



## Foreign Language Early Start Programs

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**Abstract:** Evidence of the importance of foreign language study is mounting with today's challenges of our interdependent world. Future generations will need to be proficient linguistically and cross-culturally in world languages. Ample research shows that to attain proficiency, learners need to start the study of languages in the early school-age years. Children can absorb a tremendous amount of information; their pronunciation reaches a near-native level. The reasons we should start teaching children early are innumerable. Moreover, because of the flexibility of their brains, young learners can begin to develop communicative competence from the onset of their exposure to the foreign language.

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### Introduction

On Saturday, February 19, 2011, the public in the Southern Tier had a chance to vote via the Internet on the question: "Should foreign-language instruction be required for students throughout their school-age years?" This was one of the daily questions posed by the Jamestown, NY, *Post-Journal*. Forty-five percent of the respondents said YES, while 55% said NO. Although the negative answers won by a margin of 10%, the positive answers were encouraging and showed a concern for learning, for our children and our country. Above all, they showed that at least 45% of the responding population has an understanding of the academic and

sociocultural contribution of foreign language study to the development of children. The negative answers showed a lack of understanding of (1) the necessity to study a foreign language at all; (2) the benefits gleaned from foreign language study; or (3) the importance of an early start. As one responder commented, “Learning a foreign language is always good, however, our school systems start too late.”

I wish foreign language study had the same importance in a young person’s life as sports do. Children engage in all sorts of sports: football, soccer, baseball, volleyball, basketball, gymnastics, hockey, ice-skating, etc. Only a very few excel, and even fewer go on to become professional athletes. Most of them abandon sports altogether once “real life” begins. We know, of course, that athletic activities are good and even desirable for the well-being of children and, whether children continue or not, it is certain that these young people will have greatly benefitted from their athletic experience.

The same can be said of the other disciplines children must study in grades K–12. We are cognizant of the fact that math, science, social studies, and language arts are unconditionally important, and we also realize that students must start the study thereof early. We understand we cannot wait until middle school or high school to begin learning how to write or perform addition, subtraction, and the like. Many students develop very good skills in math or science, a few excel, and even fewer will become advanced mathematicians or scientists. Not everything we learn in school is used in our everyday walks of life. Take for example pi ( $\pi = 3.14$ —the symbol of the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter); or take all the symbols in algebra, calculus, chemistry, etc. Unless we have a specific need for these in our work, we don’t use them. We certainly don’t use them to buy groceries or a can of paint. We learned in our grammar classes how to compose good sentences so that we can be clear in the ideas we want to

communicate. When we talk with people, we do not say: “Now, this is a noun and this is a verb”; we just go on with our conversations. Yet, all the things we learn in school help us develop our analytical skills, our critical thinking, and our view of the world, and lay a foundation for more advanced understanding in specialized areas.

When a baby is born, we immediately start speaking to the child so that good skills in listening and speaking and emotional stability can develop. Now imagine a baby who hears two languages from birth. Contrary to what we might think, there is no confusion in the brain of the child. According to Roxanna A. Soto, this is the top myth held by the majority of people. Ample research shows that children born into a bilingual family do not grow up linguistically confused. Bilingual expert Barbara Zurer Pearson tells us that “from just days after birth, all infants can tell the difference between many languages.” Neither does bilingualism delay speech in a child. According to Ellen Stubbe Kesler, “Research indicates that bilingualism does not cause delay in either speech or language acquisition.” Bilingualism is not a cause of language disorder or language delay (Annick de Houwer, 1999). Laura-Ann Petitto (2002), professor at Dartmouth’s Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences and Department of Education, discusses an interesting finding: “We found that if children are exposed to two languages from a very early age, they will essentially grow as if there were two monolinguals housed in one brain, and this will occur without any of the dreaded ‘language contamination’ often attributed to bilingual exposure.” Kobayashi, Glover, and Temple (2008) conducted brain-imaging on bilingual Japanese-English speakers and listed several interesting outcomes:

The study added additional support to earlier research that shows that the age at which we acquire a second language affects how we process that language in relation to our first language; the younger we learn a second language, the closer it is in our brain (literally) to our first language. For those who learn a second language later, the areas of the brain which are most active when dealing with each language are more widely separated, perhaps because languages learned later

are learned more through declarative memory (rather than being as dependent on procedural memory). (Retrieved April 1, 2011, from <http://neuroanthropology.net>.)

Scientists know that learning another language alters the grey matter in the sense that the brain “builds muscles,” and they also know that people who learned a second language at an early age have greater brain flexibility. Scan studies conducted by Andrea Mechelli at the Institute of Neurology at the University College London revealed that the density of the grey matter is greater in bilinguals than in those without a second language. (Retrieved April 2, 2011 from <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk>.)

While relatively few children in the United States are born into such golden opportunity, we would greatly help our children if we saw the need to start teaching foreign languages early in their school-age years. Bilingualism does not have to start at birth. Neuropsychologists tell us in ample and well-known research that the plasticity of the brain is at its most fertile state from birth until the age of ten. The brain is wired to quickly acquire languages. It can absorb an enormous amount of information. There is, then, ample time to begin teaching a second language prior to grade six.

### **The necessity of teaching foreign languages and the importance of an early start**

It would be tedious to discuss again the research that deals with all the benefits gleaned from the study of a foreign language. Teachers know them. It is principally administrators and parents we have to persuade. And how much can it be stressed that the sooner children begin the better? Suffice it to say that ample research has shown the effects on mental and social development of those who start studying at least one foreign language early:

- Results on standardized tests such as the SAT are higher.

- Higher order, abstract, and critical thinking are improved.
- Cognitive flexibility is shown.
- Greater self-esteem is built.
- Pronunciation is almost native-like.
- Tolerance of individual differences is enhanced.
- Greater problem-solving skills are developed.
- Fertile soil to study subsequent foreign languages is created.
- Achievement gap for the economically deprived students is narrowed.
- Career opportunities are widened.
- Cultural awareness and competency is promoted.
- English language skills are strengthened.
- English language literacy is heightened.
- Social studies and math are reinforced.
- Verbal abilities are fostered.
- Knowledge of world geography is increased.
- Basic second language foundation is laid for future studies.

The list seems endless.

There has always been a need to study foreign languages. Besides being a vehicle for communication, languages are culture. Language and culture cannot be separated. They depict the various ways populations think, live, worship, and generally do things. Kobayashi, Glover, and Temple (2008) make an interesting observation: “Differences in grammatical structures are an entirely plausible root for differences in the way that we think about other individuals’ perceptions...” Languages evolve along with their cultures. For example, the word *gay* can no

longer be interpreted as “happy” or “joyful” as it was fifty years ago. Inventions also have influenced or changed languages. Just look at what information technology has done: we use a *mouse* and click on *icons*; we open several *windows* and a *folder*, and search our *files*; if we need more space, we can *empty* our folders. These examples are a minuscule number. These kinds of changes pertain to all languages.

We do not need additional studies to see how interrelated our world is. Countries are no longer monolithic entities; populations are highly diversified. It makes good sense that we, such a vast country many of whose manufacturers are overseas, should promote for our children’s sake the study of the languages of the people with whom we deal on the market scene. Since isolationism is no longer desirable or even feasible, knowledge of the languages that populate our world has definite value. Nevertheless, it appears that we are still back in time when just a few decades ago the value of language study was not even considered, yet funds were plentiful. All languages are important, indeed, even the languages usually referred to as “commonly taught languages.” There is no valid or reasonable explanation for the elimination of French, German, Italian, Spanish, or Russian programs in order to make room in the budget for Chinese and Arabic. The “commonly taught languages” are languages that gave rise to the Western world because of their contribution to education, literature, music, art, medicine, and the many discoveries and advancements in our lives today. Many works have been written in these languages to foster research for our understanding of the world. It would be an abomination to abandon these language programs.

Having a well-defined and convincing rationale will lend support for the beginning of an early start language program. Administrators, colleagues in other disciplines, and parents must be firmly convinced that the study of languages will enhance the academic development of their

children throughout their school years. They must understand that in the long run our whole country will benefit from it.

The amount of curriculum time allotted to the study of a foreign language is necessarily dependent upon the aims, understandings, and interests of the school district and the community. Siobhan Hannan recounts in *Learning Languages* (2010) how the Italian kindergarten program in Melbourne, Australia, was begun. Melbourne, she writes, has a large Italian community. While there are no longer significant numbers of children growing up with Italian as their first language, there are large numbers of children with at least one set of Italian-speaking grandparents. The school's parent-elected Committee of Management responded to a request from local parents to offer the program. Thus, the program was created in 1997 and has remained in existence to this day. While kindergarten follows a play-based curriculum, it is a bilingual environment, says Hannan. Children learn principally from songs, repetition, and routines. (There is no foreign language requirement at the kindergarten level in Australia, and language study usually begins in school years three to six.) From kindergarten, children usually continue through the primary grades, says Hannan. To this entire school and community environment, learning Italian is not a frill but has a real *raison d'être*.

Curtain (2000) lists the challenges facing early language start in the United States:

- Choice of program model that will lead to language fluency and be part of a long sequence of instruction
- Articulation (continuity/sequencing)
- Funding
- Unrealistic goals and expectations
- Shortage of teachers

- Inadequate in-service training
- Ratio of students to teacher
- Lack of high-quality material
- Lack of sufficient allocated time and sufficient intensity to produce high-quality programs (pp. 204–05)

Two major challenges need immediate attention: continuity and funding. In order to ensure continuity or articulation horizontally, i.e., across the elementary grades, offering language the first year at just one level, say kindergarten or first grade, probably makes most sense. Because the FLES class is not textbook-oriented teaching but is driven by communicative needs that allow language blocks to build upon one another, the initial structuring of a program can be simple and quite cost effective. [The American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines and the New York State Standards for Language Other Than English (LOTE) provide ample guidance for the choice of language concepts best suited as building blocks.] Nonetheless, funding to maintain the program will have to be supplied and, funding for an extra teacher, or teachers, will have to be added to the school budget. Still, until a teacher has a full load, language teachers can be shared between schools. While it is true that teacher education programs are generally unprepared to deal with the preparation of early start language teachers (Curtain, 2000), many teachers know how to adjust to lower levels. Provided they are fluent in the language they intend to teach and have had training in child development and teaching methodology, qualified teachers may not be that difficult to find. Therefore, if the opportunity presents itself, seize it and just delve in!

## **The foreign language early start (FLES) classroom**

Make the FLES classroom a simple environment. There is no need for all sorts of posters and pictures to decorate the walls, or dolls, stuffed animals, and other toys around the room. Bring only those items you will need for teaching a particular lesson since it is especially probable that the FLES teacher will not have her or his own room. It is the language that captivates the children. Yet, I found five essentials for a classroom setting propitious to learning:

- 1) There must be enough physical space for children to move and work away from their desks; the best arrangement may be a 5'x7' rug for children to sit on in a circle away from their desks; this is especially true for children K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade.
- 2) Routines (the same song or songs, finger plays, questions) for beginning and ending class; never allow children to leave (nor should you leave) without going through the dismissal routine for you to tell them good-bye and vice versa.
- 3) Provide lots of movement through songs and games that teach or allow for review, and other activities that frequently recycle previously learned material.
- 4) The target language must be the only—THE ONLY—vehicle of instruction. This is one of the most crucial aspects of teaching a FLES class. Keep the language very simple, supplying just what the children need to understand and absorb.
- 5) Small white boards—preferably magnetic—for children to begin composing words, phrases and/or sentences; children enjoy seeing and showing what they can do; white boards, I have found, are absolutely essential. To develop good functional proficiency, the written expression must not be neglected. Magnetic letters are easily found in dollar stores.

Point number 4 may very well be the most important. Krashen (1982) is not *passé*; in the FLES class there is a great need for “comprehensible input.” Sophia Maletz (2010) states, “I have learned that children learn new language best when messages are repeatedly given to them in a manner that they can understand” (p. 21). To aid learners in understanding, Maletz uses 55% of facial and bodily expression, 38% vocal intonation, and 7% words in the target language.

### **Engaging young learners in communication**

The FLES class is fun, rewarding, vivid, lively, and filled with enthusiasm and energy. Each time it meets, it is a mini-immersion in the target language. Over the years I have become convinced that if class cannot be held every day, three or two or even one time a week for 40 or 50 minutes is highly beneficial. It is the quality of our teaching that will make the difference. If given 40 minutes, then the entire 40 minutes must be spent teaching and engaging learners in conversational exchanges. Students might progress at a slower pace in the number of building blocks for their language base than they would if language were offered daily, but they will learn well.

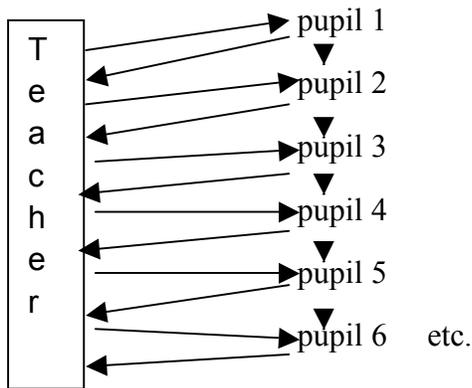
All activities must be designed in a way that will induce communication among learners and with the teacher. This is quite feasible from day *one*. Kindergarteners work principally with the first person singular since their focus is naturally on the self. What is more natural than asking children their names. Is it not what we do in real life? [Teacher in the target language]: *What is your name? My name is Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_.* [Teacher in the target language]: *What is your name?* [Pupil with teacher’s help]: *My name is ...;* subsequently, pupils will be saying: *I like....* In grades one and two, the third person singular is used: *My name is... + his/her name is...; I like ... + He/She likes....* In grades four and five, the other personal pronouns are added. The most natural way to begin conversation is to have students stand in a circle and tell their name: *Hello! My name is \_\_\_\_\_.* Pupils, of

course, emulate the teacher, who must continually coax them until responses become matter-of-fact:

Teacher: *What is your name? My name is \_\_\_\_\_.*

Pupil (With teacher's aid): *My name is \_\_\_\_\_.*

What happens in the classroom on the first day might be illustrated in the manner below:



Every time class meets, using your routine, pupils should greet the teacher in unison and tell the teacher their names. Introduce yourself and, to reinforce the idea of introducing oneself, bring a puppet, pretend it introduces itself to the class, and children, in turn, do the same. Children always enjoy the following activity:

**Name tags.** Make a name tag for each pupil with a fastener that can be easily clipped to a garment. (Velcro does not work well in this instance.) Name tags lend themselves to many meaningful language exchanges. Since after each class name tags are collected, when class meets again, hand pupils a tag with someone else's name. Pupils are to say: *No, my name is ....* Later, train pupils to say: *Who has [name]?* Then have them exchange tags. This is true language use right from the beginning. In addition, name tags can be used every new school year and in so many different ways.

Even if FLES begins at one level only—say kindergarten is the initial year of the language program—the goals must be clearly spelled out: What will the pupils be able to say or talk about by the end of the first year? You must know where you are going, what the next building block will be, and how it all ties together into the conversational aspect of the language. For example:

At the end of their kindergarten year, pupils will be able use full sentences to give their name, tell their age, and give the date of their birthday. Pupils will be able to name the parts of the body, count to 20 and tell how many animals are in a picture, identify 10 common animals, identify 10 fruit and tell which fruit they like. They will be able to name 5 colors and respond correctly when asked to color an item.

Then, for each additional year through fifth grade, goals must reflect the incremental nature of what students can do with the language:

“Kindergarten teaching,” says Siobhan Hannan, “adopts an approach that is flexible and responsive. However, it always relies on ready access to materials and ideas that are age appropriate and effectively target curriculum goals.” Goals must show that language is not a list of isolated words, rather than concepts build upon previously learned language for communicating new information. Denise Clivaz and Elizabeth Roberts (2010), two FLES teachers at the Avery Coonley School in Downers Grove, Illinois, describe the highly successful conversational model they have developed. They explain how their teaching has changed in terms of incorporating meaningful context (p.14):

Before \_\_\_\_\_ Now

- Isolated details → Context (chunk of language)
- Vocabulary → Structure (becoming comfortable with a chunk of language)
- Recall → Practice (repetition of language in context)
- Memorization → Ownership (spontaneous communication)

For young beginners such as kindergarteners, as well as for first and second graders, structure is learned incidentally through the context provided by the teacher; ownership is obtained through much practice and meaningful repetition. With children, all things must be done in order and fairly. To that extent, when selecting a child, find a way that appears fair to the children as you decide who is going to be “it.”

ACTFL has developed the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills Map in partnership with educators and business leaders across the nation. It clearly shows how the language in the classroom has changed in the past 20 years. They state:

In the Past	Today
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students learned about language (grammar)</li> <li>• Teacher-centered class</li> <li>• Focused on isolated skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)</li> <li>• Coverage of textbook</li> <li>• Use of the textbook as the curriculum</li> <li>• Emphasis on teacher as presenter/lecturer</li> <li>• Isolated cultural “factoids”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students learn to use the language</li> <li>• Learner-centered with teacher as facilitator/collaborator</li> <li>• Focus on the three modes: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational</li> <li>• Backward design, focusing on the end goal</li> <li>• Use of thematic units and authentic resources</li> <li>• Emphasis on learner as “doer” and “creator”</li> <li>• Emphasis on the relationship among the perspectives, practices, and products of the culture</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of technology as a “cool tool”</li> <li>• Only teaching language</li> <li>• Same instruction for all students</li> <li>• Synthetic situations from textbook</li> <li>• Confining language learning to the classroom</li> <li>• Testing to find out what students don’t know</li> <li>• Only the teacher knows criteria for grading</li> <li>• Students “turn in” work for the teacher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrating technology into instruction to enhance learning</li> <li>• Using language to teach academic content</li> <li>• Differentiated instruction to meet individual needs</li> <li>• Personalized real-world tasks</li> <li>• Seeking opportunities for learners to use language beyond the classroom</li> <li>• Assessing to find out what students can do</li> <li>• Students know and understand criteria on how they will be assessed by reviewing the task rubric</li> <li>• Learners create to “share and publish” to audiences other than just the teacher</li> </ul>
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Language at all levels must be contextualized, must communicate information, and must be “personalized for real-world tasks.” For instance, young learners enjoyed playing the *It’s hot/It’s cold* game. They can say it in the target language, in unison. The constant repetition reinforces the language and allows pupils to internalize it or acquire ownership. The following example illustrates how pupils learn to use the language spontaneously.

**The alphabet.** Youngsters love to learn the alphabet, and even more so in the foreign language. They also love to experiment with writing, such as their names; they spell them orally back to you. Or, children spell words as they hear the letters. Magnetic letters on a magnetic board are magic. Children have learned how to spell a few short words, so start spelling a word; even very

young ones are able to spell and guess what the word is before you have finished. They quickly learn to say in the target language: *I have the word*, and then say and show their spelled-out word. Older students might want to write with felt pens, but they, too, enjoy the magnetic letters. Pupils can sit in a circle on the floor or at their desks. You must, of course, practice with one or two words and teach them to say *I have the word*. Remember, no English.

Another way that allows children to use the language spontaneously is to have children add ideas to a story you told or read. Ad-lib (in the target language) stories such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. To use this particular story, children must have learned a number of foods and some body parts. Pupils can create their own stories by having the caterpillar eat all sorts of different foods and telling the class their version of what the caterpillar ate. Finally, pupils can make their own caterpillars, following your instruction as you model all in the target language.

**Making a very hungry caterpillar.** This is a lot of fun and parents can help with the cost of materials needed (which is usually minimal): small tube socks, stuffing, rubber bands, pipe cleaners, eyes (purchased in crafts stores), and markers. A parent or two can be a great help. In grades four and five, pupils can write their own stories to include any foods they wish.

## **Conclusion**

Language teachers are a most creative bunch. They generally go to class loaded with bags of materials to make learning enjoyable. But the FLES teacher must come to class with a really large bag of activities and contagious enthusiasm. They need different activities for the same concept to provide for repetition. Because young learners are not bound to desks but can work on the floor, in a circle, sitting or standing, or walking about the classroom, the possibilities of what teachers can do are endless. Yet, the teacher cannot dwell too long on one task, and activities

must follow quickly with a smooth transition so that there is no time for pupils to lose focus or flounder. Learners get plenty of comprehensible input that they in turn will use spontaneously. A play-based, hands-on curriculum provides opportunities for children to become directly involved in the language learning process. In the FLES program, no child is left behind and no child falls through the cracks; all participate; all learn, albeit at differing levels of ability; all work together and all have fun.

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