analysis, connections to literature and future recommendations. This chapter highlights the meaning of data presented in chapter four, its implications and connections to prior research. This chapter also includes recommendations for future research in the area of elementary foreign language education. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a summary of the findings of this exploratory case study.

Student Perceptions

Student perceptions indicated that students are motivated to learn Spanish in elementary school because of its benefits later in life in addition to its enjoyment. The older students seemed to recognize the usefulness of knowing a second language and how it will benefit them in their future education and beyond. They exhibited confidence in their abilities to be successful in more advanced foreign language classrooms in middle school. During my observations, the students in all three grade levels participated with enthusiasm and appeared to enjoy their Spanish learning activities which contrasts with many middle and high school student behavior when learning a foreign language. Overall, students enjoyed learning Spanish in elementary school which coincides with Heining-Boynton and Haitema’s (2007) study that younger students expressed more interest in learning a foreign language than older students in middle and high school. Similarly, Piaget attributes children’s ability to
learn a second language to their increased openness to new things and people (Robinson, 1998). Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) programs increase student motivation to learn a foreign language which positively contributes to their overall foreign language learning throughout elementary, middle and high school.

FLES Programs are Beneficial

The teacher's positive perception and high regard of elementary foreign language programs supported the notion that students benefit from FLES programs. The attitudinal and motivational benefits of learning a foreign language in elementary school were evident through student enjoyment, participation and enthusiasm. Instead of entering a middle school foreign language classroom as fearful monolingual students, FLES students developed strong background knowledge that increased their confidence in continuing their second language learning. FLES students experience advantages in middle and high school foreign language classroom because they reference their previous foreign language experiences and continue to build on their knowledge. The students and teacher agreed that their foreign language learning in elementary school will help them transition into higher level foreign language learning with confidence and comfort. Therefore, the fear and resulting dislike of learning a foreign language in middle and high school is most likely lessened by participation in FLES programs.

Although the teacher, student and observation data indicated that FLES programs benefit students, the teacher suggested that the students' foreign language
development would benefit even more from longer and more frequent foreign language instruction which Cutshall (2005) suggested is also beneficial and frequently sacrificed. Any exposure to foreign languages and diverse cultures is an educational asset but to maximize language development and appreciation of other cultures, increased class time and frequency of classes is most beneficial.

In accordance with language learning theories discussed in Chapter 2, students make connections to and enhance their first language when learning a foreign language. For example, students learn about cognates in Spanish and English that introduce them to new words like “medico” meaning “doctor” in English so students connect the English words “medic” and “medical” to the Spanish vocabulary word. Students internalize their first and second language learning experiences to develop each other simultaneously through connections and expansion of their schema. Krashen’s theory that children acquire language while adults learn language indicates that FLES students more easily and naturally learn a second language than adults (Scovel, 2000).

Availability

The search for programs to conduct this case study highlighted the limited availability of FLES programs in the United States. The teacher interview data suggested that school districts within the same region wanted to establish FLES programs but lack of funding for foreign language education interfered. The low frequency of FLES programs was a result of the interference of core content subjects emphasized by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). School districts face pressure to
allocate funding to other programs; the reduction of Foreign Language Assistance Programs (FLAP) in 2005 made it more difficult to find funding for FLES programs. Students left their class once a week for less than an hour to attend Spanish class at the selected school; reallocating and reorganizing approximately ten minutes per day would free up time for one elementary foreign class per week. The teacher also cited that school districts’ lack of funding interfered with the establishment of FLES programs. It was interesting that this urban school district included FLES programs into their budget but other suburban and rural districts offered other structured programs in the areas of music, physical education, technology, and art instead.

Recommendations

Based on the positive feedback towards FLES programs from students and teachers, I recommend that more FLES programs be offered locally and nationally to improve the linguistic capacity of the United States and the individual achievement of each student. Increased training and specialization of teachers will provide more trained professionals to help students build a foundation of foreign language learning in elementary school.

Although increasing the availability of FLES programs is a struggle, the next step is to increase the frequency and duration of FLES instruction. Students benefit from exposure to foreign language at a young age; the benefits of increased foreign language exposure and immersion could further enhance language development and educational experience as a whole. School districts and teachers ought to reorganize scheduling to prioritize foreign language learning as a core academic subject like
math, science, social studies and English language arts. Making foreign language education a priority will increase language development for elementary school students.

I also recommend that a variety of interactive learning experiences exist in FLES programs because the negative feedback from students indicated boredom and difficulty. While teachers cannot make seemingly difficult concepts easy to comprehend, teachers may take steps to make concepts more understandable and meaningful through high quality lessons and planned learning engagements. This is particularly true for students in the upper elementary grades, such as fifth and sixth grade who learn more difficult and specific grammar concepts which are potentially uninteresting when taught stagnantly as seat work. The increase of professional development opportunities for foreign language teachers could increase the quality and nature of foreign language learning experiences in elementary school.

Moreover, I recommend that schools with FLES programs create more opportunities for students to use the foreign language outside of school through the establishment of clubs, community partnerships, pen pals and the organization of multicultural field trips. Educating parents about what they can do to help their child learn the foreign language outside of school is a supplemental component that will enhance foreign language education programs. For example, periodic tutorials for parents to learn the foreign language or opportunities for their child to learn a foreign language outside of school will create a partnership with parents towards meeting common goals: foreign language development and cultural awareness.
Lastly, the local, state, and national government needs to recognize the state of foreign language learning in the United States, develop a thoughtful plan and standards for FLES, increase funding for foreign language programs across all grades, and encourage the development of FLES programs by offering grants and increased opportunities for teachers to receive certification in elementary foreign language. Without legislative and federal support, local school districts focus on state and national targeted subjects such as math and English language arts. Increased support for FLES programs will legitimize the program's benefits and increase its frequency in schools throughout the nation.

Areas of Future Research

This study investigated one facet of FLES programs: student and teacher perspectives. More research on FLES curriculum development and effective teaching practices are necessary in order to ensure the few existing FLES programs are effective and of high quality. As present in the 1970s and 1980s, foreign language learning research in the United States is needed to enhance foreign language programs and enhance foreign language literacy throughout the nation. Investigating effective FLES teaching practices and individualizing curriculum for elementary school students instead of generalizing foreign language standards for grades K-12 could also enhance the quality of elementary foreign language education.

To gauge FLES student achievement, a long-term quantitative case study on student achievement from grades K-12 is necessary. In such a study, FLES student achievement in math, science, social studies, English language arts and Spanish
should be investigated. According to previous research and results of this study, FLES programs have a positive effect on students’ academic achievement in foreign language and other content areas. Investigating the problem solving skills and creative thinking which are believed by Met (2004), Robinson (1998), and Foster and Reeves (1989) to be more highly developed as a result of FLES is another area of future research.

The negative impact of NCLB on foreign language education as discussed by Azzam (2005), Cutshall (2005) and Edwards (2004) is another area of future research. Interviewing education administrators, teachers and students would provide insight on the extent to which foreign language education suffers as a result of NCLB. Interviewing teachers about their regard of foreign language education compared to other content areas is an additional intriguing area of research. Teachers may regard foreign languages equal to content areas like math, science, social studies and English Language arts, but more likely than not, they will exhibit the attitude that foreign language is an optional and secondary subject.

Summary

In summation, the intent to discover student and teacher perceptions of elementary foreign language learning was achieved for one FLES program. This study revealed that teachers and students perceived the FLES programs as beneficial during their elementary school education and speculated their increased preparedness for future foreign language learning. Lack of interest and perceived difficulty of learning a foreign language in middle and high school may interfere with
development of foreign language fluency; elementary students in FLES programs have high levels of confidence, motivation, interest, and enthusiasm towards learning a foreign language in middle and high school as well as a strong foundation of foreign language background knowledge and skills. Exposure to regular developmental language learning opportunities in elementary school increases language acquisition and builds a strong foundation for future language learning and ultimately a multilingual society.

In order for the United States to increase its foreign language capacity and as a result become more linguistically capable in the national and global realms, an organized educational movement to promote FLES programs is necessary. The United States acknowledges that its monolingual population is problematic for numerous reasons but fails to take action to support foreign language education at the elementary, middle and high school levels through policy and funding. Until then, local schools can take advantage of teacher and student interest in FLES programs by sparing time each week for language learning opportunities in effort to help students gain interest in learning a foreign language and create a strong background for future language learning.
References


New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers. (June 17, 2006). Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) Programs in New York State.

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Dear Principal ________,

I am a graduate student at SUNY Brockport. I am currently developing my thesis on elementary Spanish programs. I am investigating student perceptions and attitudes towards learning Spanish in elementary school because I am interested in seeing how students benefit from learning a foreign language in elementary school.

I would like to interview a focus group of 3-5 students at the second, fourth, and sixth grade levels. A copy of student interview guide and parental consent form are enclosed. I also would like to interview your Spanish teacher, ___________. A copy of the interview questions is also enclosed. Both student and teacher interviews will be audiotaped. I would also like to observe her class for approximately 2 weeks to gain an understanding of the school’s Spanish elementary program.

I will not ask for student names. I will not disrupt instruction during my observations. In any presentation or publication, I will not disclose the name or location of the school, teacher or student names.

In order to comply with the SUNY Brockport Institutional Review Board, I must submit a letter from you, on your school’s letterhead, stating your approval of this project. I must also submit informed consent forms from the teacher and the parents/guardians of her students. I enclosed drafts of these documents.

Please contact me at 585-395-7303 or sdierks@brockport.edu if you have any questions about my proposed project. If you support the project, please mail a letter to me at the address below or fax it to my attention at 585-395-2732. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sara Dierks
350 New Campus Dr.
Brockport, NY 14420

Dr. Tom Allen
Faculty Advisor at SUNY Brockport
duffy12@rochester.rr.com
APPENDIX B

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARENTS

This form describes a research study being conducted with students about their attitudes and perceptions of elementary foreign language learning. The purpose of this research is to understand the perceptions of young people regarding towards their learning of Spanish in elementary school. The person conducting the research is a graduate student at SUNY College at Brockport. If you agree to have your child participate in this study, s/he will be asked to participate in a student focus group about her/his perceptions and her/his attitudes about learning Spanish in elementary school.

The possible benefit from being in this study could be that information will be learned that would provide insight on student perceptions and attitudes towards elementary foreign language learning. Your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary. Being in it or refusing to be in it, will not affect your child’s grades or class standing. S/he is free to change her/his mind or stop being in the study at any time.

I understand that:

1. My child’s participation is voluntary and s/he has the right to refuse to answer any questions. S/he will have a chance to discuss any questions s/he has about the study with the researcher after participating in the focus group.

2. My child’s confidentiality is guaranteed. Her/his name will not be written on the survey. There will be no way to connect my child to the written survey. If any publication results from this research, s/he would not be identified by name. Results will be given through student pseudonyms, so neither the participants nor their schools can be identified.

3. There will be no anticipated personal risk as a result of participation in this project.

4. My child’s participation involves answering 6 questions verbally as part of a group of 3-5 students in your child’s Spanish class. It is estimated that the focus group will last 15 minutes during your regularly scheduled Spanish class. Your child’s responses will be tape-recorded as part of the focus group.

5. Approximately 9-15 students will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a thesis paper by the primary researcher.

6. Data, audio-tape, and consent forms will be kept separately in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator and will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been completed.
You are being asked whether or not you will permit your child to participate in this study. If you wish to give permission to participate, and you agree with the statement below, please sign in the space provided. Remember, you may change your mind at any point and withdraw from the study. Your child can refuse to participate even if you have given permission for her/him to participate.

I understand the information provided in this form and agree to allow my child to participate as a participant in this study. I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my child’s participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction.

If you have any questions you may contact:
Primary researcher
Sara Dierks
Graduate Student, SUNY Brockport
Brockport
sdierks@brockport.edu

Faculty Advisor
Dr. Tom Allen
Faculty Advisor at SUNY
duffy12@rochester.rr.com

Signature of Parent

Date

Child’s name

Signature for audio-taping
APPENDIX C

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT FOR MINORS

This form describes a research study being conducted with students about their perceptions and attitudes about elementary foreign language instruction. This purpose of this research is to understand the perceptions of young people regarding their learning of Spanish in elementary school. The person conducting the research is a graduate student at SUNY College at Brockport. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group interview and be asked about your attitudes and perceptions of learning Spanish in elementary school.

The possible benefit from being in this study could be that information will be learned that would allow teachers and school administrators to learn what you think about learning a second language in elementary school.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Being in it or refusing to be in it, will not affect your grades or class standing. You are free to change your mind or stop being in the study at any time.

I understand that:
1. My participation is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to answer any questions. I will have a chance to discuss any questions I have about the study with the researcher after participating in the focus group.
2. My confidentiality is guaranteed. My name will not be written on the survey. There will be no way to connect me to the written survey. If any publication results from this research, I would not be identified by name. Results will be given anonymously and in group form only, so that neither the participants nor their schools can be identified.
3. There will be no anticipated personal risk because of participation in this project. My participation involves asking 6 questions to a group of 3-5 students in your Spanish class. Your responses will be audio-taped as part of the larger group. It is estimated that the focus group will last 15 minutes during your regularly scheduled Spanish class.
4. Approximately 9-15 students will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a thesis paper by the primary researcher.
5. Data, audio-tape and consent forms will be kept separately in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator and will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been completed.

You are being asked whether or not you want to participate in this study. If you wish to participate, and you agree with the statement below, please sign in the space...
provided. Remember, you may change your mind at any point and withdraw from the study. You can refuse to participate even if your parent/guardian gives permission for you to participate.

If you have any questions you may contact:

Primary researcher
Sara Dierks
Graduate Student, SUNY Brockport
Brockport
sdierks@brockport.edu

Faculty Advisor
Dr. Tom Allen
Faculty Advisor at SUNY
duffy12@rochester.rr.com

I understand the information provided in this form and agree to participate in this study.

Signature of participant __________________________ Date __________

Birth date of participant __________________________

Signature for audio-taping __________________________

Signature of a witness 18 years of age or older __________________________ Date __________
APPENDIX D

Student Focus Group Interview Guide

Grade: __________

1. Do you like learning Spanish? Why or why not?

2. What do you do in Spanish class?

3. What kinds of things do you learn about?

4. How would you feel about learning Spanish in middle school? Please explain.

5. What do your parents think about you learning Spanish?

6. Do you speak, write, or learn Spanish outside Spanish class? If yes, where do you speak it? With whom? About what?
APPENDIX E

Teacher Interview Questions

1. Are students from FLES programs motivated to learn Spanish in elementary school? Please elaborate.

2. Are students interested and enthusiastic about learning Spanish in elementary school? Please elaborate.

3. Please describe FLES students’ verbal communication development throughout the program. Please elaborate.

4. Please describe FLES students’ written communication development throughout the program. Please elaborate.

5. Please describe FLES students’ fluency development throughout the program. Please explain.

6. Please describe FLES students’ cultural knowledge and awareness development through the program. Please elaborate.

7. In your opinion, how congruent is the FLES curriculum with the middle school curriculum in terms of:
   a. Instructional Practices
   b. Theoretical Framework
   c. Content
   Can you provide any specific examples of how it is similar or different?

8. What are some of your goals for your students at each of the three grade levels selected? What particular kinds of learning activities aim to meet these goals?

9. Is there anything else you’d like to share?
APPENDIX F

Observation Field Notes Record

Grade Level: ________________

Date: ________________

Observation ___ of 3