

**PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR
FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING
IN THE ELEMENTARY GRADES**

WHEN SHOULD FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING BEGIN? *¹

Extensive research, theory, and professional debate have searched for a definitive answer to the question of the best age to begin learning a foreign language (Curtain, 1998; Harley, 1998; Harley, 1986; Singleton, 1989). One thing is certain however: given motivation and opportunity (including sufficient time and appropriate circumstances) almost anyone can attain a degree of proficiency in another language at any age.

Much publicized research on the development of the brain in infancy through early childhood suggests that there is a window for first language development (Pinker, 1994). Clearly first language develops best in early childhood. This body of research is interpreted to suggest that the innate wiring of the brain favors early development of both first and additional languages. A judicious interpretation of brain development research would lead to the conclusion that the young brain may well be predisposed to acquiring language(s). It should not, however, lead us to the conclusion that older learners cannot learn a foreign language.

Indeed, research that compares younger and older learners of foreign languages suggests that in some respects, older learners are more efficient language learners. Short-term studies have shown that older learners acquire certain aspects of language more quickly and efficiently than do younger learners. Researchers attribute this outcome to the cognitive maturity, greater world knowledge, and enhanced learning capabilities (knowing 'how to learn') of older children and adults (Harley, 1986). However, other studies have suggested that eventually younger learners may be more proficient in the long run, even if older learners are quicker in the short run

(Krashen, Scarcella and Long, 1982), particularly in the area of oral communication (Harley, 1998). There appears to be general consensus that younger learners are far more likely to attain and retain native-like pronunciation than are older learners.

The conflicting research evidence on the optimal age for language learning has centered around the ultimate level of proficiency attained. In addition to the degree of proficiency learners attain, however, there are other compelling reasons to begin language learning early.

- Since there is evidence that suggests there are cognitive benefits to early childhood bilingualism, an early start and continued progress toward bilingualism is desirable (Lee, 1996).
- Students who take a foreign language in the elementary grades may demonstrate academic gains in other areas of the curriculum (Wilburn Robinson, 1998).
- It takes a long time to gain proficiency in a foreign language, particularly when it is learned in a school setting. Therefore, the earlier students start the higher the level they are likely to achieve (Haas, 1998).
- A quality, world-class education includes foreign language study. For example, in 14 of 15 industrialized countries surveyed in 1993, foreign language learning began at age 10 or before (Bergentoft, 1994). Omitting certain academic experiences simply because older learners are more efficient may be insufficient justification for curriculum design. That is, just because older learners may be faster learners

* Excerpted from: Myriam Met and June Phillips, *Foreign Language Curriculum Handbook*. ASCD. 1999.

does not mean that foreign language learning should be delayed. For example, if it were shown that older learners can grasp mathematics concepts more easily than young children do, would educators consider delaying the introduction of mathematics in the school curriculum until grade 9?

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STARTING AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAM

1. What level of language proficiency should students attain?
2. What program model will be used?
3. Which language should be offered?
 - Is there community interest?
 - Is a program in this language feasible given the model selected?
 - Are there sufficient resources to support the program?
4. How will the program be articulated?
 - How will each year lead to the next and build on what students have learned?
 - How will new school enrollees be accommodated?
 - What will happen in middle/junior high school?
5. What will the curriculum be?
 - Does the scope and sequence address the desired level of proficiency?
 - How will content, skills, and strategies be integrated across the curriculum?
 - Which culture concepts will be taught and when?
 - Which culture(s) will be emphasized?
6. What resources are needed?
 - What financial resources does the selected model require? Are they available?
 - What human resources does the selected model require? Are they available?
 - What kinds of material resources does the selected model require? Are they available?

WHAT DOES GOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION LOOK LIKE?

- The foreign language is used (almost) exclusively.
- Classroom activities involve meaningful and purposeful language use.
- The environment is child-centered and instructional experiences are developmentally appropriate.
- The content of the elementary school curriculum is integrated with language learning.
- The target culture is an integral part of instruction and is coordinated with the social studies program.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT ARE:

- time on task
- intensity
- continuity from year-to-year
 - curriculum scope and sequence
 - recycling and re-entry
 - articulation within and across schools
- quality of instruction
- teacher skills
- appropriate instructional approaches
- use of instructional resources
- language of instruction
 - which language?
 - use of English?



INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS FOR YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS SHOULD...

- Be appropriate to children's needs, interests, and background experiences
- Focus on meaning, not form
- Provide opportunities for meaningful, purposeful language use
- Be compatible with the school's goals and educational philosophy
- Be culturally appropriate and accurate
- Allow for teacher flexibility
- Be affordable

BUILDING FOR SUCCESS: WHAT ADMINISTRATORS CAN DO

Make promises and keep them.

- Have clear guidelines for what students should learn.
- Find a way to measure whether you're doing what you said you would.
- Monitor parent, student, staff, and community satisfaction.

Integrate foreign language with the elementary school content, skills and strategies.

Hire qualified staff.

Make sure teachers have adequate instructional resources.

Provide professional development to ALL staff.

- Make sure regular teachers, supporting services staff, administrators understand the program.
- Ensure that foreign language teachers keep up to date.

Keep the state framework for foreign languages at your fingertips. Use it often. When in doubt, consult the framework. If the answer's not there, call your state foreign language supervisor.

SELECTING QUALIFIED STAFF

THE QUALIFIED FLES TEACHER...

- understands and likes children
- is proficient in the foreign language and knowledgeable of its culture
- is skilled in managing an elementary school classroom
- understands issues in the development of foreign language literacy in learners still developing literacy in English
- understand the precepts of communicative language teaching, is familiar with theories of second language development in children, and has a repertoire of instructional approaches for translating theory into classroom practice
- knows the elementary school curriculum, instructional strategies for implementing it, and can integrate these into the foreign language program

THE QUALIFIED IMMERSION TEACHER...

- has native-like command of the oral and written forms of the foreign language and is knowledgeable of the culture
- is trained (certified? experienced?) to teach the elementary grades and has a repertoire of instructional approaches that allow content to be taught through concrete experience as well as through language
- is skilled in making content accessible to students who are learning the school curriculum in a language in which they are not proficient
- is familiar with theories of second language acquisition in children and can translate theory into immersion practice
- is skilled in developing second language literacy in young learners
- can assess content and language development independently of one another to ensure students are gaining control of curriculum concepts
- communicates effectively with parents and administrators
- is a collaborative member of the immersion team

PROGRAM MODELS

	FLES	IMMERSION
Variations	Content-based Intensive	Partial Total Two-Way
Time	No less than 75 minutes weekly over 3 class meetings	No less than 50% of the school day
Intensity	Can be intensive through cognitively engaging/ demanding tasks such as content	High intensity through need to know
Staffing Costs	Itinerant teacher salary	No additional staff needed
Teachers	Foreign language teachers qualified to teach in elementary grades	Elementary school trained teachers proficient in the foreign language
Materials Needed	Supplementary: print and non- print	Replace instructional materials in English
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable to a wide range of parents and community members • Serve a large number of students with few teachers • Can offer more than one language per school or community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High levels of language proficiency obtained at minimal cost • Can serve minority language students in two-way model • High academic achievement • Scheduling issues minimized
Issues to Consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively high costs in light of results • Need a minimum number of contact minutes to meet state proficiency outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher intensive • Frequently not acceptable to wide range of parents and community members

**START-UP COSTS FOR
AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAM**

	FLES <i>[Assumes 30 minutes daily of FL instruction per pupil. Costs are for one school.]</i>	IMMERSION <i>[Includes total, partial, and two-way programs. Assumes 2 startup classes serving 50-55 students.]</i>
Teacher salary	One teacher per 200 students \$ _____ X _____ teachers	none
Fringe benefits	\$ _____ X _____ teachers	none
Training	3 days @ \$ _____ per day X teachers Trainers: 3 days @ \$ _____ per day (plus expenses)	5 days @ \$ _____ per day X teachers Trainers: 5 days @ \$ _____ per day (plus expenses)
Curriculum Development	(to prepare scope and sequence for each grade level; identify activities, resources and assessments). _____ days @ \$ _____ per day X _____ teachers	(to prepare instructional guides to support local curriculum. One unit =4 days) _____ days @ \$ _____ per day X 2 teachers
Planning	_____ teachers X 2 hours per week X 36 weeks @ \$ _____ per hour	2 teachers X 2 hours per week X 36 weeks @ \$ _____ per hour

Instructional materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher guides, student materials <p>\$ _____ per pupil X _____ pupils</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duplicating costs 5 worksheets per pupil per week @ \$ _____ per copy • Media center materials: extent and nature depends on program model. Add 20-25% to usual cost. • Listening materials: video, read-along stories. • Software • Teacher made materials (time for teachers to develop materials) <p>2 hours per week X 36 weeks X teachers @ \$ _____ per hour.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text costs replace expenditures for English language materials in content areas. <p>\$ _____ per pupil X _____ pupils</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duplicating Costs _____ worksheets per pupil per week X 55 pupils @ \$ _____ per copy • Media center materials: Use state guidelines to determine quantity of material to be purchased. Add 20-25% to usual cost. • Listening materials: video, read-along stories. • Software • Teacher made materials (time for teachers to develop materials) <p>2 hours per week X 36 weeks X teachers @ \$ _____ per hour.</p>
Miscellaneous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program Coordinator • Field Trips • Special events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program Coordinator • Field Trips • Special events