

Now That FLES Is Dead, What Next?



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THERE seems to be no question that FLES (Foreign Language in the Elementary School), spawned in most communities by the Sputnik-NDEA events, is an almost completely defunct creature.

Over the past eight years, hundreds of communities have abandoned what they hoped were ideal foreign language programs. It must be admitted that some were weak programs from their moment of conception—those meeting once or twice a week, having poorly trained or untrained teachers, no curriculum guidelines, and with the thinly disguised hostility of the “cooperating” classroom teacher who saw the program as a wasteful incursion on his instructional time.

On the other hand, many programs were based on what were felt to be sound educational and linguistic principles. Many of these have also been abandoned.

The reasons for these failures should not escape us:

1. Despite the fact that many children who completed a FLES sequence did very well in secondary school and in college, it appears that they might have done so anyway. What FLES has done in many communities is to have identified the children with high language learning aptitude, and kept them in the program by feeding their feeling of success. These were often the students whose parents or guidance counselors would have encouraged them to take

Latin, as being “more intellectual” than a modern language.

There is no denying that the extra language training these children received did allow them to do well by such measures as the CEEB scores, for example. The corollary is that, if the program was language-oriented (and many programs were, to forestall the criticism by the brighter students who felt that otherwise all they did was to play games and sing songs), after a year or two the less able students found themselves in a discipline which, like math, reading, etc., was difficult for them. If the FLES approach was more fun-oriented, the most that many students were left with was a positive attitude toward the language and perhaps the culture, along with a few words and phrases.

2. A criticism voiced by able and less able students alike was the enormous time it took to be able to discuss anything intelligently in the foreign language. Students longed to give their opinions on almost every topic which came up, but we FLES teachers knew that it would produce mayhem if we attempted to introduce, let alone teach, all the necessary vocabulary and structure for that kind of thing.

So we rationalized that students would

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have to be content with asking how much the French bread cost, or what time the plane was due to arrive. Students could be contented with this for a year or so, but even the most immature began to tire of imaginary trips to the zoo before long. As the more articulate students put it, "We are tired of being able to order a dinner including snails. We would like to be able to ask a Frenchman *why* he likes snails so well, and why he dislikes corn, and be able to understand him when he tells us."

We kept children away from the printed language and gave them instead material which was far below their psychological age, using the reasoning that they had to learn to speak before they could learn to read, and we did not want to interfere with the building of good accents. Laudable as the psychological reasons behind these practices might have been, we ignored another set of psychological principles, those dealing with interest and motivation.

3. Another serious difficulty was the

one of teacher competence. Few elementary school teachers had or have even minimal competence in a foreign language; they had to be sought. Even when they were found, they were very vulnerable. Unlike the fields of art, music, or physical education, foreign language does not engender the involvement of other teachers as the passing knowledge of the other disciplines does. Correlation with other subjects was seldom seen, and no tears were shed by colleagues when frequent fiscal cutbacks dictated that the FLES teacher would be the first to leave. Because of the few worthwhile curricula available (then and now), the change of teachers in a given school usually meant a devastating disruption in the course of study and in the learning process.

A Viable Alternative?

Most experts agree that the need for persons with foreign language competence is now more acute than ever, for a variety of reasons. It has been maintained that all education has three major objectives: the acquisition of a tool skill which will be useful on a practical basis in the performance of other tasks; social adjustment—preparation for becoming a member of a small or large community; and cultural or humanistic development, the enrichment of the individual spirit and the full fruition of his potentialities as a human being. It should be obvious that foreign language study contributes a great deal to each of these objectives, but direct communication with another people and the personal experience of another culture are contributions that no other discipline can make.

The realization that not all thoughts are cast into English molds and the shock of discovering that other peoples think different thoughts, so different as to be contradictory to, but at the same time just as logical, reasoned, and profound as American thoughts, are important elements in the humanistic and cultural development of the individual. On the other hand, many lists have been compiled elsewhere documenting the tremendous need this country has for trained

people in diplomacy, military, government, and business.

Recent experience in this country and in Canada suggests that this language proficiency can be acquired in the public schools in a way far superior to what the FLES program produced. The Canadian experience is particularly telling. Begun six years ago in a single school, and now found in over 40 elementary schools, is the home-school language switch program. Entire classes of English-speaking students are given their kindergarten, first grade, and most of second, third, and fourth grade instruction in French. That is, French is the school's medium of instruction. Students learn to read first in French, then in English.

The results have been phenomenal thus far. By fourth grade, students are equally fluent in the two languages, and as fluent as their monolingual counterparts in both cultures. Their scholastic achievement in arithmetic and other elementary school disciplines is as high as that of monolingual students and sometimes higher, for there is some evidence that becoming bilingual in this manner is a strong stimulus for other intellectual activities.

Given intelligent adaptation of this program to American schools, a number of exciting possibilities can be visualized:

1. Achieving bilingual competence before the end of elementary schools, students can make practical use of their ability, studying a great variety of other subjects in the second language; and thus giving students and teachers the satisfaction of being able to use the language in really meaningful exchanges of ideas.

2. Students would not be forced to terminate language study in the middle of high school, when scheduling now often forces a decision between chemistry, for example, and third-year French.

3. *Little additional expense would be involved.* Since there would be no "extra" teachers to hire, the expense would be approximately the same as for instruction in other schools, an advantage not shared by most FLES programs.

4. Schools now considered undesirable would be rendered particularly attractive. Al-

though the experience has shown that somewhat fewer failures occur with this type of instruction than with normal instruction, there may still be parents who would not want their children participating in such a program. Thus certain schools could be designated as foreign language schools, and the concept of bussing might take on many more positive overtones.

5. Curriculum materials for the student's psychological age would be much easier to obtain. Foreign language materials from Europe, Canada, or Latin America are fairly easily available. Even the "new math" is available in bilingual editions. This is where the slight additional cost would be, but this would be a far smaller cost than that of additional teachers. Foreign-published materials would have the added advantage of giving the student the perspective of a non-American view of some subjects, of particular value in the social studies, as American experience with American history using French textbooks has shown.

6. The critical problem of vertical and horizontal articulation would be greatly reduced. Combining language and content, many different texts can be employed, both in levels of difficulty and types of content. The lockstep approach to foreign language can thus be avoided.

We must keep in mind that over half of the world's population is bilingual, and many of these bilinguals are produced by a home-school language switch. America desperately needs more bilinguals. Here is a productive alternative to the dying FLES movement.

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