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The Benefits of Teaching a Foreign Language to Students in the Primary Grades

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The Benefits of Teaching a Foreign Language to Students in the Primary Grades

Honors Thesis by Suzanne Wetzel
Elementary Education
College of St. Benedict
April 18, 2000

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Project Title:

The Benefits of Teaching a Foreign Language (Spanish) to Children in the Primary Grades

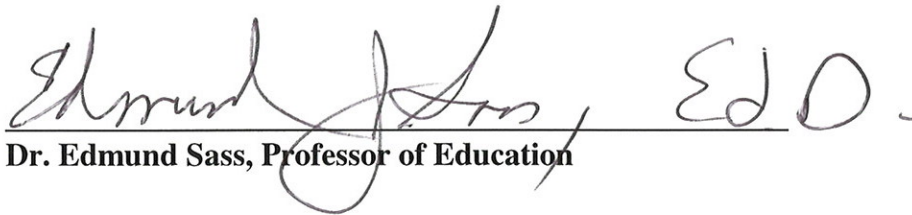
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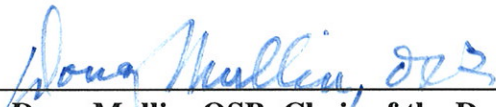
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Table of Contents

Section	Page
Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Personal Reasons for Studying Spanish Acquisition.....	5
Reasons for Learning a Foreign Language.....	8
Primary Grades are the Best Time to Teach Foreign Languages.....	12
Methods of Foreign Language Instruction.....	19
An Effective Foreign Language Curriculum in the Primary Grades.....	27
Conclusion.....	31
Works Cited.....	33
Quality Children's Books.....	35
Quality Websites.....	36
For More Information.....	38

Abstract

Research in the field of second language acquisition has existed for decades, proclaiming that children who are pre-pubescent are at the optimum age to start learning a new language. Why, then, do most American educational systems insist on delaying second language acquisition until high school? Why is there such a big gap between the research and the common practices in the American educational system? The answer to these questions stem from both a lack of resources and a lack of knowledge on how students learn a target language best. Research on second language acquisition still remains a little known body of information, an area that is often forgotten when school districts are planning their curricula. Most school districts lack the resources, both financially and faculty-wise, to implement widespread foreign language classes. Currently, there is a shortage of qualified people to teach world languages in the classroom. This paper discusses why it is vitally important for school districts to change their policies and to commit to second language instruction, especially in the primary grades.

Introduction

Research has existed for several decades acclaiming the benefits of teaching foreign languages to students in the elementary classroom. Yet, unlike European cultures, the American culture has been slow to embrace the importance of teaching foreign languages to our youngsters. Although many reasons are cited for the need for foreign language instruction in American schools, the primary reason is the need to be able to communicate with people from different countries for both economic and national security reasons: "...there is an urgent national need for citizens who can communicate in more than one language" (MacRae 1). Not only do I believe that the American educational system must be committed to teaching all students a second language, I believe this instruction needs to begin in the primary grades.

The following statement was written by Mary Finocchiaro, a teacher of foreign languages and the author of *Teaching Children Foreign Languages*. It provides a general outline for why students must be given the opportunity to learn a foreign language in the primary grades.

Childhood is the ideal period for acquiring a native or near-native pronunciation. Medical evidence, experimentation, and objective observation have proven conclusively that children learn foreign languages more quickly and more accurately (at least as far as pronunciation is concerned) than adolescents or adults because of the flexibility of their speech organs, their lack of inhibitions that are typical of older persons learning a language, and their apparent physiological and psychological need to communicate with other children. To children a new way of expressing themselves, particularly if it is associated with normal class activity, presents no problem. Children make no attempt to analyze a language as adolescents or adults do. They do not immediately compare what they hear or say in the new language to English. They do not look for difficulties.

I agree wholeheartedly with Mary Finocchiaro's beliefs on second language acquisition,

and I believe that students are actually receiving a disservice if they are denied the opportunity to study a foreign language. The research in the field of second language acquisition has existed for decades, proclaiming that children who are pre-pubescent are at the optimum age to start learning a new language. Why, then, do most American educational systems insist on delaying second language acquisition until high school? Why is there such a big gap between the research and the common practices in the American educational system? The answer to these questions stem from both a lack of resources and a lack of knowledge on how students learn a target language best. Research on second language acquisition still remains a little known body of information, an area that is often forgotten when school districts are planning their curricula. Most school districts lack the resources, both financially and faculty-wise, to implement widespread foreign language classes. Currently, there is a shortage of qualified people to teach world languages in the classroom. This paper discusses why it is vitally important for school districts to change their policies and to commit to second language instruction, especially in the primary grades.

This thesis is divided into five sections, each addressing different aspects of foreign language instruction. In order to fully understand why it is important for students to start learning a second language in the primary grades, one must discern why it is beneficial for people of any age to learn a second language, why it is especially important for students in the primary grades to study a foreign language and why they learn foreign languages with more ease. Finally, it is essential for world language teachers to know about different methods of foreign language acquisition and their productiveness and effective practices used in a foreign language curriculum.

Personal Reasons for Studying Spanish Acquisition

I have been studying Spanish for eight years, struggling to learn how to write and speak and hoping that someday I will be a fluent Spanish speaker. When I was a senior in high school, I read an article in *Newsweek* entitled “Your Child’s Brain.” One line from the article stands out to this day: “A child taught a second language after the age of 10 or so is unlikely ever to speak it like a native” (Begley 54). I wondered why I started learning Spanish relatively late (at the age of fourteen) and why more schools do not offer Spanish at an earlier age. After reading “Your Child’s Brain,” I had an interest in studying the best ways to teach children foreign languages, and that has brought me to this juncture, writing my honors thesis.

Because my major is elementary education and my minor is Spanish, I chose to concentrate on children learning Spanish, as opposed to other languages such as French or Japanese. Minnesota’s Profile of Learning mandates teaching a foreign language beginning in kindergarten. This is a very effective teaching practice because, developmentally, children learn foreign languages much more easily in the primary grades than waiting until middle school or high school as most schools do nowadays. Also, students who start learning a foreign language in the primary grades will have many years of formal instruction ahead of them in which to acquire the second language. My experience, however, is that most schools in Minnesota have not yet implemented a program to teach world languages in the elementary classroom.

I have had two distinct teaching experiences this year that have strengthened for me the belief that students should learn a second language in the primary grades. The first experience took place during January Term when I was an educational assistant in two elementary classrooms at the Adams Spanish Immersion School in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I was an assistant in a kindergarten classroom in which the majority of students spoke Spanish as their second

language. Most of them had little or no exposure to Spanish before starting kindergarten, and yet their teacher only spoke Spanish to them. She did not resort to English when students did not understand something, but instead rephrases the concept in Spanish. The students, by January, had adjusted very well to their environment. They were not understanding every word spoken by the teacher, but yet knew what she meant when she spoke. The students did not speak Spanish except for isolated words, but they understood when Spanish was spoken to them. I also assisted in a fourth-grade classroom. These students spoke Spanish phenomenally well, better than I could speak Spanish, and I had been studying it for twice as long as they had. They spoke, understood, and wrote in Spanish with ease. Their grammar and spelling were not perfect in their written work, but they could understand and speak Spanish with relative ease. The students at Adams Immersion School were interested in Spanish and motivated to learn more Spanish in order to communicate with their teacher and their friends. They did not see Spanish as a separate subject, but as the language in which all of their classes were taught. They did not get frustrated when they did not understand something, but found ways to interpret what was being spoken.

The second experience I had was student teaching Spanish in grades eight through eleven at Cathedral/John XXIII in Saint Cloud, Minnesota. The majority of these students did not enjoy taking Spanish, but instead were studying Spanish to fulfill their foreign language requirement. They were frustrated on a daily basis because they did not understand the conventions of Spanish. They were very hesitant to speak Spanish for fear of embarrassing themselves. Those students who enjoyed studying Spanish were shy and quiet because of the other students' attitudes. They wanted Spanish to "make sense" just like English "makes sense." If speaking Spanish cannot be reduced to a formula or direct translation into English, they were hesitant to

learn it. I often heard them refer to the Spanish language and culture as “stupid” or “dumb.” Never did I hear these words come from the mouth of students at Adams Spanish Immersion School. The approaches to teaching Spanish were like night and day, very contextual to very grammatically structured and dry. These experiences reinforced for me the need to study foreign language acquisition and to implement programs into all school districts where students are enthusiastic and positive about learning a second language. The simplest way to do that is to start the students learning a second language in the primary grades.

Reasons for Learning a Foreign Language

Before delving into the topic of why it is specifically important for students to start learning a foreign language in the primary grades, it is important to determine why it is important for persons of any age to learn a foreign language. In other countries, especially European countries, learning a second language, or multiple languages, is a part of life. Yet, in the United States, we have not fully embraced this concept: "American language ineptitude continues to be a rich source of international humor" (Grittner 79). There are as many reasons stated for learning a foreign language as there are languages, varying from national security to exercising the brain to obtaining a better job. In fact, some research suggests that learning a second language makes children more creative at solving problems (Marcos, [KidSource Online](#)).

The benefits of learning a second language go beyond just becoming literate in a new language, but can actually help students to succeed in other subjects. One common reason given for studying foreign languages is that students who study foreign languages frequently score higher on standardized tests in English. In fact, the College Entrance Examination Board reported in 1992 that students who have studied a foreign language for more than four years scored higher on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (S.A.T.) than students who had not studied a foreign language (Marcos, [KidSource Online](#)). Actually, the benefits of learning a foreign language go beyond academic subjects and into interpersonal communication skills and real world survival skills.

A most valid reason for students to study a foreign language is to help students learn to empathize and communicate with people from other countries. It also makes travel easier and encourages students to aim for visiting countries other than the United States. There is not a

need, however, to travel outside of the United States to speak a foreign language. In the United States alone, there are opportunities to use a second language in church, the workplace, and at school. Of course, this often depends on which area of the United States one lives in. If one lives in Texas, one is more likely to use their Spanish-speaking abilities than if one lives in North Dakota (except for migrant workers during the harvesting season). A prime location to use a foreign language is in the American educational system, where there is a large emphasis placed on multicultural education and not only teaching academics, but also teaching values such as empathy, open communication, and concern for others. I believe that teaching children foreign languages is the best way to teach these values: "The American will never really penetrate the thinking of people in a new country [culture] until he [she] has first penetrated the language in which carries, reflects, and molds the thought and ideas of people" (Grittner 24). By learning a foreign language, children will indirectly learn the values that multicultural education tries to teach and will be able to communicate with other students who are just learning English.

Learning a foreign language is much more than just learning and memorizing vocabulary words; it is learning the values and cultural norms of another country. It is understanding why grammatical structures are different than in English and how this reflects their cultural values. It is recognizing that vocabulary words and phrases represents elements that are important to people who speak that language. By committing to learn another language, we are committing to also learning about their culture. By learning another language, we are learning about the values of the culture just by learning the different vocabulary words and grammatical structures. Our society is becoming increasingly global, and it is important for us not only to be able to communicate with others, but to understand them and their culture.

Besides the fact that learning a second language makes travel easier, can get a person a better job, and can help people communicate with immigrants around them, an argument can be made for learning a second language for opening one's mind to areas other than the traditionally academic areas such as math and science. Many students who find math and science difficult can successfully learn the linguistics of another language and feel pride in being able to communicate with others in a different language. I believe that as teachers we must provide students with opportunities to succeed. I am not arguing that every student needs to become fluent in a second language, but I am arguing that every student has the right to learn and communicate in a foreign language: "Learning a foreign language is an educational experience. By acquiring even a limited skill, which may or may not be retained, the individual finds himself personally breaking the barriers of a single speech and a single culture—experiencing another culture at first-hand in the symbols through which it expresses its realities" (Grittner 28).

Some parents might worry that their child's learning of a second language will take away from their ability to learn English or will take time away from other valuable subjects that the students should be learning. In most cases, however, learning another language enhances the child's ability to learn English as well. Children can learn much about the grammatical structures and vocabulary of English by learning another foreign language. They will be able to find similarities and differences between English and the other language (Marcos, *Why, how, and when should my child learn a second language?*). Studying a second language helps students to also improve their English-speaking abilities because it helps them to focus on common conventions present in every language.

Foreign language instruction can expand the mind of a person in any age group, and learning Spanish in high school is much better than not learning it at all. Although I did not start learning Spanish until I was in the ninth grade, I have managed to learn the language well enough to function in Spain for four months. There are benefits of learning foreign language that expand to other academic subjects and even to areas beyond academics, such as reinforcing values and understanding people from a variety of cultures. I applaud schools for offering students the opportunity to learn a second language, even if it is only in high school or in grade school for thirty minutes a week. I do believe, though, that school districts need to do more to foster not only a knowledge, but an appreciation, for other languages and cultures.

In summary, the American educational system is making a big mistake by funding high school world language programs rather than funding elementary world language programs. My belief is that elementary world language programs should be mandatory and high school world language programs should be optional for those students who choose to study the language further. Those students who choose not to study the language further will still have a working knowledge of the language and an appreciation for both the language and the culture.

The next section of this thesis consists of research explaining why elementary students are motivated to learn a second language and why they learn it with much more ease than older students. This research supports the long-held belief that the primary grades is the best time to start second language instruction.

Primary Grades are the Best Time to Teach Foreign Languages

Research in the field of second language acquisition suggests that students who start learning a foreign language at an early age are more successful than students who start at the high school level: “The young student’s interest in the spoken language is so keen that the only stimulation needed is the opportunity to hear and imitate the new sounds. His ability to imitate is at its peak before he is ten” (MacRae 1). When students learn a foreign language before the age of ten, they are able to “shift” between their first language and a second language because their language patterns are not set. In essence, they do not feel the need to translate, but are able to “switch gears” between both languages (MacRae 11). This is only one of the endless reasons why students should start learning a second language beginning in the first grade, and how they learn the second language in a different way than high school students.

Some statistics even state that there is a “window of opportunity” for second language learning starting at one year of age (Marcos, *Learning a Second Language* 32). Some people would even argue that these students are not second languages learners, but are actually picking up a “second first language” or becoming bilingual. I am not stating that students should start second language instruction as early as one-year-old, but I am stating that the sooner students start learning a second language, the more easily they are able to speak it. It becomes a part of their natural speaking patterns without having to think about it. This is a difference between primary students and high school students, where students must learn speaking patterns that are out of the ordinary for them.

Students also have a much more positive attitude at a younger age, which helps them to succeed in learning a second language. Often when high school and college students start

learning a second language, they are easily frustrated because the second language conflicts with their language patterns which are set before the age of ten. In addition, statistics have shown that the chances of learning a foreign language fluently at an older age are next to none: "Americans who become fluent in a second language later in life are so few that statisticians might say that their number is less than what pure probability would predict; certainly it's less than 1 in 100, and probably it's less than 1 in 1,000" (Rosanova 38). Why then, do school districts still insist on starting foreign language instruction, at least at a consistent level, in high school? If the answer is because of financial reasons, they should move funds spent on foreign language instruction in high school to foreign language instruction in elementary school. It would be a much better investment for school districts because students would have higher rate of retention and also be able to study the language more in depth the more years they study it.

It takes a considerable amount of time to learn to speak and think in a second language: "an average of six to eight years is required to compete academically in a second language" (Bernhardt 97). It is a simple question of time—when students start learning Spanish at an earlier age, there is more time for them to learn Spanish formally and to become more fluent before graduating from high school. Learning a second language is a process that can never really be completed; it is extremely rare for a person to learn to speak a second language with the aptitude that one can speak the first language. It is, however, more common for a student to speak more fluently the younger they start, and the language can actually become like their native tongue.

The statistics about students learning languages more effectively when they are young does not just apply to English-speaking students, but rather of all students who are learning a second language. In a study of Spanish-speaking students from Cuba who emigrated to the

United States, it was concluded that the younger the students were when they emigrated, the more native-like the students' pronunciation was judged to be (Arnberg 81). The reason for this is the physiological development of children: "A number of experts attribute this proficiency to physiological changes that occur in the maturing brain as a child enters puberty" (Marcos, [KidSource Online](#)). Even though I am specifically focusing on English-speaking students learning the Spanish language, these results can be applied to any student who is learning a second language.

Study after study of the optimum condition for learning a foreign language states that, "The older they become, the less flexible they will be in adjusting to the different set of values reflected by non-English speaking cultures" (Grittner 49). Not only are student's language patterns set at a young age, but also the older students become, they more likely they are to assign American cultural values to the vocabulary of a foreign language (Grittner 66). In fact, students who learn a second language at an older age define the second language through English equivalents, and the second language has no meaning until all the words and expressions have been translated into English (Grittner 81). This is the most cited reason for why students should start learning a foreign language in the primary grades instead of in high school. Students form an appreciation for the language and the culture in itself without comparing it to the American culture.

Children are naturally curious about their natural environment and are, for the most part, excited to learn new things and have a very high level of intrinsic motivation. It makes foreign language instruction a natural expansion of their education. They want to learn about other people and new ways of expressing themselves: "Children are naturally curious about codes and

different languages. They are also very interested in different people's customs (Lipton 17-18). We need to build on the students' natural curiosity and take advantage of their enthusiasm to learn. They learn new concepts at a much greater rate than students in high school, and they enjoy expanding their knowledge and learning more about their world.

Because of the class system in the United States, most middle-class students come from homes in which English is primarily spoken. On the other hand, many students who come from lower income families speak a language other than English in their homes. Consequently, most middle class Americans have no meaningful exposure to other languages (Rosanova 38). By offering students the opportunity to learn a second language in schools, we are serving two purposes. We are offering those students who speak the foreign language as their first language the opportunity to succeed in school and to learn even more about their first language. We are also offering all students the opportunity to learn to communicate with one another and, more importantly, the opportunity to learn more about one another's cultures.

A common concern has been raised when teaching a second language to students in the primary grades—the learning of a second language interferes with the learning of the student's first language, and in the primary grades it is imperative to build a strong foundation for learning to speak, write, and read in the first language. This interference can occur in different levels: “Interference may occur especially in connection with the beginning stages of the learning of the second language, in cases where structures in the two languages are very similar, or in situations where the child is forced to use the second language at an advanced level before it is ready, such as in a classroom situation” (Arnberg 74-75). Even some college professors have been critical of teaching a second language in elementary schools. One professor of linguistics commented

about an immersion school, "I'll tell you what to do: close down those schools immediately. You are destroying any chance those children have to grow up with normal language abilities. The native language must be fully established before a child is exposed to a second language. What you are doing is shameless and immoral" (Rosanova 37). These are valid concerns and must be considered when deciding when it is best to start teaching students a second language. Studies have found, however, that students learning Spanish in immersion schools often have lower standardized scores in the primary grades, but these scores start to match or are superior to students in a "normal classroom" by grades three and four (Hernandez). In fact, many studies show that students with fully developed language abilities often have the most difficulty learning a second language. These studies point out that the best overall outcome is for students to start a second language in the primary grades. In the long run, these students will do better in school and will enjoy learning a second language more than students who start learning a second language in high school.

Some parents are also concerned because they do not speak the target language themselves. They are skeptical that these programs really are effective and that their children will not understand the target language at such a young age. This is a common belief, especially of parents whose children are in immersion schools (Rosanova 43). These are also valid concerns, especially if the parent is concerned about the child building a solid foundation in English. It would benefit these parents greatly to further research foreign language learning and to even attempt to learn the target language themselves. It is also important for these parents to know that having a supportive and positive attitude is crucial to the success of their child learning a second language. It can be a frustrating process, but it is even less frustrating for children

before the age of ten than any other age group and even less frustrating if the parents are supportive of the second language learning. Parents should not be worried that their children will suffer in other academic areas because they are learning Spanish, but should rather have confidence that learning a second language will actually help their study of other academic subjects.

In most cases, learning another language, for all age levels, actually enhances a person's ability to speak English. When learning about the structure of another language, we can learn about the structure of our own language (Marcos, *Learning a Second Language* 33). In a person's native language, one often does not know the labels or titles for grammatical concepts because one has been speaking the language since one was a child. When learning about another language, one is learning about common structures found in all languages. I can personally attest to this phenomenon. I did not know what direct or indirect objects were in English until I started learning them in Spanish when I was in the tenth grade. I had been using direct objects all my life, yet I did not know what they were called and their purpose in a sentence. Learning Spanish has helped me to understand the grammatical structures of English and has also caused me to see that English is a much more complex language than Spanish. I have great empathy and respect for people who are able to learn English because I know how much more difficult it is to learn than other languages. Other people learning Spanish often come to this realization, and it is my hope that by students learning a second language, they are able to empathize with people around them who are struggling to learn English.

In general, however, the difficulties that students learning a second language have are often the difficulties that are experienced by monolingual children who are still learning their

first language. Thus, the errors made by students learning a language as their second language are frequently the same errors made by students who are learning that language as their first language. When errors occur, students may use many types of aids when learning the second language, such as using their first language or over-generalizing or simplifying the rules of the second language (Arnberg 74-75). Parents should not be concerned when children make mistakes in either the first or second language, and should know that all people learning a new language make a series of mistakes before they are literate in the language.

The benefits of teaching a second language to students in the primary grades are varied and help students in many more ways than just being able to speak the language. Students in the primary grades are at the optimum age to begin learning a second language. The next section explains the different methods used by schools to teach young students a second language.

Methods of Foreign Language Instruction

Now that I have discussed why it is vitally important for students to learn a second language, it is essential to discuss how students best learn a second language. The optimum condition for a child to learn a second language is to grow up in a bilingual household. In fact, some people may argue that students who are reared in a bilingual household have not learned a foreign language, but in fact have learned two native languages to fit into one culture (Grittner 65). Most Americans, however, are not given the opportunity to be born in a household where more than one language is being spoken. Instead, the learning of a foreign language has become an academic endeavor, usually taught at the high school and college level. There are different models given for teaching a second language in school, the most common model being twenty adolescent students in a Spanish class for five one-hour periods a week, usually during the four high school years (Grittner 67). Why is this model held as the ideal way to learn a foreign language when so much research tells us this is not the optimum condition in which to learn a foreign language? There are four main hurdles that the American educational system must overcome before effective learning of a foreign language can take place: (1) the difficulty of motivating students to learn a foreign language when the United States is a monolingual society; (2) the short amount of time dedicated to foreign language study; (3) the tendency to delay foreign language instruction until high school; and (4) the lack of well-trained foreign language instructors (Grittner 79). School districts need to overcome these hurdles and find a way to offer all students in American schools the opportunity to learn a second language.

Another hurdle is that many people believe that children will “pick up” a second language just by being exposed to it. But it is important to remember that even for children,

learning a second language takes years and can often be an arduous task (Arnberg 75).

Therefore, teachers must supply the students with sufficient practice and motivation. There are many ways to overcome these difficulties, so it is important for teachers of world languages to understand these hurdles and to overcome them. These hurdles are large obstacles in the educational system in the United States, and schools districts have sought different approaches to teaching a second language to our youngsters in order to overcome these obstacles. There are currently four models of foreign language instruction being used; some are more effective than others.

There are four basic models for second language instruction in the primary grades: Foreign Language Exploration (F.L.E.X.), Foreign Language in the Elementary School (F.L.E.S.), immersion schools, and bilingual schools. All four of these models are used in the American education system, some being more controversial than others. In the following paragraphs, each of these models is explained in depth.

In the F.L.E.X. program, foreign languages and cultures are introduced as a concept, not as a goal of mastery. This program is usually offered about one to two times per week (Marcos, [KidSource Online](#)). Students spend time learning about different languages. After the F.L.E.X. program is over, the students are able to choose the language that most interested them, and then study that language further. This program provides the basis for later learning, but the students do not attain proficiency (Marcos, *Learning a Second Language* 32). Students are not expected to learn much of the language, but they are exposed to the language and culture being taught. It is a stepping stone to other programs and a good start for many school districts.

The F.L.E.X. model is used at Richmond Elementary School in Richmond, Minnesota. I am currently student teaching in kindergarten at this school. The students learn one Japanese word a day and remember about half of the words they are exposed to. They learn Japanese songs in music class and play Japanese games in physical education. The goal is not for the students to be able to speak Japanese, but instead to teach them a bit about the culture in the hopes that in the future they will want to study further the Japanese language and culture.

Many schools offer foreign language instruction in the primary grades using the F.L.E.S. model, where the second language is usually taught three to five times a week. In this program, students are taught the second language as a distinct subject, much like math and social studies (Marcos, [KidSource Online](#)). Students need to be learning a second language every day for an extended period of time in order for the students to receive any considerable benefits. The frequency and intensity of the instruction in these programs determines the performance of the students. The goal of this program is to provide students with a working knowledge of the target language (Marcos, *Learning a Second Language* 32).

The third model is the immersion school, in which the second language is not taught as a subject, but instead is the medium through which the rest of the content in the curriculum is taught (Bernhardt 1). The ultimate goal of immersion programs is complete proficiency in the second language (Marcos, *Learning a Second Language* 32), and it is very rare that students do not achieve this level. The earliest two-way immersion programs in the United States began in the 1960s and 1970s. Currently, only 5% of school districts in the country offer immersion school programs. The current model used by most immersion schools in the United States is based on the Canadian immersion school model, in which teachers speak only in the second

language under all circumstances for at least the first three years of schooling” (Rosanova 37). One important advantage of immersion schools is that there are no obligatory costs associated with them since there are no extra teachers needed. This is good news for school districts across the country. It is, however, more difficult for school districts to find qualified teachers since knowledge of a second language is an obligatory job qualification. The goals of immersion schools are not only to teach a second language, but also a cross-cultural understanding between students. The ideal immersion school consists of 50% native English speakers and 50% native speakers of the non-English language. All students, then are able to be first-language models and second-language learners (Tools for Schools—Two-Way Immersion Education). Many Spanish immersion programs in the United States contain students who speak English as their first language and students who speak Spanish as their first language. These programs are called “dual language programs” or “two-way bilingual programs.” There are currently two schools in Minnesota that are Spanish immersion schools. They are Adams Spanish Immersion School in St. Paul and Robbinsdale Spanish Immersion in Robbinsdale. Moorhead is in the process of establishing a Spanish immersion school.

When I was in Spain, I noticed that there were English immersion schools, but this education was only offered to the culturally elite—those families who could afford expensive private schools. I believe that the American educational system needs to focus on teaching all students a foreign language, not just those students who belong to the culturally elite. All schools need to be dedicated to foreign language instruction, and this instruction needs to start in the primary grades. No matter which language is being taught, immersion school programs need to be offered to students of diverse backgrounds for it to truly be successful.

The final model is bilingual education which has received a considerable amount of news media coverage in the past few years. In this model, students are taught in their primary language from five to seven years while they are transitioning into English (Goode 17). Most critics agree that this model is not effective because it does not move students into the second language in a timely fashion. In many instances, the immersion model and the bilingual model are confused. The bilingual model teaches students in their native language, easing into English. The immersion model teaches a second language all the time, with very little use of the first language (Curran Dorsano). In the early 1990s, a study was done in El Paso, Texas in which two groups of Hispanic students were placed in a bilingual program and an immersion program. The results of the study when the students were in grades four and five shows that the students in the immersion program performed better in all academic areas, as compared to the students in the bilingual model (Goode 17). The bilingual model has been controversial in the United States in recent years because of the slow rate that some schools move students into speaking the second language. Many districts have chosen to abolish bilingual programs due to state laws and district philosophies. There are numerous districts who follow this model, however, and do find success with it.

Whichever program is taught in the particular school district, there are four important goals that should be met when completion of foreign language instruction occurs: (1) The students should be able to understand language spoken by a native at a conversational tempo; (2) the students should be able to speak with a command of the language and carry on a conversation spontaneously with few grammatical errors; (3) the students should be able to read materials written in the second language at their level with immediate comprehension; (4) the students

should be able to write with style and creativity with few grammatical errors (Lipton 33-34). An effective second language program needs to focus on meeting these goals and needs to spend adequate time teaching the students these important skills as important as if it were math or science.

If students start learning a second language in kindergarten or first grade, most children will follow a natural progression of steps as they are learning a second language. These steps probably do not occur in F.L.E.X., but most likely occur in immersion schools and intensive F.L.E.S. programs. The first step is a blank stare from the child. This stare disappears within a few days or weeks for most children. Within the first five to seven weeks, children pick up frequently repeated phrases. In the first year of instruction, the students typically cannot form complete sentences in the target language, but are able to repeat phrases or isolated words. They are able to understand most of what is spoken to them, and respond by gestures or nods. This is called the “preproduction stage.” Extreme patience is required from the teacher at this level. Teachers also need to be firm in speaking the target language and not resorting back to English. Students are free to speak the language of their choosing, but are encouraged to speak in the target language. Students need strict routines to follow and need advanced explanation if there is anything out of the normal routine. This emphasizes the need for repetition and predictability within the first few years.

Within the first year, the child develops “private speech” in the target language. Vygotsky said that students between five and seven years of age speak to themselves which usually disappears at age nine (Rosanova 39). Vygotsky is a renowned child psychologist who discussed private speech among the many topics he researched, which is a way for the students to

maintain the presence of another person. A common activity to observe as a world language teacher is if the students speak Spanish to themselves in their private speech. When I observed in Adams Spanish Immersion School, I observed that the kindergartners had not yet moved into private speech in kindergarten. The fourth grades, on the other hand, often talked to themselves in Spanish. The high school students never spoke Spanish to themselves or to others, and frankly only spoke Spanish when they were required to do so.

The next stage is the “early production stage.” The students are able to understand whole stories that have a predictable story line or are repetitive. The second year of target language instruction usually means that the students can produce two or three-word strings in the target language. They may also do such things as speak English with a Spanish accent. During the third year of second language instruction, the students are able to write simple stories in the target language. The third stage is “the speech emergence stage.” The students are able to form complete sentences and long phrases in the target language, although they may not have perfect grammar or vocabulary. It is possible to have a meaningful discussion in the target language (Rosanova 38-42). These steps are not accurate for each child, but are helpful guidelines for world language teachers to be aware of and to observe in their students.

Students who are taught Spanish in high school are often taught with much different methods than students who are taught in elementary school. Older learners have a tendency to reduce a second language to formulas or rules. They believe that they must master the language before it is useful to them (Rosanova 38). Elementary school students, however, cannot quote grammatical rules, but learn how to use the language correctly in context to fit situations that are functional for them (Lipton 19). Because of these differences in learning styles, educators must

be aware of the different techniques that apply to each age group. There are specific and very effective ways of teaching elementary students a second language, and those must be examined apart from the techniques used in high school and college.

Since the majority of American schools focus on teaching students foreign languages at the high school level, there is ample research available about effective teaching practices at that level. It is important to remember that these effective practices cannot be applied to students in the primary grades, but a different set of practices needs to be developed: “The small child may learn better if the material is presented to him in songs, poems, games, and stories while the adult may require a more sophisticated analytical process...” (Grittner 68). Teaching young students a second language often results in the students learning in more of a “holistic fashion” in which the learning of the language is integrated with the child’s learning. In contrast, older students and adults often learning a second language in a more analytic way (Arnberg 81). These are common instructional techniques used by teachers in all subjects, but are most effective when teaching a second language. The next section discusses effective practices used by teachers of world languages in elementary schools.

An Effective Foreign Language Curriculum in the Primary Grades

As a teacher, I plan on incorporating the Spanish language and Spanish-speaking cultures into my curriculum. I believe firmly that teaching a language is not just teaching the vocabulary and the grammar of the language, but also teaching the students the roots of words and word patterns and how this reflects the culture of the people who speak that particular language. For example, Spanish (castellano) has four different pronouns to express “you” while English has one predominant way to say “you” (Grittner 83). In Spanish, there are two degrees of “you” depending on the respect that is given to the person who is being referred to. This reflects the great respect that is shown to elders and people in positions of authority. This is just one of many examples of how a language can reflect the culture from which it comes. A teacher of a foreign language cannot separate the language from the culture to which it belongs.

Foreign language instruction, with combined efforts in language instruction and cultural instruction, lends itself naturally to interdisciplinary units and lessons. Children are very interested in learning about other people’s customs which can easily be combined with social studies. Children love to sing songs, and can learn songs from other cultures in music class. They also can learn folk dances in physical education classes (Lipton 17-18). I also believe it is very important to use authentic literature, songs, and stories from the original country when teaching a foreign language. There should be many opportunities for students to learn about fables, fairy tales, poetry, and magazines in the second language (Lipton 41-42). This is a very effective way to combine the language learning with the learning of the culture from which the language comes.

Teachers need to be extremely expressive and use many gestures and actions to get the message across to the students in the target language (Rosanova 43). Teachers in the primary grades do use frequent gesturing and expressive language, but foreign language instructors must be even more expressive and animated. Teachers of special education children are good models because of their extreme patience and methods of instruction. They use plenty of repetition to familiarize their students with basic concepts before building on the concepts. It is important for teachers to first emphasize common vocabulary such as nouns used in the classroom. Nouns come relatively easy to children (Rosanova 44) because they are literal and concrete. Forming sentences and other parts of speech is much more complicated to the students and take much time and effort to enforce with the children. A foreign language classroom should be full of pictures of vocabulary to reinforce the language that is being taught. Rhythmic repetition is also an effective way to teach the target language. This is especially effective with students who are kinesthetic learners. Rhythm is a very effective way to enhance memory, both in foreign language instruction and in other subjects. These are all common methods used by special education teachers that also work very effectively when learning a second language. There are also very effective techniques used by regular education teachers in the primary grades that can be used for foreign language instruction. These techniques include pairing students up with fellow classmates, breaking the words into syllables, listening centers, repeating back what the students say, and the Learning Experience Approach (Rosanova 45-46). These teaching techniques can be applied to all curriculum areas and are used by effective teachers quite frequently in the classroom. They are also very effective when teaching a foreign language.

The key to effective foreign language instruction is to provide the students with authentic opportunities to use the foreign language they have learned so the students can see a purpose for learning a new language. In the United States, a child's learning of a foreign language is often strictly academic, and the students do not learn how the new culture fits in with the new language. This is a stark contrast from Europe, where students see the usefulness of learning a foreign language before they enter school. Students in European countries are exposed to foreign languages on a daily basis, from foreign newspapers to candy wrappers. We have to provide these opportunities to American students to make the learning of a foreign language more enjoyable and more worthwhile (Grittner 67). One way to make foreign language learning part of the student's everyday lives is by pairing them up with "e-mail pen pals" around the globe. Students can be paired up with students learning English and can alternate between writing in English and Spanish. Students will feel a sense of accomplishment when they realize they can actually communicate with people who are native Spanish speakers (Baugh 39). This is just one way to make foreign language learning less academic and more pertinent to their lives outside of school.

Parents can also serve a large role in helping their children to learn a second language even if they do not speak the second language. According to Gladys Lipton, there are several key ways parents can assist in second-language learning. Parents can help their children recognize foreign words in newspapers, magazines, and labels of different products and give them opportunities to participate in the language at museums, television, etcetera. They can have books and records (tapes) available at the child's level. They can encourage, but not force, their child to speak the second language at home. Last but not least, they can encourage the child

when the child feels frustrated or confused when learning the second language (Lipton 33-34). Even though foreign language learning can be frustrating for students in the primary grades, it can be even more frustrating to older learners. In fact, it is much less frustrating to children in the primary grades than it is for any other age group. Parents and teachers must recognize this frustration and use teaching methods that are developmentally appropriate to children in the primary grades. If the parents do not speak the target language, it would be the optimum time to learn it along with their children (Marcos, *Learning a Second Language* 33)! Parents can also offer their support for teaching the second language to make their children understand that they think it is a worthwhile venture.

Conclusion

The topic of foreign language instruction in the primary grades fascinates me, and that is why I have chosen to spend a large amount of time researching it and writing about it. I wish I could have had the opportunity to learn a foreign language at an early age. I am in agreement with Mario Obledo, president of the League of Latin American Citizens, when he says, "Every American child ought to be taught both English and Spanish" (Berhardt 19). Of course, I think there are other valuable languages to be taught such as French, Japanese, and Russian; however, I have chosen to concentrate on the study of Spanish.

In this thesis I have discussed research that exists about the benefits of learning a second language, especially in the primary grades. I have discussed common methods in the educational system for teaching world languages in elementary schools. Finally, I have explained some very effective teaching techniques for teachers of world languages that are very motivating for students in the primary grades. As I enter the work force as an elementary teacher, I plan to share this research with the school district for which I work and to fervently work for the installation and continuation of foreign language programs in the primary grades. If these programs are not concretely developed, I will work in my own classroom to teach my students both the Spanish language and the Spanish culture. I believe it is vitally important for students to learn these skills so they can survive in the real world.

In our increasingly global society, learning a foreign language is imperative to international business, foreign relations with other countries, and communication between people of different cultures. Even in domestic situations, speaking a foreign language is imperative to health care providers, law enforcement, and teachers who are working with people who are non-

English speakers. The time has come in which learning a second language has to be given priority in the American educational system.

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Quality Children's Books for Spanish Learning

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Quality Websites for Spanish Learning

<http://www.iglou.com/xchange/ece/index.html>

“Email Classroom Exchange” is a database of classrooms looking for pen pals. It sorts classes by grades, first language, and state or country.

<http://web66.coled.umn.edu/schools.html>

“Web66” contains a listing of international schools looking for pen pals that includes special categories such as gifted, handicapped, Montessori, and parochial schools.

<http://www.uebersetzung.at/twister/es.htm>

This website contains the largest collection of Spanish tongue twisters, “trabalenguas,” in the world. There are over 1,000 tongue twisters.

<http://www.rdale.k12.mn.us/lis/home.html>

This is the website for Robbinsdale Spanish Immersion School in Robbinsdale, Minnesota. There are sites for each grade level.

<http://star.ucc.nau.edu/FLI/DDLM/index.html>

This website contains different lesson plans for different grade levels to celebrate “Dia de los Muertos,” a Mexican holiday.

<http://ladb.unm.edu/www/retanet/>

This website contains lesson plans and materials for Latin American studies.

<http://members.aol.com/spanishpronto/>

This website gives a quick reference to Spanish questions, improving Spanish vocabulary, and links for Spanish study.

<http://members.aol.com/fvila/home.htm>

This website contains links to Spanish literature which can be used in the classroom of upper grades or to help teachers improve their Spanish and knowledge of Spanish literature.

<http://users.netmatters.co.uk/dandaforbes/Spanish.html>

This site contains a Spanish dictionary, as well as five multimedia lesson plans. It is compatible with Macintosh, the brand of computer used by many schools.

<http://www.artifacts.org>

This website is an online museum of Spanish artifacts and relics that were found in America. There were relics brought over by Spaniards.

<http://soar.berkeley.edu/recipes/ethnic/spanish/indexall.html>

This website is full of good Spanish recipes which can be sampled by any classroom!

<http://www.angelfire.com/de/hadas/first.html>

This website provides four lesson plans for children who are beginning to learn Spanish.

<http://www.angelfire.com/ny2/Spainishteacher/>

This website provides links to the Spanish national anthem, Spanish radio stations, Spanish newspapers, and Spanish pen pals.

<http://www.mibibook.com/tabofcon.html>

This website contains a list of Spanish books for children, organized into various categories.

<http://www.widomaker.com/~ldprice/spain.html>

This website contains many reference materials for students learning Spanish, from dictionaries to other common Spanish websites.

http://ericir.syr.edu/Virtual/Lessons/Foreign_Lang/index.html

This website contains many lesson plans for Spanish lessons from the ERIC database.

<http://www.forlang.utoledo.edu/BOOKMARK/BookmarkSPN.html>

This bookmark is a reference for many other websites on Spanish music, media, etc.

<http://www.veen.com/Veen/Leslie/Curriculum>

This website contains information about elementary Spanish curriculums.

<http://www.mibibook.com/catalog/spholiday.html>

This website contains references for books for a K-8 Spanish curriculum.

<http://www.uji.es/spainwww.html>

This website contains information about Spain.

For more information on foreign language instruction:

ACTFL-American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
6 Executive Plaza
Yonkers, NY 10701-6801

ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics
1118 22nd Street Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20037-1214

National FLES Commission of AATF
Dr. Gladys Lipton
University of Maryland, Baltimore County
Department of Modern Languages/Linguistics (MLL)
Baltimore, MD 21250

National Network for Early Language Learning and CAL
1118 22nd Street Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20037-1214