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Teaching second languages in the elementary school

Alla Brisker-Kramer
University of Northern Iowa

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Teaching second languages in the elementary school

Abstract

This paper is a literature review of foreign language instruction in America's elementary schools. The language needs of a person living in a global society are identified. Economic, cultural and intellectual reasons for studying foreign languages are determined. Expert opinions are gathered about language programs that currently exist in the elementary school, and guidelines for an effective foreign language program are suggested for those who develop language programs. Elements of the most effective language instruction are discussed. These include: age, motivation, positive attitude, teaching strategies and techniques, and language-culture connection. Recommendations for teachers and parents are provided.

TEACHING SECOND LANGUAGES IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL.

A Graduate Review
Submitted to the
Division of Elementary Education
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Alla Brisker-Kramer

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This Review

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12-13-95

Date Approved

Marvin Heller

Graduate Faculty Reader

12-13-95

Date Approved

Donna Schumacher

Graduate Faculty Reader

12-15-95

Date Approved

Peggy Ishler

Head, Department of
Curriculum and Instruction

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Abstract

This paper is a literature review of foreign language instruction in America's elementary schools.

The language needs of a person living in a global society are identified. Economic, cultural and intellectual reasons for studying foreign languages are determined. Expert opinions are gathered about language programs that currently exist in the elementary school, and guidelines for an effective foreign language program are suggested for those who develop language programs.

Elements of the most effective language instruction are discussed. These include: age, motivation, positive attitude, teaching strategies and techniques, and language-culture connection.

Recommendations for teachers and parents are provided.

Teaching Second Languages in the Elementary School

Introduction

In most European countries considerable attention is paid to teaching languages. English is not my native language. My first language is Russian but my education in Russia included the opportunities to learn a second language. I have always been interested in foreign languages. Here, in America, I have noticed that many people do not know any other language besides English. According to the statistics, 1 out of 5 American secondary school students study a foreign language; fewer than 1 out of 20 students study it past the second year, or long enough to develop usable skills (Benevento, 1985).

I believe foreign language education needs to receive more emphasis in American education. The following facts support this:

1. In 1975, the United States was one of the 35 nations to sign the Helsinki Accords, a treaty calling for participating countries to encourage the study of foreign languages and civilizations as an important means of expanding communication among people.

2. A 1979 report, "Strength Through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability," prepared by the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, concluded: "Americans' incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous... our lack of foreign language

competence diminishes our capabilities in diplomacy, in foreign trade, and in citizen comprehension of the world in which we live and compete" (as cited in Nielsen, 1992, p.10).

3. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, in its 1983 report "A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform", called for foreign language education beginning in the elementary grades. Arpan (as cited in Nielsen, 1992, p.11) said: "From pre-school to college school curricula should be internationally oriented and of world quality standard...."

4. A 1982 survey conducted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) showed that approximately 19% of students in grades 7 to 12 were enrolled in foreign language classes (Benevento, 1985).

Purpose of the Study

The United States continues to be the only nation in the world where one can graduate from college without having studied a foreign language. Even though 9 out of 10 Americans can not speak, read, or understand any languages, except English, there is apparent public interest in the study of foreign languages (Benevento, 1985). A national survey conducted by the University of Michigan in 1979 showed that 50% of Americans wished they could speak a foreign language and 75% thought a foreign language should be taught in the elementary school. This situation illustrates the need for future research and study in order

to improve foreign language education. Language learning should be seen as a fundamental aspect of general education with a unique role to play (Byram & Morgan, 1994).

The President's Commission on Excellence in Education recommended foreign language proficiency for all students and suggested that this study begin in elementary school (Benevento, 1985). The topic of foreign language education has been chosen so that I may find out why the present situation exists and what elementary school teachers and other interested parties can do to change this.

Statement of the Problem

The problem being investigated is: What kind of opportunities for learning a second language (beyond English) can, and should, elementary schools provide?

Specific questions that will be answered as part of the investigation of this problem are:

1. What are the "language needs" of a person living in a global society?
2. What language programs currently exist in America's elementary schools?
3. Under what conditions is language instruction most effective?

Definition of Terms

Second language--a language acquired by a person in addition to his/her mother tongue. Definition by UNESCO (Cook, 1991).

To be proficient in foreign language--to be able to

communicate in the language in real-life situations (Curtain, 1991).

Integrative motivation--learning the language to take part in the culture of its people.

Instrumental motivation--learning the language for a career reason or other practical reason (Cook, 1991).

Strategies--specific methods of approaching a problem or a task (Brown, 1994).

Teaching techniques--the specific activities, manifested in the classroom (Brown, 1994).

Methodology

The collection of articles, research and instructional materials related to this topic was gathered by conducting a search of the ERIC database (Educational Resources Information Center). The search was narrowed by selecting materials that were published since 1980 in order to analyze the present situation that exists in American education and to fit the rationale for this study.

An ERIC search was made by using the following descriptors:

- teaching second language;
- teaching foreign language;
- second language education;
- second language needs;
- need and foreign language learning;
- role of foreign language learning;

- importance of foreign language learning.

Only titles related to elementary education were selected from the listing. From the references of these listings additional resources were selected for the review.

Another source of materials was the Donald O. Rod Library where instructional materials and literature on theory and methods of teaching were found. All materials that were found were analyzed in such a way that direct answers to the questions posited in this investigation might be obtained.

1. Language needs of a person living in a global society were determined. After analyzing the literature, economic, cultural and intellectual reasons were defined. These factors helped to determine the language needs.

2. The literature was reviewed to determine what programs currently exist in America's elementary schools. Expert opinions were gathered during this process.

3. What are the best conditions for foreign language learning to occur? The literature was analyzed according to the following aspects: (a) age consideration, (b) positive attitude and motivation, (c) teaching strategies and techniques, and (d) language and culture.

Analysis and Discussion

The Language Needs of a Person Living in a Global Society

Why learn a foreign (second) language? This is an often-asked question. What is valuable about knowing several languages? As Simon (1988) stated, "Language is a

key to opening minds and attitudes. To speak, read, write and understand another language is the beginning of understanding other people" (p.49).

The financial setting of the 1990s is that of a global economy. There are many economic opportunities for persons with language skills. Knowing another language may mean getting a job. "One of every six jobs are linked to international trade, and one third of our agricultural acreage was devoted to exports" (Benevento, 1985, p.11).

Proficiency in a second language can benefit people entering careers in science, law, the tourist industry, and advertising. Many workers in technical jobs also need foreign language skills (Nielsen, 1992).

Besides the already-mentioned economic reasons for learning a second language, there are intellectual ones. An extended study of foreign language can actually improve Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) scores as documented in table 1.

Table 1.

1991 SAT Statistics on South Carolina's College-Bound Seniors with Foreign Language Background

<u>Years of study</u>	<u>Mean SAT verbal score</u>
more than 4 yrs.	496
4 years.	471
3 - 3,5 yrs.	440

table continues

table continued

2 - 2,5 yrs.	391
1 - 1,5 yrs.	340
less than 1 year.	306

The national mean verbal score (all students) was 422 in 1991.

Note. The College Board, 1991 Profile of SAT and Achievement Test Takers, South Carolina Report and National Report. From "The Global Challenge. A Foreign Language Framework for the 1990s", by B.Nielsen, 1992, ERIC documentr reproduction service No. ED 356625.

The person who has never comprehended another language, other than his/her own mother tongue, has little or no perspective on his/her own language. Students of foreign language gain a greater understanding of grammatical structures and syntax, and also an increase in their vocabulary. The study of European languages enhances vocabulary building because so many English words are derived from those languages (Curtain & Pesola, 1988). Foreign language study has also been associated with improvements in students' creativity, self-concept, critical thinking abilities, memory listening skills and performances on tests. "Language learning develops logical thinking, brain-training, that helps them to think more flexibly" (Cook, 1991, p.4).

By learning other languages students gain an increased appreciation for literature, art and music as a result of exposure to foreign cultures. Knowing only one (native) language doesn't allow people to penetrate the rich areas of learning and experience lying beyond monolingual communication.

All of this evidence leads to the conclusion that foreign language study should be considered an educational basic, along with English, math, science, social studies, physical education and the arts. It is very important that all people involved in education view foreign language study as being in the mainstream of education (Benevento, 1985).

Foreign languages are ideal for interdisciplinary teaching. With its emphasis on meaningful content and real-world applications, a communication-based foreign language program presents language as a means for learning about the world, not as an isolated subject in and of itself (Curtain, 1991). Interdisciplinary teaching is a mutually beneficial experience, enhancing both content knowledge and language skills.

Language Programs that Currently Exist in America's Elementary Schools

There are several language programs that currently exist in America's schools. Three types of elementary school foreign language programs are: Immersion, Partial Immersion, and Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES).

Immersion

Immersion is a program in which students spend most or all of the school day studying content areas (math, science, social studies, etc.) in a foreign language. Instruction in the foreign language itself is incorporated into the curriculum as needed (Nielsen, 1992). The objective is functional proficiency in which students are able to communicate as well as native speakers of the country where the language is spoken (Benevento, 1985).

Partial Immersion

Partial immersion is similar to immersion, but with less time spent studying content areas in the foreign language (Nielsen, 1992).

FLES - Foreign Language in Elementary School

FLES includes ongoing foreign language instruction in the elementary grades by a language specialist trained in the learning styles and needs of young learners, with an emphasis on the language itself and its culture. It is designed as part of an extended sequence of language study leading to continued study in the secondary grades. FLES is usually taught in 20-60-minute periods, one to five days a week (Nielsen, 1992). This type of program in a school is generally organized in response to community interest and thus varies from school to school. Language and culture content are usually integrated with geography, music, art and other subjects (Benevento, 1985).

Campbell, Gray, Rhodes and Snow (1985) conducted a study comparing these three language programs. One of the objectives of the Campbell et al. research effort was to identify in detail the characteristics of the programs. Figure 1 (see Appendix A) reveals some differences. Figure 1A. shows the average percentage of time spent in foreign language. Immersion program comes first with the amount of time spent in foreign language, followed by partial immersion and then FLES. Figure 1B. reveals the average percentage of use of foreign language to teach core curriculum subjects. In immersion program children are taught most of the subjects in the foreign language. In partial immersion program only some classes are taught in the foreign language. None of the curriculum subjects are taught in the foreign language in the FLES program. Other findings of this research are:

1. Immersion programs start in kindergarten. Children are taught most of the subjects in the foreign language. It sets the highest proficiency goal of all the programs (Campbell, Gray, Rhodes & Snow, 1985).

2. Partial immersion has characteristics of both immersion and FLES, and the proficiency goals fall somewhere between the two. A portion of the school curriculum is taught in the foreign language (Campbell et al., 1985).

3. The FLES program emphasizes oral communication. The main goal is for students to acquire a certain level of listening and speaking skills and awareness of the foreign

culture. The degree of proficiency anticipated in a particular FLES program depends on the amount of time available for language instruction (Campbell et al., 1985).

The French and Spanish versions of the Modern Language Association Cooperative Test (MLA test) were administered to the students in the Campbell et al. study. The test consists of 4 subtests: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Two types of French programs were included in this study (FLES and Immersion), and three types of Spanish programs were examined (FLES, Partial Immersion, and Immersion). The scores are presented in Figure 2, and Figure 3 (see Appendix B). Students enrolled in the immersion program show higher scores in all subtests than students who were taught in the partial immersion and FLES. Students in the FLES program show the lowest scores in all subtests.

These results provide clear indication of the student gains that can reasonably be expected from the Immersion, Partial Immersion, and FLES approaches to foreign language instruction. Immersion reaches the highest level of proficiency. Partial Immersion ranks second and FLES ranks third (Campbell et al., 1985).

An Effective Foreign Language Program

When talking about different foreign language programs, it is appropriate to mention what makes the program effective. Good planning, cooperation, and commitment are important. Special attention must be paid to the

development of foreign language programs in elementary and middle schools, making sure that these programs are coordinated with each other and with local high school programs to insure a smooth progression of skills from one learning level to another.

Curtain and Pesola (1988) developed guidelines for an effective foreign language program. In an effective foreign language program:

1. Every student is given the opportunity to study at least one foreign language.
2. The study of foreign language begins ideally in kindergarten, but not later than fourth grade, and study continues uninterrupted through high school.
3. Instruction is communication-based. Functional proficiency in all the basic communication skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing; is the primary goal.
4. Foreign language instruction is a permanent, core component of the school curriculum.
5. Students receive foreign language instruction several times a week. Five times is ideal, but instruction should be given no less than three times a week.
6. Students are exposed to a language's native speakers and their cultures.
7. The curriculum is sequential and the study of a foreign language is continuous.

8. Instruction is provided by foreign language professionals who are proficient in their languages and familiar with a variety of foreign language teaching methods and strategies. (p.xiv)

According to Nielsen (1992), the ideal foreign language program includes:

1. Classes in grade K-12.
2. Enrollment of every student.
3. Daily instruction.
4. Teachers with high level proficiency in languages taught.
5. High school graduates with proficiency in at least one foreign language. (p.27)

Conditions Under Which Language Instruction is Most Effective

Several conditions contribute to effective language learning. In this sector, age, attitude and motivation, teaching strategies and techniques, and language and culture connections are explored.

Age consideration.

Children are popularly believed to be better at learning second languages than adults. There is, however, not enough research to prove this either way.

Children at the preschool level learn another language very naturally and with little difficulty. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (as cited in Cellitti, 1990) and Lennenberg (as cited in Cellitti, 1990) concluded that the earlier the

child has exposure to another language the more easily it will be learned. They also reported that it is easier to teach young children a second language because at this stage of a child's development he/she is able to acquire the subtle meaning and deep structure of the language more precisely than older children. The earlier a child is introduced to a new language, the greater the possibility of minimizing or avoiding the negative attitude towards learning (Cellitti, 1990).

Some authors, like Cook (1991) say that it is hard to find research evidence favoring the superiority of teaching young children a foreign language; the research, he suggests, is still open to other interpretations. "To be older leads to better learning in the short term, other things being equal. Children get to a higher level of proficiency in the long term than those who start second language learning while older, perhaps because adults slow down" (Cook, 1991, p.86).

Curtain (1991), one of the advocates of an early start, reports that age 10 is considered a critical time in the development of attitudes towards other people and countries. It is an ideal time to introduce children to other cultures. This is another reason to introduce foreign languages in the elementary grades. McLaughlin (as cited in Cellitti, 1990) says, "Successful second language learning is easier at a young age, and the process of acquiring a second language is developmental in nature."

Positive attitude and motivation.

Some second language learners do better than others because they are better motivated or have positive attitudes. Children's attitudes about learning a foreign language are influenced by many factors: age, peer-group pressure, home background, attitudes, the strong feeling that "everyone" abroad speaks English, experience of travel abroad, and job ambitions (Cajkler & Addelman, 1992).

Starting a pupil on the path of foreign language learning as early as possible is recommended, because positive attitudes toward foreign language learning are implanted by an early start (Cajkler & Addelman, 1992). Younger pupils can develop positive attitudes to foreign language learning if the experience is successful. That positive experience can be achieved by motivating children to learn.

Motivation is another factor affecting language learning. It may be integrative or instrumental. Both types may lead to success, but each may cause problems (Cook, 1991). There are also intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for learning a second language. Intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual. It does not need external stimuli to provoke it. Many learners of all ages need external stimuli: something, or someone other than themselves creates the desire to learn when extrinsic motivation occurs (Cajkler & Addelman, 1992).

Motivators for learning a second language include: some kind of reward, praise by peers, or warm praise by the teacher. Children also can be motivated by "fun" classes. An impression obtained from: smiles, games, jokes, puzzles, problems to solve, making things, and other different activities. "Native speakers are also great motivators" (Cajkler & Addelman, 1992, p.5).

Teaching strategies and techniques.

The methodology used in today's elementary school foreign language programs emphasizes communication. Elementary school foreign language programs place great value on the ability to communicate, even at the beginning levels (Curtain, 1991). One of the key elements in successful methodology for elementary language classrooms is that communication is the main goal (Curtain, 1991). A basic element in promoting communication is that the language is used as the primary means of instruction. The teacher helps the students understand it through the use of gestures and visuals and through the routines of the lessons throughout the school day. Other methodologies include written forms of language. Some teaching strategies create contexts to motivate children to communicate; they include simulations, dialogs and role play activities.

Another key element of methodology recently discovered is the need for early language experiences that provide many opportunities for listening comprehension. Listening is an

important factor in motivating children to learn a language (Curtain, 1991).

Strategies and activities used in elementary school foreign language programs are diverse. "There is really no single approach or method that is most effective with all children" (Curtain, 1991, p.325). The following are some strategies and techniques that are currently in use and contribute to effective elementary school foreign language teaching:

1. Total physical response--Students respond with physical activity to teacher commands. An important aspect of the strategy is the creation of commands, which encourage creative and careful listening.

2. Natural Approach--Students learn new vocabulary through experiences and associations with the words in a meaningful context. This approach outlines a useful sequencing of teacher questions which moves students from a listening mode to a speaking mode.

3. Descriptions and Demonstrations--The teacher describes an object or a picture constantly using gestures and elements from the object or the picture to make the meaning clear. In a demonstration, the teacher gives instructions on how to complete a task.

4. Telling and reading a story--Storytelling is an important method for providing natural language experiences.

5. Games, Songs and Rhymes--Games are a familiar method by which elementary school teachers create a setting

for second language learning. Games provide motivation and a sense of play that can enhance both learning and memory. Many songs and rhymes incorporate actions which make the new language more meaningful.

It is very important to provide favorable conditions for second language learning. Children are more open to second language learning in informal situations. Hence, they are easier to teach through an informal approach (Cook, 1991). It is better to integrate the new language concepts into the regular classroom instruction, rather than during one specific period of time (Cellitti, 1990). One of the most important factors influencing the development of language proficiency is, however, the amount of time spent in working with the language (Curtain & Pesola, 1988).

Language and culture connection.

Language and culture are closely linked with each other. This connection is very significant for teachers, because cultural learning should be considered an important feature of all language study (Ramirez, 1995).

"Culture is the unique lifestyle of a particular group of people. Culture is also communicable knowledge; learned behavioral traits that are shared by participants in a social group and are manifested in their institutions and artifacts" (Harris & Moran, as cited in Ramirez, 1995, p.59).

A person can not learn a language without learning the culture. Culture should be emphasized, not isolated, and

incorporated into the curriculum. "Foreign language teaching includes knowledge about the culture from which the languages arise, and attitudes towards members of the culture" (Byram & Morgan, 1994, p.39). At all levels of study, students of a foreign language should be exposed to the customs, and beliefs of the native speakers of the language. Students, often start by understanding the language itself, and then later come to understand and appreciate the culture and people.

We live in a diverse society. That is why we need to learn a foreign language and understand other peoples' cultures. Students will learn about culture most effectively through meaningful experiences with cultural practices, rather than through discussions. "Language itself is the single most important evidence of culture available to children. It provides both an important starting point and the obvious vehicle for culture learning" (Curtain, 1991, p.327). Letters, tapes and pictures can bring new meaning and importance to the experience of learning a language. The use of authentic materials in audio, video and printed forms offers students a wide range of cross-cultural experiences within the classroom (Ramirez, 1995). Real information from the culture must be a daily part of the activities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this review of literature was to investigate the present situation of foreign (second)

language instruction. According to statistics, 9 out of 10 Americans can not speak, read, or understand any languages, except English. The problem that was investigated is: "What kind of opportunities for learning a second language (beyond English) can and should elementary schools provide?" The literature, that was analyzed described the language needs of a person living in a global society. It suggests that there are economic, cultural, and intellectual reasons for studying foreign languages. Research shows (a) that there are many opportunities for bilingual people in the business world, (b) that extended study of other languages can improve SAT scores, and (c) by learning other languages, students gain an increased appreciation for literature, music, and art.

What language programs currently exist in the elementary school? Experts believe that among three main programs: Immersion, Partial Immersion, and FLES; Immersion reaches the highest level of proficiency.

Under what conditions is language instruction most effective? Curtain and Pesola (1988) developed guidelines for an effective foreign language program. These guidelines should be used by teachers as they develop language programs in their schools. The guidelines are:

1. The study of foreign language begins ideally in kindergarten, but not later than fourth grade, and study continues uninterrupted through high school.
2. Instruction is communication-based.

3. Students are exposed to a language's native speakers and their cultures.
4. The curriculum is sequential.

It is very important to provide favorable conditions for second language learning. Age consideration is one of these conditions. There is debate about the best time to start, but most of the researchers believe that the preschool level is the best time to start. Teachers should take advantage of this by teaching children a second language at as early an age as possible. The same suggestion can be given to parents who want their child to be proficient in a second language. An early start is a very important step on the way to reaching this goal.

Motivation is another factor affecting language learning. More motivated students perform better. Teachers should use all types of available materials e.g. songs, games, and pictures to motivate students to learn. Authentic materials should be brought into the classroom whenever possible.

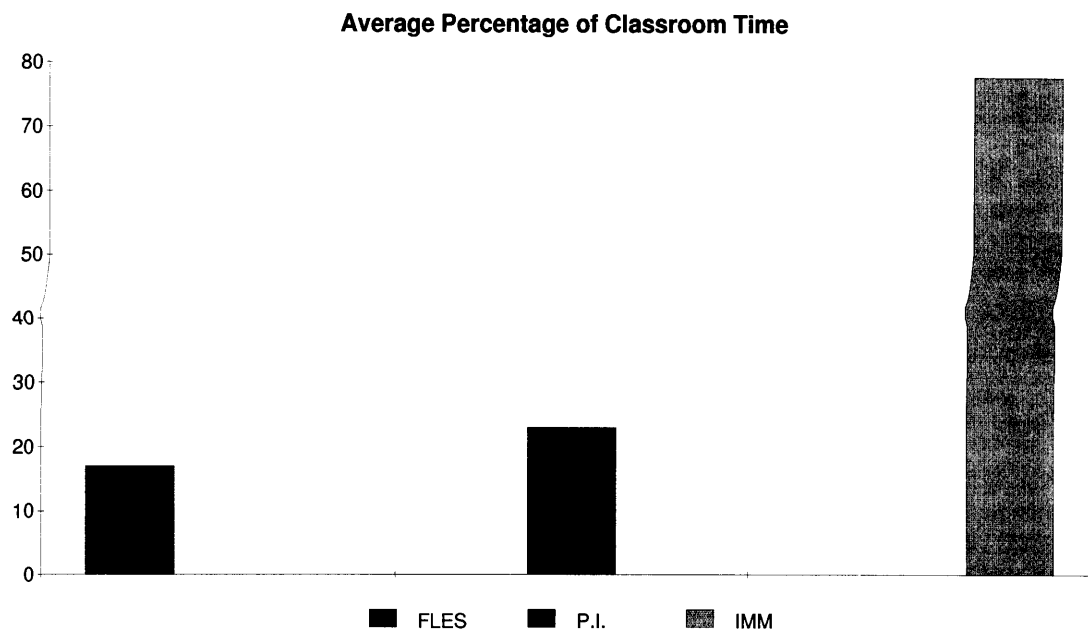
Teaching strategies and techniques are an important part of the language instruction. The main goal of the elementary school foreign language program is communication. Teachers need to remember this when creating language lessons; all activities should emphasize and stimulate communication. There is no certain strategy that is most effective with all children. Some strategies that can be used are: total physical response, natural approach,

descriptions, demonstrations, and storytelling. Role plays, dialogs, games, songs, and rhymes can also be effective strategies and motivators.

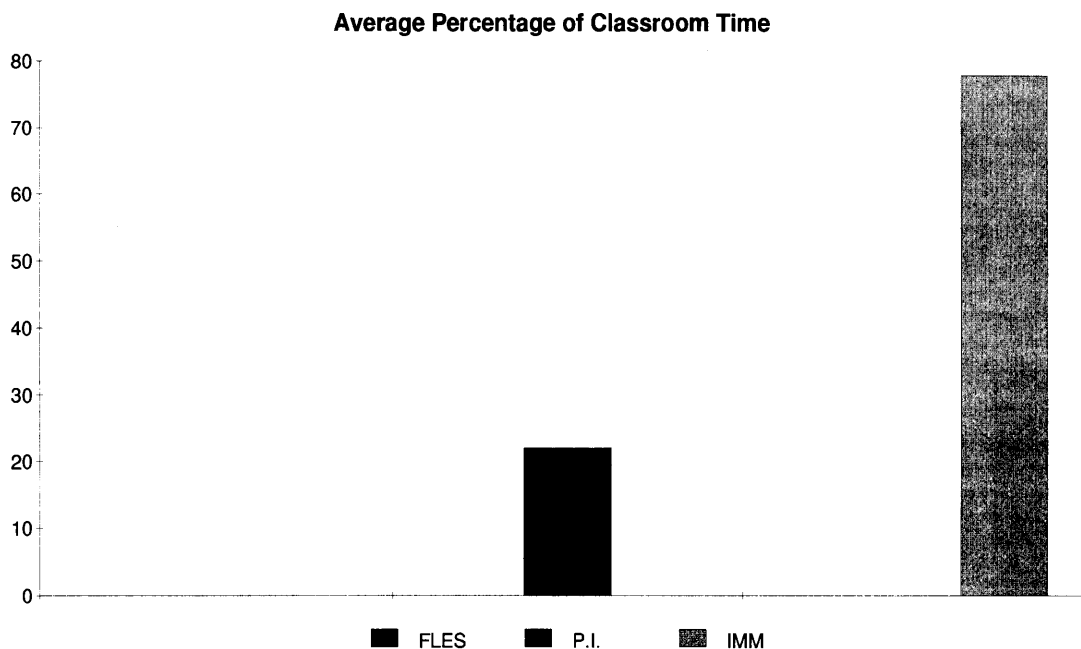
Teachers need to remember that language and culture are closely linked. Culture should be emphasized but not isolated. Understanding of the culture needs to be incorporated in the language instruction. Teachers need to include real information from the culture in every day activities. "Language skills and cultural awareness, when effectively developed, are complementary keys to success in the 1990s" (Nielsen, 1992).

Appendix A

Figure 1. Summary of Three Distinguishing Programmatic Features.



A. Average Percentage of Time Spent in Foreign Language.



B. Average Percentage of Use of Foreign Language to Teach Core Curriculum Subjects.

Note. From "Foreign Language Learning in the Elementary Schools: A Comparison of Three Language Programs", by R. Campbell, T. Gray, N Rhodes and M. Snow, 1985, *The Modern Language Journal*, 69, p. 46.

Appendix B

Figure 2. Graphic display of the difference between the two programs.

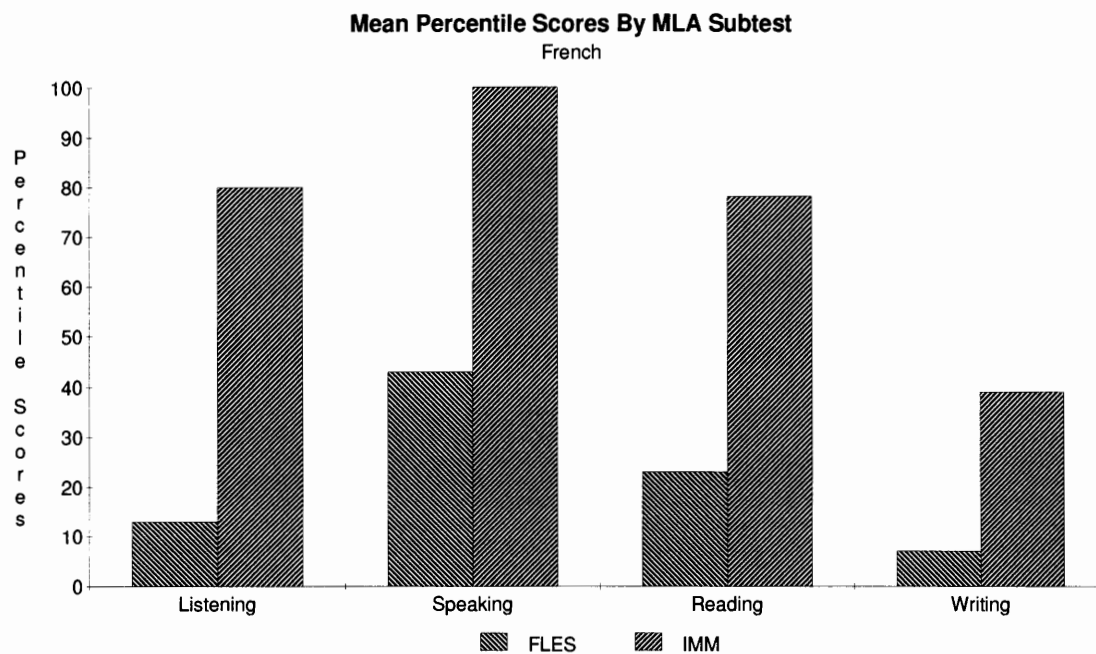
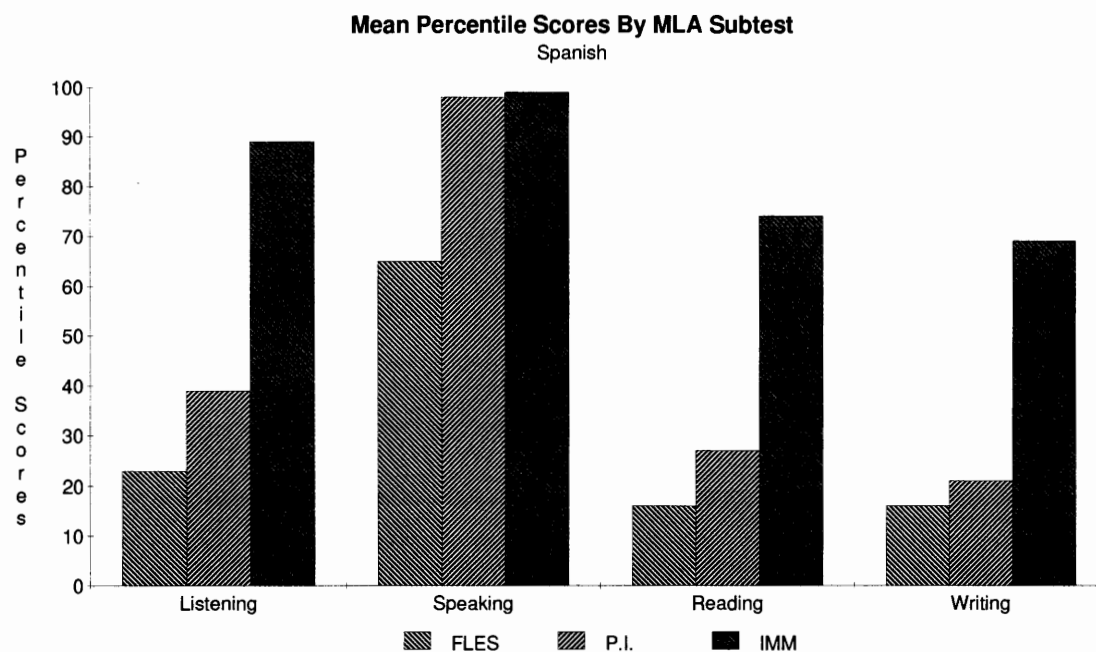


Figure 3. Graphic display of the difference between the three programs.



Note. From "Foreign Language Learning in the Elementary Schools: A Comparison of Three Language Programs", by R. Campbell, T. Gray, N Rhodes and M. Snow, 1985, *The Modern Language Journal*, 69, p. 49.

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