

The Rebirth of Foreign Languages in the Elementary School

Myriam Met

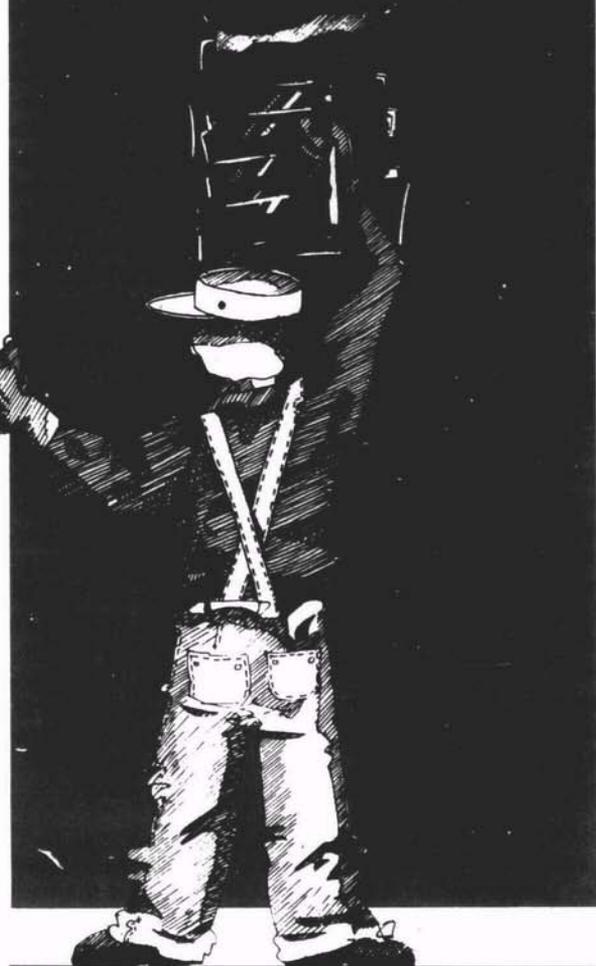
While the last decade has seen considerable weeping and wailing over the plight of foreign languages at the secondary and post-secondary levels, a quiet revolution has been taking place in the elementary school. Despite the indifference and occasional hostility toward second language study, the rebel forces that support language learning have regained a territorial foothold in the elementary school.

Foreign language in the elementary school is not a new concept. The 1950s and 1960s saw the heyday of Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES). By the mid-1960s, FLES programs had begun to wither and fade. There were many external and internal causes. As the furor of the post-Sputnik era over the inadequacy of the American educational system lost its momentum, public concern with language learning and government financial support of language programs diminished. Internally, FLES faced many problems. Qualified teachers and quality instructional materials were in short supply. Articulation between the elementary and secondary program was—at best—limited! So, after several years of elementary school language study, students entering junior high school might find themselves enrolled in French I.

The resurgence of elementary school languages has not been in the forefront of recent educational innovations. It has been neither supported financially by federal dollars nor a subject of interest in professional education publications.¹ Nonetheless, elementary school language programs are making a comeback.

The new movement has received its impetus from diverse sources. The focus on the ethnic heritage of our nation's cultural minorities has generated a renewed interest in their languages. Related to the

¹ The 1976 ACTFL Review of Foreign Language Education discusses many successful elementary school foreign language programs; some are survivors of the golden ages of FLES. Programs in Des Plaines (Illinois), Akron (Ohio), and Hackensack (New Jersey) have provided and continue to provide exciting opportunities in language learning to children. See Dwayne Adcock, "Foreign Languages in Elementary and Emerging Adolescent Education," in *An Integrative Approach to Foreign Language Teaching: Choosing Among the Options*, G. A. Jarvis and A. C. Omaggio, eds. ACTFL Review, 1976. (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1976).



Despite poor financial support and lack of professional interest, foreign language study in elementary schools is making a comeback.

"The focus on the ethnic heritage of our nation's cultural minorities has generated a renewed interest in their languages. Related to the ethnic heritage thrust is the emphasis on bilingual education."

ethnic heritage thrust is the emphasis on bilingual education. While most bilingual education programs are for students of limited English-speaking ability, Title VII guidelines state that English dominant students may not be excluded from such programs. In fact, many parents who live in communities where bilingualism is necessary for socioeconomic survival—or where it is a valued skill on the job market—have demanded special bilingual programs for their children. In California, for example, English-speaking children in Culver City, San Diego, and Hayward are taught their regular school subjects in Spanish.

St. Lambert Model

Perhaps the earliest and best known of the bilingual programs designed for English-speaking students was the St. Lambert experiment, which originated in a suburb of Montreal.² Parents in that community requested that their English-speaking children have a program of bilingual instruction so that the children would become fluent in French. Students were "immersed" in French starting in kindergarten. Until the second grade, little or no English was used. French was not taught as a subject; it was the medium of instruction for the regular school curriculum. Scrupulous research on the progress of these children revealed no detrimental effects on their academic achievement. By the fourth grade the experimental group was performing as well as their peers on standardized tests in English despite the fact that they had been taught in French. This result was all the more impressive since the experimental group first had learned to read in French, and had experienced no English reading or language arts until the second grade. Today, immersion programs such as the St. Lambert model are no longer a novelty in Canada, and they are gaining in popularity in the U.S. Currently, total immersion programs are flourishing in California, as well as in Silver Spring, Maryland; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Plattsburgh, New York.

Magnet School Movement

Another stimulus to the revival of elementary school foreign language programs has been the magnet school movement. Language magnets offer students an opportunity to learn a second language in addition to the regular school curriculum. Such magnet programs vary with regard to the program model and the level of second language proficiency to be attained. They may range from an enrichment program of 15-20 minutes three times a week to the kind of total immersion programs that Canada has pioneered. The public schools of St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Chicago all offer foreign language magnets.

In Cincinnati, over 1,800 pupils are currently studying French, German, or Spanish in magnet programs housed in ten schools throughout the city. In the French and Spanish bilingual schools, the kindergarten provides a partial immersion program. The teacher speaks to the children in the second language except for the period devoted to English Reading and Math Readiness activities. No formal attempt to teach the second language is made. Rather, children learn their second language in much the same way they learned the first.

Children entering first grade may also enroll in any of the bilingual programs. In first and second grades, they receive second language instruction in a sequenced and structured oral language program characterized by the extensive use of the second language in the classroom and by a multimedia instructional approach. An itinerant second language teacher gives each class 70 minutes of language instruction daily; instruction supplemented by filmstrips, storybooks, and other audiovisual materials. The second language is an integral part of the regular elementary school curriculum. Reading is first taught in English, then in the second language. In physical education, children learn games and dances played and danced in French, German, and Spanish-speaking countries. Music is taught in the second language. Art projects relating to the customs and culture are undertaken.

² Wallace E. Lambert and G. Richard Tucker, *The Bilingual Education of Children: The St. Lambert Experiment*. (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1972).



Myriam Met is Coordinator, Spanish Bilingual Program, Cincinnati Public Schools, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Throughout the year the children prepare presentations dramatizing the target culture.

In the French and Spanish bilingual programs, third graders have a bilingual teacher who teaches both the regular third-grade curriculum and the second language. An increasing portion of intraclassroom communication takes place in the second language. Fourth and fifth graders continue their language study. An ever increasing portion of the school day is conducted in both languages. Reading, language arts, math, science, art, music, physical education, and social studies are all taught bilingually.

Currently, a bilingual middle school program is being planned and is expected to open in September 1980. This program, designed for grades six-eight, will continue to approach second languages as both the subject and medium of instruction.

In Chicago, the LaSalle Language Academy is one of the most recent arrivals on the elementary school foreign language scene.³ LaSalle is a magnet school designed to attract pupils kindergarten through eighth grade to a racially balanced language learning center that is part of Chicago's Access to Excellence program. In 1978, its first year of operation, LaSalle had 449 pupils enrolled, backed by a waiting list of about 600. The school offers Spanish, French, German, Italian, and English as a second language to a somewhat academically diverse pupil population. Time spent in second language study ranges from 25 minutes daily for primary pupils to 45 minutes for grades 6-8.

Under the Chicago Access to Excellence plan the elementary school language program will articulate with a high school language center. Although LaSalle currently is the only elementary magnet school that offers languages, the Access to Excellence master plan calls for a total of four such schools to be in operation in the next few years.

Three models of innovative elementary language programs have been presented here. Canada's program is a bilingual, total immersion approach in which the second language is the means of instruction and the principal language of the school, rather than the focus or subject of instruction. The Chicago model is a more traditional FLES program in a new setting—a portion of each day is set aside for foreign language study. The Cincinnati program lies somewhere between the concepts of FLES and "immersion." Both immersion type experiences (kindergarten, grade 3, and beyond) and a program of formal language instruction (grade 1 and beyond) are included. Subject matter is taught bilingually starting early in the program sequence.

It is clear that elementary school foreign language programs are indeed beginning to experience a

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new period of growth. Most exciting, there are a wide variety of models, both new and old, to choose from. Not only are these models designed to permit a wide range of goals and methodologies, but they also tend to incorporate many of today's educational priorities. Humanistic goals, including affective education and values clarification, may be implemented in the language classroom since, after all, language is a tool for interpersonal communication. Occupations available to those with second language skills can be stressed as part of a career education component. Individualized instruction is also often a facet of the second language instruction program and, what better way to incorporate multicultural education?

In this age of multinational business corporations, in this country where approximately one out of every ten persons speaks a language other than English at home⁴, and in this time of educational focus on multicultural and affective education, we should look once again to elementary school language programs to meet our needs. Many communities have, with very positive results. *EL*

³ Personal interview at LaSalle Language Academy, Chicago Public Schools.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics cited by Dorothy Waggoner, in *Linguistic Reporter* 19 (December 1976): 5.

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