Language Learning

A Worldwide Perspective

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In June 2004, the U.S. Department of Defense convened the National Language Conference to discuss approaches to meeting the nation's language needs in the 21st century and to identify actions that could move the United States toward becoming a language-competent nation. Participants from the government, the military, the education field, and the private sector assessed the country's needs and issued a call to action to improve its language capacity. U.S. Representative Rush Holt, a keynote speaker, maintained that the United States is in a "Sputnik moment" and needs a national commitment to languages that is

> on a scale of the National Defense Education Act commitment to science, including improved curriculum, teaching technology and methods, teacher development, and a systemic cultural commitment. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2004)

This is one of many calls for major changes in the U.S. approach to teaching foreign languages. During the two decades preceding the National Language Conference, numerous reports and articles decried the mediocrity of our students' foreign language skills and called for improved language education (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999). In a 2003 report, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) noted the marginalization of arts and foreign language instruction and asserted that both are at risk of being eliminated as part of the public schools' core curriculum.

The United States has not kept up with the rest of the world in providing quality foreign language instruction in its schools. How can we give our students the opportunity to develop proficiency in more than one language so that they and the broader society may benefit from expanded language competence?

SUCCESSFUL INTERNATIONAL MODELS

The practices and policies of other countries can serve as guidance. Knowledge of multiple languages is much more common and expected in countries outside the United States. One study (Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian, 2000) collected information from educators in 19 countries: Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Spain, and Thailand.[1] More recent developments within Canada and the expanding European Union also provide models to consider.

Successful foreign language programs have several common strands.

An Early Start

Most of the 19 countries in the survey begin compulsory language instruction for the majority of students in the elementary grades, whereas schools in the United States typically do not offer foreign language classes until mid-

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Country	1st Foreign Language	Starting Age	Additional Languages
Australia	French	6	German, Greek, Italian, Japanese
Austria	English	6	French, Italian
Brazil	English	11 or 12	Spanish, French, German
Canada	French	10	German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Punjabi
Chile	English	>12	French, German, Italian
Czech Republic	English and German	9	French, Russian, Spanish
Denmark	English	10	German, French, Spanish
Finland	English or other	9	Swedish, Finnish, German, French, Russian, Spanish, Italian
Germany	English or other	8	French, Spanish, Russian, Italian, Turkish
Israel	English	10	Hebrew, French, Arabic
Italy	English	8	French, German, Spanish, Russian
Kazakhstan	English	10	German, French
Luxembourg	German and French	6 or 7	English, Italian, Spanish
Morocco	French and English	9 or 10	Spanish, German
Netherlands	English	10 or 11	German, French
New Zealand	French	>12	Japanese, Maori, German, Spanish
Peru	English	>12	French, German
Spain	English	8	French, German, Italian, Portuguese
Thailand	English	6	French, German, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic
United States	Spanish	14	French, German, Japanese

Figure 1. *Foreign Languages Offered and Age of Introduction*

Source: Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian (2000). Reprinted with permission.

dle school or high school. Figure 1 summarizes the ages at which schools in the 19 countries studied introduce the first foreign language to the majority of their students.

Consider Luxembourg, for example, a multilingual country in which proficiency is expected in at least three languages. Children who do not speak Luxembourgish learn the language in compulsory preschool. All students study German beginning in 1st grade. In 2nd grade, students begin spoken French; in 3rd grade, written French is added to the curriculum. In most cases, both oral and written German and French are formally taught in grades 3–6, with Luxembourgish remaining a vehicle for communication and interaction. These 7- to 12-year-olds receive one hour of instruction each week in oral Luxembourgish and an average of six to eight hours of instruction each week in German and French.

A Coherent Framework

A well-articulated curriculum and assessment framework builds coherently from one grade level to the next, from elementary school to middle school to high school to postsecondary levels. It is also standards-based and proficiency-oriented. Such a framework indicates when students should start a foreign language, how much instruction they will receive, and what levels of proficiency they should attain. The framework should also be transparent, in the sense that both educators and students should clearly understand what the levels of proficiency mean.

Most European countries have already adapted their foreign language learning and teaching at the national level to the overall frameworks and standards defined by the Council of Europe's language policy. Europe has clarified what proficiency means for at least 18 languages. This promotes consistency and coherence in language education by coordinating efforts in the various stages of education—from elementary to secondary to postsecondary—and in such sectors as public schools, private language instruction, and technical training (Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000). The Council's clear standards carry over into the workplace as well: Employers know what they can expect from a graduate who has achieved a certain proficiency level in a given language.

In Australia, the Australian Language Levels Project (Scarino, Vale, McKay, & Clark, 1988) influenced major national curriculum development, particularly in Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, and Japanese. It subsequently provided a framework for collaborative syllabus development and a common exit assessment from senior secondary schooling.

Strong Leadership

Leadership can come from any direction. Grassroots leadership—arising from parents and the community—often stimulates the creation of a program and can play a role in expanding and ensuring quality. Fostering strong language education programs, however, requires a solid partnership among local, state, and federal leaders because each group plays an important role in setting policy and providing funding for education.

Such leadership and collaboration might look like this: With national model standards in mind, federal funding would provide incentives for establishing and improving language programs. States would align with federal priorities by including languages in their core K–12 curriculums and providing appropriate assessments, state standards for languages, guidelines for strong professional development related to language instruction, and adequate funding. Local school districts would implement programs that follow state guidelines and support programs and teachers. Superintendents would set priorities and make funding decisions in conjunction with local school boards.

Israel has this kind of strong and coherent language education program. A new language policy, introduced in 1996 and termed "three plus" (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999), requires the study of three compulsory languages—Hebrew, English, and Arabic—in addition to heritage, community, or other world languages.

Language as a Core Subject

Arguably one of the most influential policy decisions that countries make with respect to foreign language learning is the status of foreign languages within the school curriculum. In the 19 countries studied, 15 required at least one foreign language. Frequently, foreign languages in these countries claim the same status as mathematics, reading, and writing, and are required for school exit examinations and university entrance.

Teacher Education

As in all areas of education, well-trained teaching professionals are important contributors to excellence in language education. In some countries, such as Finland, university-based teacher education programs are highly selective, drawing teachers from a pool of the best high school graduates. Other countries, like Morocco, report that their language teachers are some of the best-trained teachers in the country. Becoming a secondary school English teacher, for example, involves obtaining a four-year degree in English from a university or teacher training college, with one year of specialization in either literature or linguistics. Students then spend a year studying language teaching methodology and getting practical training at the Faculty of Education. The majority of English teachers in universities and teacher training colleges in Morocco hold doctoral or masters degrees from British or U.S. universities. In addition to preservice preparation, inservice development for language teachers is considered one of the keys to success.

In several of the countries studied, teacher participation rates in professional development courses, seminars, and conferences are high. Many countries have an elaborate system of inservice professional development in place, with training widely available and, to some degree, required. Teachers are encouraged to attend courses and workshops, study abroad, and participate in collaborative learning—in study groups, for example—at the local school level.

In Germany, all states have systems in place that enable teachers to choose from a variety of courses offered at regional or state education centers. Each year, teachers are eligible for one week of inservice training, which the state pays for. At present, there is some discussion about making inservice training mandatory. In the Czech Republic, foreign language teachers are increasingly taking the opportunity to study abroad or attend international courses in countries with excellent reputations for foreign language teaching, such as the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands.

Promoting Proficiency

Learning content matter through the medium of a nonnative language has become increasingly popular in many of the countries studied. Such instruction frequently occurs at the secondary school level, once students have acquired sufficient proficiency in the language. In Finland, for example, a substantial amount of content-area instruction takes place in English. A 1996 survey showed that 5 percent of elementary schools, 15 percent of middle schools, and 25 percent of high schools used this approach in some form.

In European immersion programs or bilingual programs, students—typically those in primary school—receive subject-matter instruction exclusively, or in large part, in a second language. In Canada, immersion education is a successful and widely researched practice that mainly targets the English-speaking majority learning French (Turnbull & Lapkin, 1999). The United States practices im-

mersion education to some degree, and there has been a recent upswing in the number of two-way immersion programs, in which native speakers of two different languages (most often Spanish and English) receive instruction in both languages in the classroom.

Technology

Many of the countries surveyed are using technology to increase interaction with native speakers and improve classroom instruction. The Internet is increasingly becoming the technology of choice, with students accessing authentic materials—texts and audio/video files—in the language of study and interacting with native speakers in online chat rooms. Video-based language programs are also increasingly available. These tools can improve classroom instruction by providing access to authentic uses of the target language, increasing students' motivation to use the language, reducing students' anxiety about their performance in the language, and providing individual students with more practice in using the language than a traditional classroom setting might allow. In fact, research suggests that students produce more language—and higher-quality language—in computer-mediated contacts than in face-to-face interactions in the classroom (Leloup & Ponterio, 2003). This is another area that the United States can pursue to improve language skills outcomes.

Heritage Languages

Most countries have linguistically diverse populations with communities that speak a variety of languages. A number of respondents in the study described programs that aim to develop the mother tongue skills of members of those communities. Such programs conserve the language resources of a country and foster language achievement among minority populations.

For example, subsequent to passage of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1990), a number of provinces declared multiculturalism policies and established heritage language programs in their official school curriculums (Canadian Education Association, 1991; Cummins, 1991). These heritage languages include both immigrant languages—such as Cantonese, Mandarin, Portuguese, and Ukrainian—and indigenous languages, such as Inuktitut, Cree, and Mohawk. Several Canadian provinces have developed First Nations language maintenance programs to promote specific indigenous languages.

New Zealand has established *language nests* for Maori, an official language with few native speakers, and for some Pacific Island languages. Beginning at the preschool level, children are immersed in the language; later they may choose bilingual classes or special schools in which Maori is the language of instruction.

The United States has a great diversity of languages spoken within its borders. In fact, the 2000 U.S. Census documented the current use of more than 300 languages. U.S. educators can take advantage of the cultural richness of the many immigrant and indigenous communities within the United States by promoting the learning of the heritage languages spoken in these communities. One promising approach is two-way immersion, which supports continued growth in native language skills among heritage language speakers.

AS EUROPE SEES IT

In 2003, the Commission of the European Communities approved the 2004–2006 action plan, *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity*. To further the goals of the European Union, the commission asserted that "the ability to understand and communicate in other languages is a basic skill for all European citizens" (Commission of the European Communities, 2003). The action plan moves that agenda forward. Among its policies and recommendations, it calls for learning "the mother tongue plus two other languages" in primary schools and carrying that study into secondary education, postsecondary education, and beyond through classroom instruction, technology-based activities, and study abroad.

The plan also focuses on improving professional development by providing teachers with greater access to travel abroad; facilitating effective teacher networks at the regional, national, and European levels; and commissioning research in language pedagogy and disseminating new findings. The plan encourages specific e-learning opportunities, such as *e-twinning*, a program in which schools from different European countries pair up to increase language learning and intercultural dialogue among students.

The plan calls for building a language-friendly environment by supporting linguistic diversity and encouraging the learning of regional, minority, and migrant languages, with specific activities, such as conferences, designed to implement these objectives. European countries have always been more attuned to the importance of language skills than the United States has been, but the coming together of the members of the European Union around such principles promises to take Europe giant leaps ahead.

A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

Like the European Union, Canada has embraced language learning more enthusiastically than the United States has.

In a recent policy initiative, the country rededicated itself to its goal of making its two official languages—English and French—available to all Canadians. In 2003, Canada released a five-year action plan for education, community development, and public service within a new accountability framework to promote the use of both official languages (Government of Canada, 2003). A notable objective for the education plan is to ensure that by 2013 half of all secondary school graduates are bilingual in English and French—roughly double the current number of bilingual graduates.

The Canadian government has pledged new and increased funding for programs to help schools and communities achieve these goals, committing more than $700 million to the five-year plan. This national initiative works in conjunction with an ongoing commitment to support the full array of heritage languages spoken across the country.

WHAT'S AHEAD

U.S. schools and policymakers have a lot to learn from the way other countries support foreign language education. Learning languages has not been an education priority in this country in recent years. A case in point relates to assessment. A promising development in the late 1990s was including foreign language as a new subject area in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Yet although development of the language assessment was well on its way, the first administration of the test to 12th graders was postponed. Decisions like this underscore the fact that we have marginalized languages in the curriculum.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages is working with colleagues around the country to celebrate 2005 as the Year of Languages in the United States (see www.yearoflanguages.org). Perhaps this initiative will raise interest in foreign language learning in communities, schools, and government agencies. We hope it will serve as the impetus for implementing some of the lessons that we have learned from other countries about foreign language education.

ENDNOTE

1. For a comprehensive report on the study, including a summary of other comparative language education studies, see www.cal.org/resources/countries.html.

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