

Thematic, Communicative Language Teaching in the K–8 Classroom

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Foreign language instruction for children can be enriched when teachers use thematic units that focus on content-area information, engage students in activities in which they must think critically, and provide opportunities for students to use the target language in meaningful contexts and in new and complex ways. The national standards for foreign language teaching and learning support this approach to language instruction (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996).

According to the standards, when teachers plan lessons they should focus on the five Cs of Communication, Culture, Connections with other disciplines, Comparisons with students' native languages and cultures, and use of the foreign language in Communities outside the classroom. Increasingly, foreign language educators are integrating the five Cs of the standards into "content-related" (Curtain & Pesola, 1994) or "theme-based" (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) curricula. These curricula reinforce or extend the content of the regular classroom curriculum to give coherence to the language lessons. A unit on the solar system, for example, might include vocabulary that describes the attributes of the planets, which students are also learning about in English. Students might also listen to and recite a poem about the moon and the stars, compare the view of the "rabbit in the moon" found in Aztec and Asian cultures to the North American view of the "man in the moon," observe the night sky (phases of the moon and star constellations) in their area at different times of the year, and compare their observations with those of students in other parts of the world through email exchanges in the target language.

Planning Thematic Units

Themes for curriculum units can be derived from many sources. Planning thematic units allows the teacher to incorporate a variety of language concepts into a topic area that is interesting and worthy of study and that gives students a reason to use the language. Teachers should choose themes that lend themselves to teaching language that will be useful for their students. Themes and lessons should integrate language, content, and culture into activities that allow students to practice the foreign language and that prepare them to use it in a variety of contexts. A focus on communication, including the interactions present in all uses of the language (for speaking, listening, reading, and writing) is essential. Students need to be able to interpret the language, express themselves in the language, and negotiate meaning in the language (Savignon, 1997).

In beginning communicative language classes, the teacher's role includes introducing vocabulary and phrases and providing comprehensible language input for the students. Visuals and manipulatives, gestures, sounds, and actions all help students understand the new vocabulary and structures. Students need opportunities to be active participants in tasks that require them to negotiate meaning and practice language in communication with their teacher, their peers, and others.

Pesola (1995) developed the Framework for Curriculum

Development for FLES programs, which begins with a thematic center and creates a dynamic relationship among the factors that teachers must take into account: language in use, subject content, and culture. (See also Curtain & Pesola, 1994, for a detailed description of the framework.) The framework highlights a set of questions to guide curriculum planning:

- Who are the students in terms of learner characteristics, such as developmental level, learning style, and experiential background?
- What are the planned activities, and how will teachers assess students' performance?
- How will the classroom setting affect the planned activities?
- What materials do teachers need to support the activities?
- What language functions, vocabulary, and grammatical structures will students practice through the activities?
- What knowledge about subject content and culture will the students gain?

Examples of Thematic Units

Three thematic units—Visiting the Farm, A German Fairy Tale, and The South American Rainforest—are described below. They were developed by teachers who used Pesola's framework to guide their planning process. In each of these units, the teachers created language immersion settings in their classrooms, planned lessons around themes that were interesting to the students, asked the students to think critically, reinforced concepts and skills from the regular classroom, integrated culture, and gave students many opportunities to use the target language in a variety of situations (Haas, 1999).

Visiting the Farm

Martine's second-grade French class focused on the farm for 4 weeks. The class began each day with an activity that reviewed previously learned language. For example, one student would make an animal sound and call on another student to say the name of the animal. As the students moved from activity to activity, Martine gave them short time limits for specific tasks to be completed on their own or in pairs or small groups. The students used French as they manipulated pictures and completed assigned tasks. Activities included brainstorming a list of names of farm animals in French that students already knew, learning new animal names in French, and drawing a farm mural on butcher paper; singing a song about animals in the barnyard (*Dans la basse cour*); comparing barns in France and the United States; planting two types of vegetables chosen from seed packets of common French vegetables; measuring and charting the plants' growth; tasting radishes with butter (as they are served in France); creating a labeled farm page for their book of all of the places they "visited" in class that year; sorting food by plant or animal and completing and describing a food pyramid; making baguette sandwiches; comparing with a partner pictures of vocabulary words (e.g., the animals on their farm pages, their

favorite foods, the ingredients in their baguette sandwiches) with a partner; listening to the story of the three pigs in French and creating their own versions of the tale (e.g., the three horses and the big, bad, hungry cow), which they acted out; and taking their baguette sandwiches with them to a fantasy picnic on the farm.

A German Fairy Tale

In this 3-week unit, Frederike introduced her third-grade German students to a story based on a Grimm's fairy tale about a pancake (*Pfannkuchen*) by singing the song "*Ich Habe Hunger*" ("I Am Hungry") with them, then preparing batter (measuring in grams) and cooking a pancake in class. Next, pairs of students compared the sentences they had cut apart from mixed-up copies of the recipe and resequenced them in the appropriate order. Throughout the unit, Frederike began each class by telling or retelling part of the pancake story. "The Thick, Fat Pancake" ("*Der Dicke Fette Pfannkuchen*") is the story of an old woman who bakes a pancake that does not want to be eaten. It jumps out of the pan and rolls through the forest. The pancake's delicious smell attracts one forest animal after another. The names of the animals describe their characteristics, such as Wolf Sharptooth (*Wolf Scharfzahn*) and Rabbit Longears (*Haselongohr*). As the animals tell the pancake to stand still so that they can eat it, each one adds another adjective to describe the pancake: "Thick, fat, dear, sweet, yummy, wonderful, golden, delicious, marvelous pancake, stand still! I want to eat you up!" At this request, the pancake laughs and waves and continues rolling down the hill. Finally, the pancake meets two hungry orphans, jumps into their laps and begs, "Eat me, I will give you strength." The orphans then eat the pancake.

The students practiced new vocabulary by drawing pictures on the board as Frederike recited the scene and by sequencing sentences about the story using sentence strips and a pocket chart. The retellings were never boring and always included student input and probing questions that elicited information about the animals in the fairy tale. With each storytelling, Frederike emphasized different vocabulary or introduced a new animal. She also engaged the students in activities that provided practice in using German:

- copying sentences from the story and illustrating them to create personal storybooks
- listing characteristics of the animals, such as the large, sharp teeth of the wolf
- creating surnames for the animals, like Wolf Sharptooth
- playing "inside outside circles" (Kagan, 1986), with one circle of students asking questions about the story and their partners in the other circle answering
- pretending to become animals and pancakes when the teacher waved her magic wand, then role playing their actions in the story
- singing and dancing the "duck dance" and learning the parts of the animals' bodies
- listing what the animals ate and learning the German words for carnivore, herbivore, and omnivore
- practicing reading the fairy tale to a partner
- selecting roles for a play based on the fairy tale and presenting the play for their parents and the first-grade German students
- reading their illustrated storybooks to the first graders.

The South American Rainforest

"¿Necesitamos los portafolios de español?" (Do we need our Spanish notebooks?) is one of the questions students ask as they pre-

pare for Soledad's fifth-grade Spanish class. Soledad begins the first class of this 6-week unit on the rainforest with a song about the weather and questions about the weather outside. Soon the class is working with maps, first with Soledad asking questions about the location of various rain forests in the world, then with the students in the role of teacher, asking other students questions.

The activities that follow lead students to communicate with each other, practice their Spanish, and focus on vocabulary and structure: locating rainforests on the map using their background knowledge from social studies class; contributing to a written description of rainforests on the overhead projector; reading chorally what they have written; and playing games and singing songs that practice the names of animals and their movements. They also work in small groups to tell each other how to color the different animals, to create sentences about animal pictures, to introduce themselves as an animal to their neighbors, to create a dialog between two animals, to write their animal dialogs on chart paper and to read and role-play them, and to edit the dialogs that they have written. They learn about the layers of the rainforest and where each animal lives, what they eat, and what their body coverings are. They write and record conversations between two animals that incorporate all of the information covered in class. They create the sounds of the rain in the rainforest through claps, snaps, and pounding feet. They write a paragraph about the rainforest and, finally, they make *batidos de mango* (mango shakes).

Conclusion

Although each class is different from the others in content and specific activities, all of the teachers planned interesting thematic units that included daily review of language; rich, comprehensible input in an immersion setting; and opportunities to think critically and to process language and negotiate meaning. They also involved students as active and interactive participants in a variety of activities that reflect the goals of the national standards. Although creating thematic units takes time and effort on the part of the teacher, this way of teaching engages students and provides them with a meaningful and exciting context in which to learn a new language.

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Model Early Foreign Language Programs: Key Elements

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Schools and school districts across the United States are establishing and expanding foreign language programs. Although most programs are found at the secondary school level, an increasing number are being established in elementary schools. A survey by the Center for Applied Linguistics indicates that 31% of U.S. elementary schools are offering foreign language instruction, up from 22% a decade ago (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999).

In the late 1990s, the U.S. Department of Education funded an effort to identify early foreign language programs that could serve as models for schools or districts interested in establishing or enhancing early-start, long-sequence foreign language programs. Seven model programs were identified through a nomination and selection process informed by the national standards for foreign language education and by research on effective language instruction for elementary and middle school students (Curtain & Pesola, 1994; National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999). The programs selected met specified criteria in the areas of curriculum, outcomes, ongoing evaluation, coordination with content areas, articulation from elementary to secondary school, accessibility, student diversity, professional development opportunities, and community support. Although the seven programs represent a range of program models and instructional strategies, they had a number of critical elements in common. This digest describes these elements, which are deemed key to the long-term success of early foreign language programs.

National Foreign Language Standards

All seven programs have incorporated the five Cs of the national standards (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities) into their curriculum. In some districts, the five Cs explicitly form a core element of the foreign language curricula for all grades. In others, the content-related curricula address the standards in an integrated, almost organic way. Interestingly, none of the programs has adopted textbooks to form the core of its instructional program. Rather, materials are identified or developed that connect language learning to the immediate context or to specific lessons in the regular curriculum.

A Focus on Content

All seven of the model programs use content-based or content-enriched curricula that are closely tied to the general elementary school curriculum. *Content-based* programs are those in which one or more subjects are taught in the foreign language. Immersion programs, in which some or all academic subjects are taught in the foreign language, are content based. *Content-enriched* programs are those in which language lessons include concepts from subjects such as math, science, and geography, mostly as reinforcement of subject matter classes taught in English. Students in a third-grade Spanish class in Toledo, Ohio, for example, learn about the growth processes of a plant through a Total Physical Response activity conducted entirely in Spanish, then read a Spanish news article on the same topic.

Articulation and Alignment

Language instruction in the elementary grades frequently emphasizes creative activities that involve oral communication; there is not a strong focus on accuracy or written language. As a result, there can be a disconnect when students move to the higher grades, where there is more emphasis on grammar, writing, and formal assessment. The challenge is compounded in decentralized districts, where a school-based management approach may favor institutional autonomy at the expense of articulation with programs in other schools. The seven model programs address this challenge through meetings, teaching exchanges, and standardization of curricula and assessment. In Glastonbury, Connecticut, for example, curriculum goals for languages are standardized across all eight schools in the district. Meetings are held not only with the district's

foreign language teachers and administrators, but also with staff at the University of Connecticut to enhance the transition to higher education for secondary students. Another way in which this district strengthens articulation and alignment is through an innovative program of exchange teaching. From time to time, the foreign language teachers trade classes—elementary school teachers move to a high school and vice versa.

Effective Teaching Methods

Teachers in the seven programs keep their students motivated through age-appropriate, enjoyable lesson activities, many involving pair- or small-group work. In the elementary grades, songs are popular, especially those that fit new lyrics to familiar tunes. Most activities have a strong focus on communication and student interaction and a minimum of "listen and repeat after me" instruction. Teachers have devised creative guessing games and simulations that educate, entertain, and motivate learners and that bring together students from different grade levels. Fourth graders at Ephesus Road Elementary School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, for example, help first graders review French numbers, animals, colors, and verbs of motion by leading them in a guessing game using numbered animal puppets. In a fifth-grade class at the same school, the French teacher tells the story of a mother moose in eastern Canada traveling to the west coast to be united with its baby moose. Students in small groups move a moose figure across maps and answer questions about geographic regions and time zones as they listen to the story.

Appropriate Use of Technology

Training staff in the effective use of computer-based resources is a major focus of in-service staff development in nearly every one of the seven programs. Districts are also increasing younger learners' access to computers. Ephesus Road Elementary School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is notable in its use of interactive Web-based communication with other French language programs around the world through "Ethnokids" (www.ethnokids.net). This is a joint effort of teachers and students at dozens of elementary schools in countries around the world, including Belgium, Vietnam, Guyana, and Côte d'Ivoire. Students from each participating school contribute essays, drawings, and descriptions of celebrations, homes, and schools—all in French.

Student Assessment

Although all of the model programs have a strong assessment component, specific assessment practices vary widely from one program to the next. Bay Point Elementary School in Pinellas County, Florida, uses a Home Assessment System that involves parents, regular classroom teachers, and FLES teachers in the students' language learning process and allows students to proceed at their own pace. Students are given task cards that indicate specific activities that they need to be able to do (e.g., "I can describe the contents of my backpack"). There are 10 levels of tasks, with 10 tasks at each level. As children demonstrate the tasks at home, their parents sign the task cards, which the students then file in the classroom, providing a portfolio of their foreign language performance. The teacher quizzes students in class to confirm their ability to carry out the tasks.

To assess progress in speaking and listening skills in the partial immersion Japanese program at Richmond Elementary School in Portland, Oregon, teachers conduct a one-on-one interview with each student at the end of the school year. In kindergarten, each student brings a blank videotape to school which is then used in succeeding years to record the interviews. In the earlier grades, the interviews are simple exchanges of questions and answers, but by fifth grade, the interviews are conducted according to Oregon Japanese Oral Proficiency procedures, resulting in a 15-minute ratable performance sample. This tape follows the students to middle school, where at least one additional interview is recorded.

Funding

Establishing and maintaining an early-start, long-sequence foreign language program costs money. Most of the model programs have received grant funds from state or federal sources, particularly during the start-up phase. The pre-implementation and early implementation years of foreign language programs require the greatest concentration of resources. Curricula and evaluation procedures must be developed, books and other instructional materials must be purchased, and teachers must be recruited and trained. Most programs have been able to diversify and localize much of their funding as they mature, turning to federal and state grants for special needs such as program evaluation, articulation with postsecondary programs, or expanded use of technology.

Professional Development

Professional development is particularly critical during the early stages of a foreign language program but continues to be important as programs mature, curricula change, and new technology is introduced. Professional development opportunities offered by the model programs include demonstration lessons, in-service workshops, and participation in professional association conferences. The program in Toledo, Ohio, has offered its teachers a low-cost summer language camp; teachers in Prince George's County, Maryland, take university courses taught by the district's foreign language supervisor.

Advocacy

Outreach to the community, visibility at the school and district levels, and involvement of parents have been important to initiating programs, expanding them, and keeping them going during times of tight budgets. In most cases, advocacy for the programs involves media attention. All seven model programs have been featured on local television stations and in newspaper articles. Program newsletters and foreign language fairs are among the ways that program staff have captured and kept community support. Political connections are also important to these programs. The superintendent in Springfield, Massachusetts, is a major advocate for early foreign language education; in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, two foreign language teachers have served on the school governance committee of Ephesus Road Elementary for several years. Having the support of individuals and groups who are in a position to influence the future of the foreign language programs can be crucial to their long-term success.

Conclusion

It is clear that many qualities and characteristics contribute to the success of early foreign language programs. In addition to those described above, the seven model programs have demonstrated flexibility, teamwork, leadership, and commitment. They have adapted to changes brought about by unanticipated events, including diminished funding. They have forged close working relationships with district superintendents, members of the board of education, school principals, regular classroom teachers, parents, and others in the community. They have strong leaders with a vision of foreign language teaching and learning who know how to inspire others and organize the people and resources necessary to build an effective program. Finally, everyone involved has a deep commitment to the program and to the goal of providing effective foreign language education for young learners.

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Model Early Foreign Language Programs

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Planning for Success

Common Pitfalls in the Planning of Early Foreign Language Programs

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There has been a significant increase in new foreign language programs at the elementary school level in recent years. Many of these programs, often referred to as foreign language in the elementary school or FLES programs, have been implemented to comply with state mandates, while others have been developed in response to parental pressure for early language learning opportunities for their children. The growing body of information about the cognitive and academic benefits of early bilingualism will no doubt fuel the continued development and expansion of these programs. Unfortunately, many will not succeed over an extended period of time because of planning decisions that were not carefully thought out or that were based on inaccurate assumptions about foreign language learning. The purpose of this digest is to identify some common pitfalls in program planning and to focus attention on issues that must be considered in the planning stages if early foreign language programs are to succeed.

Pitfall: Scheduling foreign language classes too infrequently or in sessions that are too short.

There is a widespread misperception that children learn foreign languages easily even with very limited exposure. As a result, some programs operate on the assumption that a little bit of language instruction is better than no language instruction at all. This perception contradicts the recommendations of foreign language professionals and the experience of successful programs (Gilzow & Branaman, 2000). A sequence of instruction that includes sufficient instructional time is needed for students to achieve proficiency in another language. Met and Rhodes (1990) suggest that "foreign language instruction should be scheduled daily, and for no less than 30 minutes" (p. 438). A national group of experts, convened by Goethe House New York, recommended a minimum of 75 minutes per week for any program designated as FLES; they agreed that these classes should meet all year, during the school day, at least every other day (Rosenbusch, 1992). More recently, the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* (Swender & Duncan, 1998) proposed a higher standard: elementary programs that meet from 3 to 5 days per week for no less than 30-40 minutes per class; middle school programs that meet daily for no less than 40-50 minutes; and high school programs that equal four units of credit.

Pitfall: Treating foreign languages differently from other academic subjects.

In most countries around the world, languages have the same status as other academic subjects and are a regular part of the curriculum of every school. Instruction usually starts no later than Grade 5, and often earlier. Given that most of these countries are much more successful than the United States at producing adults who can speak more than one language, we would do well to follow their example. Foreign languages should be recognized as valid academic subjects and be accorded the same status and priority for instructional time as other school subjects.

Pitfall: Offering only commonly taught languages, without considering other important world languages.

Spanish is by far the most commonly taught language in the United States, followed by French (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999). While there is no denying the importance of these two languages both domestically and globally, there is a tremendous need for individuals who speak many other world languages. The United States interacts with virtually every nation in the world; the need for proficiency in the languages of these countries has never been higher (Brecht & Ingold, 1999). It is impossible to know which language will be most useful to any given elementary school student or which will be most important for our country in the future. It is important, therefore, to offer a variety of languages in order to provide choices for individual students and to broaden the range of languages spoken by U.S. citizens.

Pitfall: Implementing a new program in all grades at the same time.

There are many stresses in launching a new foreign language program at the elementary school level. Unlike teachers in other curriculum areas, foreign language teachers cannot turn to existing textbook series and standardized materials as they plan a program. This is partly because elementary school programs differ markedly from one place to another. Locating and adapting appropriate materials is a formidable task even when the language is introduced in only one or two grades at a time. If a new program is introduced in all grades at once, the task is much greater. Although all students are beginners in the first year, even introductory lessons need to be adapted to the different developmental levels of students in different grades. In the second year of the program, curriculum for every grade level after the first one needs to be written. This process continues yearly until the entire program is in place. It is much more effective to implement a new program in only one or two grades during the first year, then add another grade each year until it is in place at all levels.

Pitfall: Ignoring the needs of students who enter the program in later grades.

Students who enter the program after the second year require significant support to catch up with classmates who have already had 2 or more years of foreign language instruction. This support may be provided in the form of supplementary materials and additional instructional time. Without such support, newcomers are likely to experience considerable frustration and may never reach the level of language proficiency of their peers. If the proportion of newcomers to a program becomes too great, especially at more advanced levels, the language experience for all students may be diluted in a misguided attempt to make it comprehensible for the new students. Specific plans must be in place to provide appropriate support for newcomers before the language program enters its second year of operation.

Pitfall: Failing to plan for appropriate articulation from elementary to secondary school programs.

Articulation issues, when postponed, can lead to the eventual disintegration of an early language program (Abbott, 1998). No child who has already studied a language for several years should be treated as a beginner after moving on to middle school. Admittedly, bridging the middle school years is a difficult challenge. Because middle schools typically receive students from several elementary schools, they may have some incoming students with extensive language experience in elementary school and others who have had no prior language instruction. This presents a significant scheduling challenge. Courses for students with prior language learning experience must be designed to build on the learning that has taken place in elementary school. If elementary school program planners involve secondary school teachers and administrators in addressing these issues in the early planning stages of their program, the potential for long-term success is much greater.

Pitfall: Hiring teachers who do not have both language and teaching skills.

There are two misconceptions that sometimes influence the hiring of foreign language teachers: that a native speaker is always a better choice than a teacher who has learned the language as a second language, and that teachers at beginning levels of instruction do not need the same degree of language proficiency as those who teach at more advanced levels. In reality, teachers at all levels need to be fully proficient in the language they teach. But native or near-native language proficiency is not the only requirement. Language teachers also need to be knowledgeable about second language acquisition, especially in children, and about appropriate second language teaching strategies and practices.

Teachers who cannot comfortably use the target language for classroom purposes will not be able to surround learners with language, an essential component of an effective language learning environment. They will also find it difficult to develop and create curricula and activities in the target language. Even fluent speakers of the language may be ineffective in the classroom if they are not knowledgeable about second language acquisition, child development, and teaching strategies for American elementary school students.

Pitfall: Planning and scheduling the foreign language program in isolation from the general curriculum.

An isolated foreign language program can justifiably be perceived as an intrusion on precious time in the elementary school day. By contrast, a content-related program can reinforce the goals of the general curriculum, provide additional practice with significant concepts, and give learners a second chance at understanding material from other curricular areas. A common characteristic of seven model early foreign language programs examined in Gilzow and Branaman (2000) is a close connection with the general elementary school curriculum.

Effective language instruction is thematic and builds on topics and contexts that are relevant to the students. These topics or contexts can vary greatly, from activities based on the regular school curriculum, such as those found in content-based or content-related instruction, to other activities typically found in early language programs, such as drama, role-play, games, songs, children's literature, folk and fairy tales, storytelling, and puppetry. All of these activities contribute to the other content areas and to the basic mission of the school, because they all contribute to the child's learning.

Pitfall: Planning schedules and workloads that lead to teacher burnout.

There is currently a shortage of qualified teachers for early language programs. To rectify this situation, it is imperative to build programs that are good for children and also good for teachers. With this in mind, the Georgia Department of Education stipulated that FLES teachers in state-supported model programs should teach no more than eight classes per day, leaving time for the many additional responsibilities of a FLES teacher: interacting with numerous classroom teachers, developing curriculum and materials, communicating with parents and community, and building public relations for the program.

If language teachers work under unfavorable conditions, they are likely to burn out and leave the profession or opt for regular classrooms. There are dangers in the proliferation of early language programs when attention is not given to the stress factors involved in typical teacher workloads. Elementary school language teachers may find themselves teaching as many as 14 classes in a single day, seeing as many as 600 students in a week. Their classes are often scheduled back to back, and they rarely have their own classrooms. They often lack professional support and opportunities for inservice training, and their schedules rarely allow them time to collaborate with other language teachers.

Conclusion

While it is not possible in this short space to address every issue involved in planning an early language program, this digest identifies a number of important considerations that program planners need to address. Many of the issues discussed here may sound familiar—they are similar to the obstacles that plagued the early language learning movement 40 years ago: a shortage of qualified teachers, a tendency to establish programs without sufficient planning or careful selection of teachers and materials, a lack of clarity about the connection between program goals and the amount of time allocated to the program, and a willingness to promise whatever the public wants to hear. In order to avoid the mistakes of the past, it is critical that program planners have a clear understanding of all of the components necessary to create a positive environment for early language teaching and learning.

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