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An Analysis of United States Foreign Language Programs

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Abstract

This paper evaluates research to determine possible benefits and problems with early childhood foreign language education. It examines multiple studies conducted by different researchers in different settings to determine the key components of these programs and the expected outcomes. Using a poll as an instrument to measure, district opinions in foreign language programs are assessed; recommendations to slowly move towards early-start programs are suggested.
In an increasingly global world, language barriers are a greater issue now than they were in the past. People from the other side of the planet are at the fingertips of anyone with internet access, companies are stationed in countries all over the globe, and business and political networks span the earth. With such frequent interaction among populations, being able to communicate, typically via a spoken or written language, is critical. Knowing other languages, then, is the logical solution. Foreign powers that we frequently interact with, such as Spain, Germany teach foreign languages in their schools from an early age and most adult citizens have at least an intermediate proficiency in at least one language besides their native one (Eurostat, 2017). A chart from the European Union marks an impressive 59% of citizens learning two or more languages in upper secondary education (Eurostat, 2017), while about 20% of United States adults are proficient in just a second language (Commission on Language Learning, 2017). Should the United States consider reshaping our foreign language education programs?

Two common goals exist in any foreign language program – a functional proficiency in the language, and cultural knowledge of the speaking countries. Students and parents enroll in a language course to learn how to speak, write, and understand it on some level. The motives can vary from a social/intrinsic interest, a school requirement, or a desire to be competitive in the work force. This concept is important and you introduce it later – so be clear, and cite the source for this idea, too. Most of these programs in the United States begin in middle, or even high school and sometimes are carried through college. Only about 25% of elementary schools offer any sort of foreign language education (Pufahl, Rhodes, 2011).
Nikolov & Djigunović (2006) addressed a commonly accepted principle of foreign language acquisition; while language is acquired slower in younger ages, proficiency is stronger in the long run – an idea known as the Critical Period Hypothesis, or CPH. They analyze the CPH and its true relevance. In studies of students learning a second language at varying ages and stages, they were able to disprove the notion that adults cannot become proficient in a second language learned in adulthood. This idea, somewhat diminishing the importance of starting a language early. If adults can still learn a new language, what is the benefit to starting younger?

Nikolov & Djigunović (2006) acknowledged that young students can still achieve more natural proficiency - granted their early programs are effective. However, the greatest impact to starting a second language before middle schools comes not from the level of language development, but in student attitudes and motivations. Children who are exposed to other languages, and thus other cultures, create a wider view of the world and are more likely to pursue foreign language acquisition from an intrinsic motive, which will increase their chances of success.

Given the current state of education, many districts struggle to find funding for all they want to accomplish. With limited funding, many schools don’t even have the necessary supplies to run an effective classroom. They lack technology, and they pay their teachers inadequate wages. Thus, money is a prohibiting factor in providing early foreign language programs in some districts. While this is not a universal issue, as some districts do not struggle to find funds, it is a concern for many districts looking to develop stronger foreign language programs.

Another problem districts run into when considering elementary foreign language, is what to teach. In high school, students can choose a language as their schedule provides – though
smaller districts may only have one or two languages to choose from. In elementary school, students are taught generally in the same classroom all day. They must all, then, receive instruction in the same foreign language. With so many to choose from, how do you decide for them? A common choice is Spanish, as the population of native Spanish speakers in the United States grows each year (United States Census, 2016). A district could argue that Mandarin is the most relevant for future business, or that German opens doors for engineering, or whatever makes the most sense to them. No matter what the ultimate selection ends up being, they all run into crossover problems come high school (Curtain, Dahlberg, Pesola, 2000). If all the elementary school began learning Spanish and setting the foundation for long-term Spanish knowledge and success, not every student will choose to continue learning Spanish, and may choose instead to begin a different language. Some could argue that for this student, the years learning Spanish were wasted as they are not yet proficient and have chosen to stop. Another could argue though that while they will not attain fluency in Spanish without further instruction, they still spent years building some vocabulary and use, still developed cognitive skills, and still learned about another culture and broadened their level of awareness.

Arguably a second major issue in early-start programs is finding the time. Ask any teacher about their classroom and they will tell you there just aren’t enough hours in the day for everything they would like to do. This is intensified by the range of assessments students are required to pass. In Ohio we have MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) testing three time a year, and the AIR test (American Institute for Research assessments) in math and reading as well as the high stakes Third Grade Reading Guarantee which students must pass in order to continue on to fourth grade reading. With so much weight on these two subject areas and with many standards to meet, it can be challenging just to reach these expectations. It seems nearly
impossible to throw in an entirely new subject and do so effectively. Even among currently
standing early-start programs, effectiveness of learning is often a problem (Björklund, Mård-
Miettinen & Savijärvi, 2014). Young students require different teaching strategies to acquire a
second language than older students. The teachers teaching them require training in order to
provide effective instruction that benefits students.

What does an effective program look like? Highly trained teachers who are native or near
native speakers of the language they are teaching, and value and regular use of the language in
the classroom and school community fragment. In Finland, foreign language is held at the same
value as the math and reading curriculum (Björklund, Mård-Miettinen & Savijärvi, 2014). The
language should be taught through meaningful activities, such as Second, allowing young
students to use and develop the memory via xxx, and authentic practice as they would their
native language (role play, dialogues, etc). Deriving the rules of the new language through
memorization and drills is ineffective (Björklund, Mård-Miettinen & Savijärvi, 2014). Young
learners need more time to process linguistic information and require much repetition and
practice. Over time, as children continue receiving effective instruction, their linguistic
understanding will be deeper than someone who started later in their life (Nikolov & Djigunović,
2006).

In order to gain insight into the attitudes and opinions of school districts about foreign
language learning, the following questions were sent as a survey.

1. What foreign languages are taught in your district? If none, why not?
2. How many years or levels of each language are offered? (for example, year 1, level 1,
   beginner, intermediate, advanced, AP, etc.)
3. What grades (i.e. freshman, 7th grade, 10th grade, etc.) offer foreign language classes?
4. Are students required to take a foreign language? If so, for how many years?

5. Do you consider foreign language an important part of the academic curriculum? Why or why not?

6. Do you perceive learning a foreign language to be beneficial for students? Why or why not?

7. Do you consider your programs effective? Do students leave with some level of proficiency?

8. Would you change anything about your programs? (i.e. starting earlier, adding new languages, removing some current languages, requiring a different number of years for students, etc.)

9. Does your district offer any external foreign language activities (such as a club or similar)?

10. Would you consider offering foreign language study in earlier grades, such as in elementary school? Why or why not?

11. Do you have any additional comments or questions to be considered?

Thirty school districts of varying location, size, socioeconomic status, and private or public were sent the voluntary survey. Unfortunately, only 3 of the districts returned their responses, but they all said roughly the same thing. They offer European languages, such as German, Spanish, and French, for high school students as a full-time class. One district has an exploratory program for middle schoolers to dip their feet in, but don’t have the time to commit to an entire year of the language. The other schools simply begin in ninth grade with no other exposure beforehand. Each district expressed that they feel foreign language learning is an important part of the curriculum so that their students build positive attitudes towards other cultures, and make themselves more marketable in the global job market. They shared that they would like to offer more languages, but the capacity of their district does not allow for more. They also all said they would be interested in starting sooner than ninth grade, even as early as elementary school, but having to meet so many requirements in math and reading with such high stakes assessments and
measurements does not leave time for anything else. Overall, they all view foreign language as an important part of their curriculum, but cannot change anything given the current education model imposed upon them.

Should we look to offer foreign language learning in elementary schools? This is a complicated question, even more so than I initially had thought. While learning a second language is an important skill, both to communicate and to develop greater global awareness, and young students often meet these goals better, the answer is not so simple. With so many requirements placed on elementary schools in math and reading, it would be incredibly difficult to work a truly effective early start program in. Given that crossover of an early language to high school rarely happens smoothly, this too proves problematic. For most districts, offering an early start to foreign language study would require an upheaval of the current education model, not only on their part, but also in changing state or national requirements in order to maintain and meet the standards. Given the romantic status of our current languages, perhaps a better first step for most schools would be to offer a wider variety of languages in high school. Schools should introduce Asiatic languages such as Mandarin, the largest spoken native language in the world, or Arabic. American Sign Language is a “foreign language” that would find benefit closer to home and perhaps offer a greater relevance to students and strengthen communities. Taking small steps and offering classes at the middle school level are a better next step as well. Given the benefits of early instruction, I believe that we should start slowly moving towards early-start programs being the norm. This will require a wide change in policy and measurement of standards and designing curriculums that not only meet math and reading goals, but also strongly address social studies, science, and foreign languages.
References


(1) 2008 instead of 2010.
(2) 2010: not available.
(3) 2016 instead of 2015.
(4) 2014 instead of 2015.
(5) 2015: definition differs.

Source: Eurostat (online data codes: educ_thrilan and educ_uoe_lang02), Unesco Institute for Statistics (UIS) and OECD