

## **Why Are FLES Programs Essential?**

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### **Introduction**

Why are FLES programs essential? This question has been asked many times. Children, by nature, have inquisitive minds. Unless hindered by some physical or mental ailment, children naturally seek to discover the world around them and emulate their parents or older siblings, or gain the knowledge they admire in them. This translates into a certain magical pride that allows them to demonstrate, uninhibited, what they know or can do. Just observe how proudly a young child writes his or her name! Never mind if some letters are printed backwards, handwriting is shaky, line is slanted, or characters are of different sizes; the joy and pride that emanate from the “See, I can write my name” is priceless. This same exuberance is manifest when a child can demonstrate knowledge that an adult interlocutor does not have. This is frequently the case when a child can utter words in a language other than English. Because, in most cases, parents belong to the group The Tongue-Tied American,<sup>1</sup> the child can show a bit of extra information his or her parents do not have, and this makes for greater excitement.

There are, however, other reasons for early language learning. All language educators are cognizant of the benefits of foreign language study. They also know that a longer sequence of instruction leads to higher proficiency in upper levels (Curtain and Pesola, 1988; Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian, 2001). Provided these students have a continuous and well-developed sequence, they will also develop a global attitude. As Curtain and Pesola (1988) state, elementary school children are in the process of moving from egocentricity to reciprocity as their cognitive skills continue to develop. Referring to Piaget, Curtain (1990) explains that “Cognitive development

takes place when a child is faced with an idea or experience that does not fit into his or her realm of understanding. The cognitive conflict becomes the catalyst for new thinking.” Another and most important element is the understanding and acknowledgement that the world is flattening.<sup>2</sup> “I recognize even more today with the flattening of the world and the downward spiral of the United States in its position as a world power, how important it is to us to offer a strong language program” (Barbara H. Swadyk, assistant superintendent of instructional services for North Carolina’s Winston/Salem/Forsyth County schools, as cited in Sweley, 2007, p. 47). The ever-increasing interrelationship and interdependency of the world’s countries alone should broaden our view and thinking as far as foreign language early start programs are concerned. Otherwise, we may very well end up not only with many children left behind but with an entire country left behind.

The table below provides an idea of language requirements in other countries:

Table 1. FOREIGN LANGUAGES OFFERED AND AGE OF INTRODUCTION

Country	First Foreign Language	Starting Age	Compulsory*	Widely Available	Additional Foreign Languages
Australia	French	6		X	German, Greek, Italian, Japanese
Austria	English	6	X		French, Italian
Brazil	English	11 or 12	X		Spanish, French, German
Canada	French	10	X		German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Punjabi
Chile	English	>12	?		French, German, Italian
Czech Republic	English and German	9	2X		French, Russian, Spanish
Denmark	English	10	2X		German, French, Spanish
Finland	English or other	9	2X		Swedish, Finnish, German, French, Russian, Spanish, Italian
Germany	English or other	8	2X		French, Spanish, Russian, Italian, Turkish
Israel	English	10	X		Hebrew, French, Arabic
Italy	English	8	X		French, German, Spanish, Russian
Kazakhstan	English	10	X		German, French
Luxembourg	German and French	6 and 7	2X		English, Italian, Spanish
Morocco	French	9	X		English, Spanish, German
Netherlands	English	10 or 11	2X		German, French
New Zealand	French	>12		X	Japanese, Maori, German, Spanish
Peru	English	>12	?		French, German
Spain	English	8	X		French, German, Italian, Portuguese
Thailand	English	6	X		French, German, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic
United States	Spanish	14		X	French, German, Japanese

\* 2X means that two languages are compulsory.

Note: This chart was published in 2003. Subsequent studies show that foreign language early start continues to expand. EM

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### Cognitive Developmental Characteristics of Children Ages 5–10

It is no mystery to foreign language teachers that up to the age of ten, children's brains are like little sponges and muscles of the speech apparatus are quite flexible. They can absorb a

tremendous amount of information to be stored in long-term memory. The following is a general outline of the cognitive development of children between the ages 5 and 10:<sup>3</sup>

#### **Children ages 5–6**

- Need concrete objects as base for experience
- Are still learning the bulk of language
- Have limited concentration
- Can classify along one dimension
- Think in terms of words or meaning associations
- Love fantasy and like to pretend
- Can illustrate a story and talk about it
- Like having stories read to them

#### **Children ages 7–8**

- Have a greater ability to reason
- Have good listening skills
- Are interested in how or why relationships work
- Are better at articulating ideas
- Are interested in reading and writing
- Still often put language ahead of concepts
- Can construct a series, as from small to big
- Can classify hierarchically
- Still need concrete experiences

### **Children ages 9–10**

- Reading and writing skills are well established
- Can classify along more than one dimension
- Can think logically
- Need to express themselves
- Analyze work critically
- Begin to think in abstract ways
- Still need concrete experiences
- Differences in learning styles begin to appear

It is clear that in the FLES classroom, as learner characteristics begin to emerge, there will be different stages of language-learning skills, styles, abilities, and interests that the teacher will have to accommodate, but it is equally clear that this age span (5–10) is conducive to acquiring and learning just about any language. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), “The research evidence is fairly strong that those who begin second language learning at an early age are most likely to eventually be indistinguishable from native speakers” (186).

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### **Learning from Foreign Language Teaching in Other Countries**

A worldwide study conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics collected interesting information concerning foreign language instruction at the elementary levels (ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, 2002). This study allowed the researchers to identify some of the essential characteristics of foreign language early start education. The

countries surveyed were Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Spain, and Thailand. Information was also gleaned from studies on China, England, and Hong Kong (Pufahl, Rhodes, and Christian, 2001). This study afforded foreign language educators the opportunity to examine what works in other countries and what the United States can learn from this. The researchers concluded that:

- 1) An early start is essential for the development of high levels of proficiency. The researchers noted that seven of the countries had compulsory foreign language education by age eight and that many required a second foreign language in upper elementary grades.
- 2) A rigorous teacher education was *de rigueur* for successful programs.
- 3) A comprehensive use of technology enhanced foreign language teaching in the classroom, particularly in the area of communication.
- 4) Effective teaching strategies were mentioned as powerful tools. Among those were:
  - Use of the foreign language as the medium of instruction
  - Integration of language and content learning
  - Communicative teaching methods
  - Focus on language-learning strategies
  - Building on the first or subsequent languages
  - Sole use of foreign language in the classroom
  - Use of a modular approach in which students are grouped according to proficiency
  - Use of authentic materials

- 5) A strong policy at national, regional, and local levels is required to maintain foreign languages as core subjects. Educators surveyed realized that support needs to come from administrators first and the community second.
- 6) Assessment was regarded as one of the best practices in foreign language education. Assessment of programs and pupils' achievement were considered strong indicators of program effectiveness.
- 7) Maintenance of heritage, regional, and indigenous languages enhances foreign language study. Programs that teach the mother tongue of speakers of languages other than the dominant one in the country were highly encouraged (Pufahl, Rhodes, and Christian, 2001).

Educators in the United States can learn much from what works in other countries and use them as example to implement strategies and policies that will help develop better foreign language programs.

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### **Why FLES Programs Failed in the 1960s**

While there are well-founded concerns about starting language study in early grades, educators need to remember the principal reasons for the failure of foreign language programs during the 1960s. With the advent of Russia's Sputnik in 1957, a national sense of urgency shook the country. The United States realized that the inadequacies of foreign language knowledge—and particularly in Russian—only contributed to the American scientists' inability to keep informed about the development of the Russian satellite (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2004). While generous federal grants became readily available through the National Defense Education Act

and language programs could be quickly established at both the elementary and the secondary levels, they faded away just as quickly. The following is a synoptic view of the reasons language programs failed.

- They grew too rapidly.
- They made promises and set goals that were unattainable.
- Taxpayers did not see the results promised.
- There was no clear rationale.
- Methodology was not appropriate.
- There was a lack of qualified teachers; there was no pre-service or in-service training.
- With no adequate methodology youngsters were getting bored with studying languages.
- The programs did not get support from secondary schools; articulation with middle and secondary schools was nonexistent.
- Teaching consisted mostly of listening and speaking.
- Language programs were not part of the curriculum and, therefore, were not taken seriously.
- There was no research to answer the question: Why FLES?
- Everything was done too fast without much planning.

Gladys Lipton (1998) offers many detailed suggestions on the planning stages before beginning an early-start program. Once a program is in place and functioning, assessment of student learning, proficiencies, faculty efficiencies, etc. must be evaluated on a regular and frequent basis.

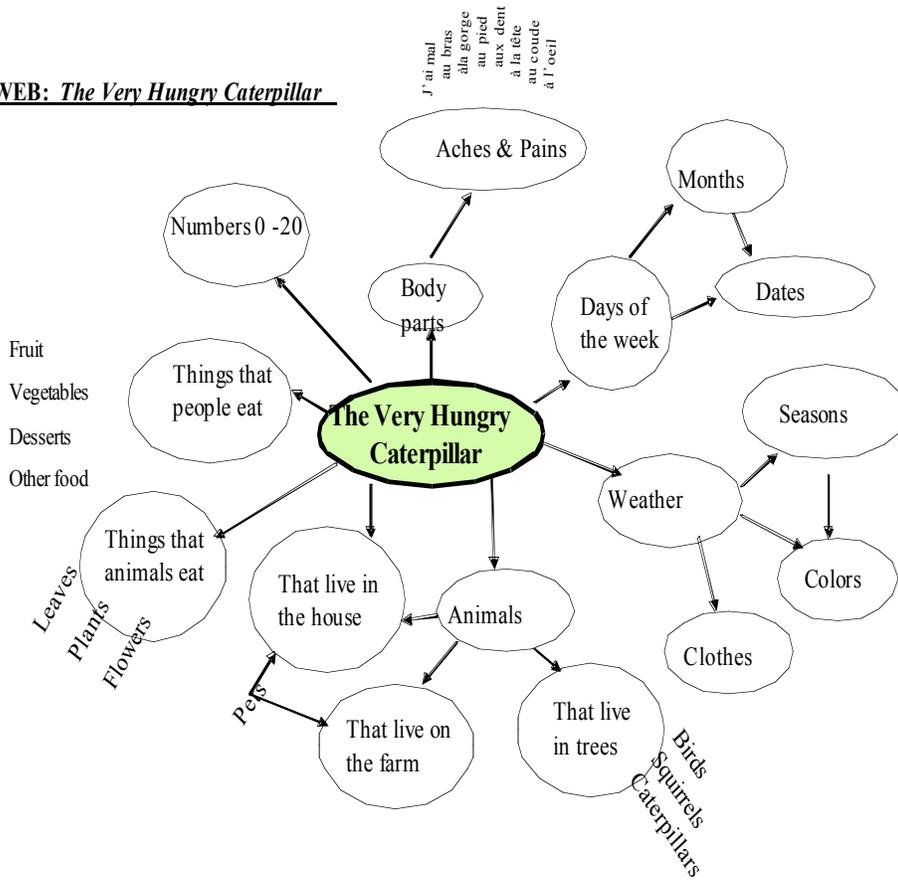
### **Some Sound Principles for Conducting a FLES Program**

FLES programs inevitably vary from school district to school district. Entrance level, weekly frequency of classes, length of class instruction, instructional materials, or even financial support are only a few concerns. Regardless, there are certain principles the FLES teacher should consider in order to create a successful experience for both the teacher and the students:

- Have a curriculum in place. This does not mean one that is established according to grammatical criteria or what textbooks regard as the ultimate language progression, but rather one that meets the needs for daily expression of the students and teacher involved. This means that the teacher will not systematically teach, say, objects in the classroom, or regular then irregular verbs, or all the colors or numbers, etc. The curriculum must be an assemblage of language items that will permit students to express themselves right from the start and be able to build upon that base. Where can one find such a curriculum? From books that children like. For years this writer has advocated Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. This simple story contains all the necessary language elements on which the teacher can expand: days of the week, numbers, foods, animals, colors, nature, and many more. It lends itself naturally to content-based education and all ACTFL standards. Publishers have quickly understood the worth of this book and, although now commercialized, teachers will be better off to create their own curriculum to suit their teaching styles or approach to language and, most of all, their students.

One of the best ways is to begin with a web; otherwise one ends up teaching snippets of language without any "rhyme or reason." The web below is one this writer created and used with third graders.

**WEB: The Very Hungry Caterpillar**



- Set specific goals and objectives with clear ideas of the materials to be used. It is easy to think that one can teach just anything, but language must make sense, and young students need to feel they can create with the language and not just list words. This

writer's goal was for the children to be able to "create" an expanded version of foods the caterpillar ate and tell the story.

- Do not use English from the onset of the program. Children will get used to it. Speak, however, slowly and clearly using gestures, mime, realia, or examples. Make the language simple and enunciate well. Children never ask for a translation; they never or rarely ask: How do you say \_\_\_\_\_? They never ask for any grammatical explanation.
- Have many diverse activities and move at a rapid pace; children's attention span is short and they quickly get distracted and off track when a lesson or activity drags.
- Use the students to act as the teacher; children are always eager to be the teacher. Children are very good at questioning their peers, and their peers in turns are happy to respond.
- Recycle the language frequently, adding new elements to it.

### **The FLES Class**

It is very important to captivate young students' interests, enthusiasm, and eagerness to learn.

- Have a routine to begin class; songs are usually excellent catalysts, particularly when children begin class in a circle and they can all see and participate. Routines can even take much of class time. Remember that real language is learned through repetition—oral or written.
- Make sure you have much movement and a variety of activities. Activities within a routine or otherwise must follow on rapidly. As the French would say: "Il faut que ça

sauté.” Routines usually include several animated songs or finger plays that teach children vocabulary and inevitably culture.

- Consequently, make sure that the physical space is amenable to moving around and is equipped with a magnetic board.
- Teach chunks of language. You can teach both affirmative and negative forms at the same time. For example, children do not find any difficulty in using meaningfully *J'aime les...* and *Je n'aime pas les...* when talking about just about anything.
- Participate in activities along with the students. When you start, children simply imitate you.
- Use a lot of cards, puppets, realia and, of course, gestures.
- Conduct class in the target language only.

Children learn using all four skills though singing, speaking, writing when the level is appropriate, and reading but, particularly important in the FLES class are the routine activities at the beginning of class. Engaging and lively songs can be found in any language. An excellent way is to begin singing in a circle. This writer used the three songs below as routine from the first day of class with third graders. These songs have a very lively tune and can be easily acted out. Teach the nouns only via illustrations and verbs via mime. The rest is not important since the songs are acted out. Other songs are gradually added as learning expands and language concepts increase. The three routine songs below show, in their simplicity, repetition that is at the core of language acquisition.



Tapent, tapent petites mains  
Tourne, tourne petit moulin  
Vole, vole petit oiseau  
Nage, nage petit matelot.



Mes p'tites mains tapent tapent tapent  
Elles tapent en haut  
Elles tapent en bas  
Elles tapent à droite  
Elles tapent à gauche  
Mes p'tites mains frottent,...  
...tournent ...

Mes p'tites mains font tap tap tap  
Mes p'tits pieds font paf paf paf  
Un, deux, trois; Un, deux, trois  
Trois petits tours et puis s'en va.



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While there is a wide range of songs children will enjoy, the FLES teacher must make sure that repetition is ever present. Tunes can be invented or adapted, but best of all are those that are authentic. Lipton (1992) has suggested that there is no one way to teach FLES and that methodology is determined by the goals, the students involved, and the teacher. Content and its

organization are dependent upon the goals of the program. Following only one approach to the exclusion of others may lead to boredom.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> See former Illinois Senator's *The Tongue-Tied American*. 1980.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat*. 2006.

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<sup>3</sup> For this reason, this educator considers FLES to be grade K-6.