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Exploring the Benefits of Early Foreign Language Learning:
Student Attitudes and Program Implementation

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Abstract

This paper endeavors to determine the benefits of instituting foreign language study at the elementary level in all American public schools. Throughout the article students attitudes toward foreign-language learning and items that strengthen these attitudes will be detailed. The general benefits of foreign-language learning and items that hinder these benefits are also explored. Benefits of across the board implementation and options available to help schools create or improve upon an early foreign language programs will also be explored. The results of this study would be beneficial to those educators who wish to create or adjust an existing early foreign language program to provide significant academic benefits to students in elementary schools and all public school students in grades K-12.

Introduction

In recent years it has become commonplace to encounter individuals who have spent or are spending extended periods of time abroad, particularly within the European Union. Many do so while on vacation, others while on business trips, and a number do so as part of study abroad programs through various educational institutions. Whatever the reasons behind this time abroad, one observation is increasingly reported: European children, adolescents and adults have very impressive linguistic abilities. In fact, by the time average German students complete their high school degrees they are typically proficient in three languages in addition to their native language. This fact is not due to a natural talent with languages, but instead can be attributed to the implementation of elementary foreign language programs that begin at the first grade level in German elementary schools. This approach to second language learning is embraced not just in Germany but in the majority of the nations in the European Union as well. In fact, "a recent survey by the European Union found that over half its citizens reported that they speak a second language" (Byrnes, 2007, p. 247). Where second language acquisition is concerned, the most current research on the subject highly supports the idea that, "the gap between listening comprehension and speaking skills is greater for new students than for early learners" (Dominguez, 2005, p. 477). It is this gap that is perhaps one of the most frustrating items for foreign language teachers in the field. These teachers are habitually aware of the human brain's ability to assimilate

a second language during younger ages and consider waiting until middle or high school to begin foreign language learning as a tragic waste of material. Perhaps Leonor Larew said it best when she stated that "psychologists and linguists seem to agree generally that early childhood is the time for second language learning" (Larew, 1961, p.205). Larew furthered this idea by stating that "the time to begin second language learning 'in accordance with the demands of brain physiology' is between the ages of four and ten" (Larew, 1961, p.205). An analogous example would be if an individual with an incredible ability to play tennis were to wait until the age of 40 and then attempt to win Wimbledon. This analogy, though exaggerated, is exactly what the average American student of foreign languages is forced to do. In this research venture, the implementation of elementary foreign language programs in American schools will be discussed.

The latest research concerning foreign language learning at the elementary level concerns itself not only with the acquisition of foreign languages but also with the long lasting benefits of foreign language instruction that manifest themselves in other areas of academics. In fact, some of the most prominent educational researchers of our time claim that,

"research shows that foreign language study improves cognitive abilities, positively influences achievement in other disciplines, and results in higher achievement test scores, especially when study of a second language begins in the elementary school years" (Stewart, 2005; Cumming-Potvin, Renshaw, & Van

Kraayenoord, 2003; Garcia, 2001a; Turnbull, Lapkin, & Hart, 2001; Hakuta, 1987; Weatherford, 1986; Landry, 1974).

In this research endeavor, the benefits of early foreign language learning will be discussed in great detail.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine the benefits of instituting foreign language study at the elementary level in all American public schools.

Sub-problems

1. Do elementary students have positive attitudes towards early foreign language learning? If so, what strengthens these attitudes?
2. What are the benefits of early foreign language learning? What hinders these benefits?
3. What are the benefits of across the board implementation? What are some options available to help schools create or improve upon an early foreign language program?

Need for the Study

The results of this study will be extremely beneficial to those in the field education. Its material, may help educators to create or adjust an existing early foreign language program to provide significant academic benefits not only to students in those elementary schools but rather to all public school students in grades K-12 in the country. Furthermore, the results of this study will help educators to become knowledgeable regarding students' attitudes about foreign language learning.

These attitudes have proven time and time again to be one of the most valuable resources for determining the effectiveness of elementary foreign language programs (Heining-Boynton, 2007). Furthermore, educators will be made aware of what items may strengthen or weaken these benefits. In addition to an enhanced understanding of the benefits of early FL learning, the advantages of across the board implementation of early FL programs will be discussed. In this paper, educators will also be provided with some options available to help schools create or improve upon an early foreign language program. These options will consist of various material including an Evaluation Inventory System, Curriculum Content Standards as well as perspectives regarding self-designated dual language programs.

A secondary benefit that is more geared towards current foreign language instructors and collegic foreign language majors preparing to enter the field, is the boost in demand for foreign language instructors that would surely follow the implementation of elementary foreign language programs in American public schools. This boost would be sure to create numerous foreign language teaching positions as well as foreign language curriculum development positions.

Review of the Literature

Introduction

In this section, three main issues will be addressed in order to come to a conclusion about the benefits of instituting foreign language study at the elementary level in all American public schools. To begin with, the attitudes of elementary students towards the idea of early foreign language instruction will be analyzed. The evaluation of these attitudes will serve as a key factor in determining the before mentioned benefits. In addition to this, the items that have proven time and time again to strengthen these attitudes will be detailed. Following this, the benefits of early FL study will be established as well as the aspects that may hinder such study. The third and perhaps most comprehensive issue that will be addressed in this section will be the detailing of some options available to help schools create or improve upon early foreign language programs. In addition to this, the benefits of across the board FL program implementation will be discussed.

Do elementary students have positive attitudes towards early foreign language learning?

It seems to be the consensus among current researchers in the area of student attitudes toward early foreign language learning that "the importance of attitudes in second language studies cannot be underestimated" (Heining-Boynton, 2007, p. 150). This being the case, it must be determined if students do indeed have overall positive attitudes toward early foreign language learning. One two-part study conducted in 2007 that is

particularly noteworthy was conducted by Dr. Audrey L. Heining-Boynton of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The two-part study is considered to be one of the most important of its kind because "the enormous size of the elementary school data compares with the largest educational studies conducted in other disciplines" (Heining-Boynton, 2007, p. 165). In addition to the size of the dataset the study's duration makes it particularly reliable as it was conducted over a ten year period. One section of the two-part study was conducted at an urban school district and the other at a suburban school district in order to obtain a well rounded view of students' attitudes. Another aspect of the two-part study that makes it particularly convincing is that it included a follow-up survey that questioned several of the students' opinions years later while in high school. This allowed the researchers to gain a before and after view of student attitudes over this ten year period. Now that the validity and tremendous significance of Dr. Heining-Boynton's study has been established, the importance of her study to this research project shall be detailed. Findings from Dr. Heining-Boynton's study revealed that, "the analysis from the combined 10 years of data indicates that there was indeed a positive impact attributable to FLES (foreign languages in elementary schools) instruction on a student's perception of speakers of languages other than English, foreign cultures, and how FL study impacts their education" (Heining-Boynton, 2007, p. 165). As Dr. Heining-Boynton explains, these findings matched up perfectly with earlier findings from 1962. Vollmer showed that,

"students who had received FLES instruction were almost twice as likely to persist into higher levels of FL instruction in high school as students who did not receive FLES instruction" (Heining-Boynton, 2007, p. 165; Vollmer, 1962), demonstrating that early exposure to FL learning strengthens students' positive attitudes. Both of the studies, though separated by over 40 years, solidify the idea that "we are at a point in this country where ensuring that students commit to a long sequence of language study is paramount, and beginning language study at the elementary school is one way of doing so" (Heining-Boynton, 2007, p. 165).

In continuing to decipher whether or not students have positive attitudes towards FL learning it is logical to state that "since pupils' attitudes and motivation have an important role in successful language learning" (Merisuo-Storm, 2007, p. 226), it makes sense to pinpoint what strengthens these attitudes. An article published in 2007 by Tuula Merisuo-Storm examines direct exposure to foreign languages. Specifically, that "the more a person reads literature written in this language, visits countries where it is spoken on holiday, seeks opportunities to use the language and so on, the more successful he or she will be as a learner" (Merisuo-Storm, 2007, p. 228). Dr. Merisuo-Storm's statement concerning this type of motivation speaks directly to the importance of strengthening attitudes towards FL learning through exposure to the target language. One motivational technique that is suggested by Dr. Merisuo-Storm advocates "that teachers should try to find out what the needs

of their students are and abandon the authoritarian approach of *designing the program to meet their students' needs* as they see them (Merisuo-Storm, 2007, p. 228; Rivers, 1997, p. 137). Dr. Merisuo-Storm continues this idea with, "they should consider what aspects of motivation can be changed and create successful experiences that will enhance motivation" (Merisuo-Storm, 2007, p. 228).

Another study that attempts to identify items that strengthen positive attitudes towards early foreign language learning is one that was conducted at several elementary and secondary schools in California. The 1998 study revealed that a high number of students with positive attitudes toward their foreign language classes relied upon the students' parents having positive attitudes regarding their children's early foreign language studies. This revelation proved to be a beneficial one being that "parents on the whole demonstrated positive attitudes toward their children's FL study" (Sung & Padilla, 1998, p. 215). It becomes clear that an additional strengthener of students' attitudes toward FL learning exists when it is revealed that "students may select a particular language for study because it is their ancestral language" (Sung & Padilla, 1998, p. 215). Aside from familial reasons for wanting to study a foreign language personal reasons have proven to be significant (Sung & Padilla, 1998). An example of such reasons could be a strong desire or interest in someday visiting, or even living in, another country. No matter what the reasons for increased positive attitudes towards foreign language study may

be, it becomes clear that as educators "we must orient our language instruction toward students' personal reasons for learning these languages" (Sung & Padilla, 1998, 215-216; Brecht & Walton, 1993).

What are the benefits of early foreign language learning?

In determining the benefits of instituting foreign language instruction at the elementary level in American public schools, it is logical to detail some of the pre-existing programs that have been successful in promoting achievement in both the areas of foreign language and other subject areas. A study completed in the Winter of 2005 attempted to identify the lasting benefits of early FL learning on future FL learning. When comparing the oral comprehension abilities of students who begin FL learning (namely Spanish) in elementary school to those who begin in secondary school it was discovered that,

"the early learners comprehend key words and phrases better than the new students. Data from students' self reports also indicated that new students feel less confident of their Spanish comprehension skills than early learners. These results all support the conclusion that the early learners outperformed the new learners in listening comprehension" (Dominguez & Pessoa, 2005, p. 477).

In addition to outperforming new learners in oral comprehension, "early learners outperformed new students in their speaking skills in Spanish" as well (Dominguez & Pessoa, 2005, p. 477). After comparing the early and new students of Spanish in the

suburban public school district in Pennsylvania, the researchers attempted to gauge each students overall language growth over the academic year. This attempt revealed that "early learners showed more language growth over the school year than new students" (Dominguez & Pessoa, 2005, p. 477). When identifying the lasting benefits of early FL learning on an individual's future FL learning it is also necessary to explore students' literacy skills in the target language; Dr. Domingez and Pessoa's study also explored this aspect. When asked about the level of confidence shown on behalf of the students in FL classes the teachers pointed out "that early learners are more confident about their reading skills than new students" (Dominguez & Pessoa, 2005, p. 478). This idea was furthered by the fact that "the students' *self-reports* indicate that early learners feel more confident about their reading skills than new learners" (Dominguez & Pessoa, 2005, p. 478). Another aspect of student literacy is student confidence concerning literacy. According to the study's results, "students who have been learning Spanish since kindergarten are more confident about their Spanish literacy skills, especially when it comes to producing a text without a model" (Dominguez & Pessoa, 2005, p. 478).

In addition to determining the lasting benefits of early FL learning on an individual's future FL learning, it is significant to uncover the non-FL subject areas that are also enhanced due to early FL instruction. A study conducted in August of 2005, by Hostler Stewart succeeded in proving not only

that foreign language study is linked to higher achievement in other core subject areas, but also that FL study is correlated with higher achievement test scores. The former will first be examined. The first item that is detailed in Hostler Stewart's study is that "children who study a foreign language tend to develop new perspectives and depth of understanding about the vocabulary and structure of their first language" (Holster Stewart, 2005, p. 14). This particular phenomenon is one that the researcher has encountered personally while taking on the mastery of a FL2 (first foreign language; German) and FL3 (second foreign language; Spanish). One particular observation that can be offered is that during the period in which grammar and verb conjugations were the primary topic, these areas strengthened understanding in the FL1 (native language; English). One explanation for this strengthening of the FL1 that the researcher experienced can be attributed to the academically supported idea that "when learning to put together words and structures to make sense in a second language, students are forced to think about why certain structures work well and they tend to make comparisons to their native language" (Hostler Stewart, 2005, p. 14). In addition to the increased understudying of one's own language, "students of foreign languages also develop an understanding of geographical and cultural perspectives that enhances learning in other classes such as social studies, science, art and music" (Hostler Stewart, 2005, p.14; Roberts, 2002). Stewart's study also made reference to the fact that strong connections have been shown to

exist between FL learning and improvement in core subjects such as English, mathematics, science as well as social studies (Hostler Stewart, 2005; Marcos, 2001b; Weatherford, 1986). As noted earlier, Hostler Stewart's study succeeded in proving that FL study is correlated with higher achievement test scores. The supporting research in Holster Stewart's study reflects the idea that "if studying a foreign language results in higher achievement in other academic areas, it is logical that higher scores on standardized tests would occur" (Hostler Stewart, 2005, p. 15; Marcos, 2001b).

Some tangible evidence that FL study results in higher achievement levels was found by a 2001 study of a Kansas school. In the study it was revealed that "nearly all the students in the school showed gains in their achievement test scores and surpassed students in comparative school settings where a second language was not studied" (Hostler Stewart, 2005, p. 15; Garcia, 2001). Ultimately, Hostler Stewart's study indicates that "children who begin the study of a FLES develop more native-like use of the language and tend to transfer skills learned to reading, math, and other academic areas" (Holster Stewart, 2005, p.15). The study also indicates that, "foreign language study in combination with a strong core curriculum in the elementary school may be the key to improved achievement in reading and math as well as preparing our children to be successful participants in the global community (Holster Stewart, 2005, p.15). An earlier study by researchers in California came to similar conclusions concerning achievement benefits. It is

explained that,

"in regard to the role of foreign language education as it relates to closing the achievement gap between high-performing and low performing students, Met (1991, 1998) found that foreign language learning fosters students' critical thinking, supports their cognitive development, and if they are ELLs (English language learners) it also improves native language, reading, and writing" (Sung & Padilla, 1998).

The findings of the California study are particularly significant because FL programs are being eliminated in many school districts where resources are limited and the focus is put on math and reading. Though such schools see FL learning as expendable, in reality FL learning programs may very well be an essential tool to increasing overall achievement.

Though the primary focus of this research endeavor surrounds the positive benefits of early FL learning, it is also important to detail some hindrances to effective FL learning that occur in many districts. To begin with, a project run in a Kansas school district that was designed to measure the effect of FLL (foreign language learning) programs on student academic achievements in English, revealed a fatal flaw that should be avoided in all FL programs. The researcher explained that "since the amount of time per week was just one hour, the findings might be criticized on the grounds that the stimulus was too weak" (Schuster, 2005, p.350). The researcher also added criticism that "the lack of differences in measured achievement

might be produced by greater time wasting in the no-FLES schools" (Schuster, 2005, p. 350).

What are the benefits of across the board implementation?

Though there are various school districts that have created or adopted early FL programs, an across the board implementation of FL programs in all American schools has yet to occur.

Following this, it is worth while to investigate the benefits of across the board implementation of FL programs as well as some options available to help schools improve those programs.

According to Jensen (2007), one benefit of taking an across the board approach to early FL program implementation is that "a national policy will cause state policymakers to focus on second language learning for the long term instead of engaging in sporadic short-term efforts as seen now and in the past" (Jensen, 2007, p. 263).

In determining what methods are best able to help schools create or improve upon their FLL programs it is helpful to examine currently existing programs in hopes that the same methods can be applied to other FL program. Since 1995 Donato and Tucker "have been involved closely with the Charles Valley School District as it has developed, implemented, and monitored a comprehensive, innovative foreign language program that has been recognized domestically and worldwide" (Donato & Tucker, 2007, p. 256). During their time with at the Pennsylvania school district they were able to classify four main actions that the district in question utilized to successfully install their FL program (Donato & Tucker, 2007). The actions identified by

Donato and Tucker are as follows:

1. Centralize Foreign Language Programs
2. Insist on High Quality Teachers
3. Enlist Community Involvement in K-12 Education
4. Assess Program Implementation and Impact Continually and Longitudinally

When describing the first action in greater detail, the researchers explained that "the success of the program can be traced to the efforts made by the district to integrate and centralize foreign language instruction directly into the life of the school and to make language study part of the regular curriculum required for all students" (Donato & Tucker, 2007, p. 257). The second action states that in order to successfully install a FL program educators should "provide clear guidelines for the certification of foreign language teachers" (Donato & Tucker, 2007, p. 257). The guiding principles that the authors offer belong to the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), established in 2002. Action three was included into the listed actions because the researchers encountered "strong community involvement and support during program development, implementation, and monitoring (Donato & Tucker, 2007, p. 257). Furthermore, the authors explain that their former research enterprises have taught them how important longitudinal research can be. In turn their study, "established the advantage of an early start for students as compared with other students who begin language study in the middle years of the elementary school" (Donato & Tucker, 2007, p. 257; Dominguez

& Pessoa, 2005).

In 2005, the state of New Jersey took the initiative to raise standards regarding the instruction of foreign languages throughout the entire region. The creation of what is referred to as "the *New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for World Languages* (1996) placed two major demands on school districts and language educators" (Jensen, 2007, p. 261). According to the before mentioned Jensen (2007), the two primary requirements that this initiative set forth were as follows:

1. To devote sufficient instructional time and to create longer sequences of well-articulated language study (a quantitative change)
2. To change the instructional paradigm from a linear, grammatical approach to one that focuses on the development of communicative competence (a qualitative change)

In addition to these two initiatives, research concerning the *New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for World Languages* revealed that "three critical elements are needed to enable the systematic implementation of world language programs: policy, accountability, and professional development" (Jensen, 2007, p. 263).

A 1990 project headed up by Heining-Boynton took on the task of creating what is called a FLES Program Evaluation Inventory. The main goal of this item is to make available a means of assessing currently existing and newly created FL programs. When discussing the establishment of FL programs in

districts that traditionally did not offer FL instruction Dr. Heining-Boynton explained that, "not all school districts are able to employ a FLES or FL coordinator who is both trained and has the time to develop a program evaluation instrument" (Heining-Boynton, 1990, p. 432). Furthermore, when referring to the creation of the FLES tool for multipurpose data recording Dr. Heining-Boynton explains that "a standardized format would assist in reporting, analyzing, and comparing conditions that exist nationally" (Heining-Boynton, 1990, p. 432). Another positive aspect of such a FLES Program Evaluation Inventory is that all individuals within a school district would be able to judge their own program's quality. These individuals would include any administrator, teacher, parent and even students within the programs themselves (Heining-Boynton, 1990). Another aspect that Dr. Heining-Boynton's study identifies is the importance of documentation in the field of education and that the FLES Program Evaluation Inventory may serve as such documentation. She states that "evaluative program data can provide the proof some FLES coordinators need to ensure the continuation and growth of their programs" (Heining-Boynton, 1990, p. 438).

Another noteworthy item available to help schools improve their current FL programs is not an Evaluation Inventory, Curriculum Content Standard or a currently existing early FL program, but is rather a perspective regarding self-designated Dual-Language programs. It is explained that a dual-language program is a program that relies on "two languages for

instruction with explicit goals of full conversational and academic proficiencies in the two languages" (Torres-Guzmán, Morales-Rodríguez & Han, 2005, p. 454). In the research effort by Torres-Guzmán it is proclaimed that clear distinctions must be made between the before mentioned dual-language programs and self-proclaimed dual-language programs that have shown themselves over time. During a study conducted by Dr. Torres-Guzmán, the researchers noted:

"What we have found from teachers' labeling is that many programs within the district we studied were, as we suspected, second-language enrichment programs borrowing the label of dual language. This finding suggests that teachers, as representatives of one of the groups involved directly and indirectly in decisions about children, believe that what they do *is* dual language" (Torres-Guzmán, Morales-Rodríguez & Han, 2005, p. 470)

The researchers reinforced this idea by explaining that "teachers did not know the basic tenets of dual-language programming and are participating in decisions or allowing decisions to be made in ignorance of what they ought to be doing" (Torres-Guzmán, Morales-Rodríguez & Han, 2005, p. 471). The critical message given by Dr. Torres-Guzmán's study is that educators will benefit from maintaining clearly defined lines between dual-language and non dual-language programs. By doing so, educators may ensure that the quality of their program meets the needed standards.

Summary and Conclusions

Summary

In attempting to determine the benefits of instituting foreign language study at the elementary levels in all American public schools, it was necessary to examine three intimately related issues. First, the question of if elementary students have positive attitudes towards FLL, as well as what might strengthen these attitudes, was inspected. Second, the benefits of early FLL and the hindrances of these benefits were scrutinized. Thirdly, the benefits of across the board integration as well as some of the options available to help schools create or improve upon their FL programs were also examined.

Conclusions

After reviewing the necessary data all of the researcher's initial hypotheses were confirmed. Ultimately, it was determined that students do indeed have overall positive attitudes towards early FLL. In addition to this, it was revealed that early exposure to FLL harbors increased positive attitudes on behalf of those students that continue their FL learning. It was also determined that exposure to the target language, positive parental attitudes regarding a child's early FL studies and the significance of a student's personal reasons for taking a FL were the key items that strengthened students' positive attitudes toward early FL learning.

It was determined that the primary benefits of early FL learning included significantly enhanced language growth on

behalf of those students who began FL learning at an earlier age compared to those who did not. Another key benefit that was uncovered was that that foreign language study is most definitely linked to higher achievement in other core subject areas such as mathematics, science, social studies, art and music. Furthermore, it became clear that FL study assisted in the widening of students' perspectives as well as student understanding about the vocabulary and structure of their first language, which was English. One of the most compelling findings supported by two particularly strong studies was that almost all students who were apart of early FL programs showed significant improvement on achievement tests. Following this, it became apparent that though many schools with low budgets and demanding standardized test achievement goals see FL learning as expendable, in reality such FL programs may very well be an essential tool to increasing overall achievement.

It was also determined that the main benefit of across the board implementation of early FL learning programs was that "a national policy will cause state policymakers to focus on second language learning for the long term instead of engaging in sporadic short-term efforts as seen now and in the past" (Jensen, 2007, p. 263).

The implications of this study are extremely significant to field of education. The findings clearly indicate that students are capable of and ready for early FL learning. Furthermore, findings also indicate that there are abundant options available to assist schools in the implementation of such early FL

learning programs. Considering the supporting research, it is recommended that future researchers plan out more in-depth programs to successfully institute FL learning programs at the elementary level.

It is noteworthy that Dunkel of the University of Chicago, who published an article concerning the need for increased FL programs 50 years ago, reflected on a situation that still exists today. He noted that though "many elementary schools have recently made instruction in modern foreign languages a regular part of the curriculum" (Dunkel, 1958, p. 31) such instruction in foreign languages is generally the exception rather than the norm. In turn, when educators do decide to install a FL program in their school or district they must come to grips with the idea that "facts that are well known to language specialists are less familiar to the group now charged with putting many elementary-school programs into effect" (Dunkel, 1958, p. 31). For this reason, it is the hope of this research venture that all educators who may be considering the implementation or improvement of a FL program in their district will make use of the diverse material presented.

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