Foreign Language: On Starting Early
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The most significant trend in elementary school foreign language instruction is the exponential increase in opportunities for children to begin foreign language study while in the elementary grades. Nine states require instruction to begin in elementary school; most other states likely will require it soon or provide substantial incentives to schools which do. These states, along with a rapidly growing number of schools and school systems, are recognizing that early foreign language instruction benefits students cognitively and academically, contributes to the achievement of schools' multicultural goals, and can help to meet the needs of the nation.

A number of recent studies have confirmed and expanded upon earlier research which showed that students who begin to learn another language in childhood score better on measures of cognitive functioning than do their monolingual peers. And students in elementary foreign language programs have equalled or outperformed those in control groups on standardized achievement tests, even when these subjects were taught in another language or when time has been "taken out" of the school day to make time for foreign language instruction. Other research indicates that pre-adolescents are more receptive to learning about people of other cultures and may be more likely than older learners to develop positive cross-cultural attitudes. In addition, students who begin foreign language instruction when they are young will have time to develop the levels of proficiency Americans will need to participate effectively in the global economic and political arenas in the 21st century.

Elementary program models may be placed on a continuum reflecting time devoted to language study and program goals and objectives. In immersion programs, the most ambitious model in terms of goals and the most time intensive, the regular curriculum is taught through the medium of another language. In partial immersion, at least half the school day is taught in the foreign language; in total immersion, all instruction is in the language. In the United States, immersion programs begin in kindergarten or 1st grade. Language teaching per se is not the focus of instruction but rather, language is acquired through instruction in other subjects. Immersion produces extremely high levels of foreign language proficiency. In addition, immersion students consistently perform as well as or better than controls on measures of achievement in reading language arts, mathematics, and science, even though immersion students generally learn these subjects in a foreign language. Since in immersion the "language" teacher is the classroom teacher, no extra staff is needed, making it the least expensive program model. But immersion requires one teacher per class, seven for a K-6 program of one class per grade level, who must be highly skilled and certified elementary school teachers with native-like oral and written proficiency in the foreign language. First pioneered and now widespread in Canada, immersion accounts for only 3 percent of U.S. programs.

Approximately 45 percent of programs are FLES (Foreign Language in the Elementary School), a sequential program beginning at any grade K-6 and continuing through the elementary grades. FLES classes may meet between 2 and 5 times per week in sessions ranging from 20 to 70 minutes, with a minimum of 90 minutes per week being scheduled in many programs. When FLES is part of a well-articulated, long sequence of study, it can result in useable levels of language proficiency and can significantly contribute to improving students' knowledge of and attitudes toward people of other cultures. A relatively new trend is content-based FLES, which integrates foreign language with other subjects of the elementary curriculum. For example, 3rd grade students who were recently studying Ghana in social studies were also learning vocabulary for animals in their Chinese FLES class. They used a Venn diagram to classify animals according to whether they may be found in Ghana, China, or both.

Since one FLES teacher may work with as many as 200-250 students per week, these programs allow for wide participation within a given school. This is an important advantage at a time when there is a critical shortage of trained teachers for all elementary foreign language programs. One disadvantage of FLES is that schools usually need an additional teacher—over and above the regular staff—for program delivery.

FLEX (Foreign Language Experience or Exploratory) is a short-term program lasting from several weeks to one year which focuses primarily on cultural objectives. FLEX can provide strong motivation for students to continue their language study later and a sound orientation to learning about people of other cultures. However, since FLEX results in minimal development of language skills, this model cannot achieve many of the goals which motivate the initiation of elementary foreign language programs in the first place. Also, it should be noted that research related to the academic and cognitive benefits of early language learning has not included FLEX students. About 41 percent of all U.S. elementary school foreign language programs are FLEX.

All of the models described here require curriculums and materials that are developmentally appropriate and firmly rooted in sound foreign language pedagogy. Often these are developed at the local school or district level, frequently by the teachers themselves. These teachers must be qualified to teach languages and to work with young learners. The most effective programs provide for careful articulation from level to level, no matter which model is used.

A number of organizations and net-
works provide support and information for program planners, teachers, and parents. It's never been easier, and perhaps never more important, to begin sound programs of foreign language instruction in the elementary school than it is today.


2 For a resource packet with more in-depth background information, a list of organizations to contact, and print materials to assist in program planning, readers may write to the author at the address that follows or to Nancy Rhodes, National Network for Early Language Learning, 1118 22nd St., NW, Washington, DC 20037.

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