THE ABCS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

If you already have a foreign language program in your elementary school, you have discovered how impressive it is to see young children learning a foreign language. But many other parents aren’t quite so fortunate. Statistics vary, but foreign language programs can be found in only about 25 to 30 percent of all public and private elementary schools in this country. Foreign language study should be considered a priority, especially if we want our children to be responsible citizens of our world.

What is FLES*? (pronounced “flestar”)

FLES* is the overall term for all types of “early-start” elementary foreign language programs. These programs are most successful when planned and implemented in the context of both the total elementary school program and the K-12 foreign language sequence. Basically, there are four different program models which can be adapted, modified, or combined to suit the individual needs of schools and school districts. All four program models are similar in that they reflect the national foreign language standards; provide students with some fluency in the language; help children learn about different cultures and provide them with an enlarged vision of the world; motivate them to continue foreign language study in middle school, high school, and beyond; and contribute to the K-12 foreign language sequence.

Why should foreign language be taught be taught in elementary school?

Research indicates that before the age of 10 the brain is at its optimum ability to learn foreign language sounds. The national foreign language standards indicate that “earlier starts with language instruction ensure greater success for more students.” Also, FLES* students outperform non-FLES* students on basic skills assessments, demonstrate greater mental flexibility and creativity, develop a greater openness to other cultures at a young age, and outperform their peers on the advanced placement (AP) foreign language exam.

Foreign language teachers and curriculum

Foreign language teachers need to have a high level of proficiency in both English and the foreign language, because children imitate exactly what they hear. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about FLES* methodology, materials, and the content of the U.S. elementary school curriculum.

Depending on the goal of the particular program, foreign language is taught with a focus on communication, cultural appreciation, and connections to various aspects of the elementary school curriculum. The emphasis is on students’ oral (with some written) performance in the foreign language in real-life situations, using different approaches such as story-telling, child-appropriate themes, topics from the elementary school curriculum, and so forth. Grammar is taught by using the foreign language in meaningful, age-appropriate activities. For example, in talking about favorite desserts, we might hear the following:

(Spanish) Me gusta helado de chocolate... ¿y tú?
(French) J’aime la glace au chocolat... et toi?
(English) I like chocolate ice cream... do you?

The early-start foreign language programs use a wide-variety of age-appropriate materials such as computer programs, guided use of the Internet, everyday objects, games, and so forth.

What can parents do to advocate for and support early-start start foreign language programs?

Parents can

- Assist with assessing the school’s needs for FLES*;
- Help in identifying the school’s foreign language resources;
- Provide assistance in developing realistic program goals;
- Serve on a study committee to collect information on all kinds of early-start foreign language programs;
- Advocate for a program by speaking with other parents, PTA leaders, policy makers, and school personnel.

Those parents whose children already study a foreign language in school can enhance their children’s study in the following ways:

- Encourage the child to use the foreign language outside of school;
- Help children to read foreign language picture books;
- Encourage them to use a children’s foreign language dictionary;
- Contact the teacher to see what kind of home support is needed;
- Check homework assignments and read teacher’s communications about the program;
- Attend events that feature music, dance, or food from other countries;
- Borrow a variety of age-appropriate foreign language materials from the library;
- Assist in the preparation of a child’s foreign language class project.

Making foreign language programs affordable

Although it’s true that today many schools and school districts are experiencing tremendous budget restrictions, making it difficult to add foreign language instruction to the curriculum, there are ways to make a program affordable. For example, school communities can develop an inexpensive pilot program to demonstrate students foreign language performance. Others can obtain a FLAP (Foreign Language Assistance Program) grant when these grants are available from the U.S. Department of Education, or perhaps schools are able to get local foundation support. Often, even a foreign language club with many community outreach performances can generate interest in the development of a more intense elementary school program.

All in all, despite budget constraints, including foreign language study in a school’s curriculum reinforces much of the current elementary school program. Through an interdisciplinary approach in FLES* classes, students reinforce their listening, speaking, reading, writing, and other skills. They develop good study habits, and learn to appreciate different ways of doing things as they study different cultures and their traditions.

Checklist for a Good Early-Start Foreign Language Program

- Are all children included in the program?
- Are parents and other members of the community involved and supportive?
- Are the specific goals clearly stated, realistic, and within budget?
- Do the children use the foreign language inside and outside of school?
- Is there a student foreign language performance assessment based on the goals?
- Are the teachers fluent and trained for teaching foreign language to young students?
- Do the “basics” (time schedule, space, materials, etc.) accommodate the goals?
- Does the program give children an expanded view of the world?
Program Models for Early Elementary School Foreign Language Programs

Sequential FLES*
- One foreign language
- Three to five times a week
- Presented as a distinct subject, such as science or social studies
- Children may attain substantial fluency

Sequential FLEX
- One foreign language
- One to two times a week
- Introduces students to the other cultures and languages as a general concept
- Limited fluency; emphasis isn't on learning the language itself

Exploratory
- Multiple introductory foreign languages
- One to two times a week
- Introduces students to other cultures and languages as a general concept
- Limited fluency; emphasis isn't on learning the language itself

Immersion
- Total immersion (all day) programs; all subjects (math, social studies, science, etc.) taught in the second language
- Partial immersion; some subjects taught in the second language
- The language is the medium for content instruction rather than the subject
- Higher level of competence than those participating in other language programs

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RESOURCES

American Association of Teachers of French, Mailcode 4510, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4510; (618) 453-5731; E-mail: abrate@siu.edu; Web site: www.frenchteacher.org

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 6 Executive Plaza, Yonkers, NY 10701-6801; (914) 963-8830; E-mail: actflhq@aol.com; Web site: www.actfl.org

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, 4646 40th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20016-1859; E-mail: eric@cal.org; Web site: www.cal.org/ericcll

National FLES* Institute, P.O. Box 2632, Kensington, MD 20891; (301) 231-0824; E-mail: flesstarlipton@erols.com; Web site: [www.gladys-c-lipton.org].

National Network for Early Language Learning, Center for Applied Linguistics, 4646 40th Street NW, Washington, DC

20016-1859; (202) 362-0700; E-mail: nnell@cal.org; Web site: www.educ.iastate.edu/nnell

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