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**Foreign Language Learning: An Early Start. ERIC Digest.**

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During the 1960s, the idea of introducing foreign languages in the elementary school was a popular one, and elementary school foreign language programs were numerous. Interest in early language programs has resurfaced in recent years, and the number of programs being implemented is increasing. Many states are requiring the study of a foreign language at the elementary level. Louisiana, for example, has mandated that foreign language study begin in grade 4.

For a local school or community seeking to implement elementary school language programs, it is important that a rationale--reasons why the program should be incorporated into the curriculum--be developed to meet the needs and priorities of the particular area or institution the program(s) will serve. "School boards and parents organizations need reasons and evidence before making a commitment of time and resources to a new program" (Curtain, & Pesola, 1988, p. 1). A rationale should address benefits of language learning, the choice of languages to be taught, and the type of instruction to be used. A convincing rationale will help secure a place for foreign language education in the elementary school.

(For more information on elementary foreign language programs, see the ERIC Digest, Elementary School Foreign Language Programs, prepared by Jane Reeves, 1989.)

## **BASIC RATIONALE FOR BEGINNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY IN THE ELEMENTARY**

### **SCHOOL**

A general rationale for teaching foreign languages in the elementary school includes the following:

Longer sequence of instruction/Achievement of proficiency. Studies show that there is a direct correlation between the amount of time devoted to language study and the language proficiency that the students attain (Curtain & Pesola, 1988). It can be argued, therefore, that children who begin foreign language study in elementary school, and who continue such study for a number of years, have a better chance of developing a high level of foreign language proficiency than do students whose foreign language instruction begins in the post elementary school years. Because the level of proficiency plays a role in the achievement of positive benefits from knowledge of a foreign language, the economic, political, social, and intellectual benefits of foreign language proficiency are gained, in most cases, when students achieve advanced levels of language skill and cultural understanding.

Development of a global attitude. During their elementary school years, children are open to ideas of global understanding. Study of a foreign language and culture can serve as an important vehicle by

which to expand their intercultural views. According to many child psychologists, children reach an important developmental stage at the age of ten (Lambert, & Klineberg, 1967). "Children are in the process of moving from egocentricity to reciprocity, and information introduced before the age of ten is eagerly received" (Curtain, & Pesola, 1988, p. 4). With this expansion, children will have the freedom to explore the wealth of values and perceptions of the world; they will not be restricted to any one narrow view of life or one limited set of options (Carpenter & Torney, 1973).

Enhancement of cognitive skills. Foreign language learning enhances cognitive development and basic skills performance in elementary school children. In her article in FLESNEWS (Spring, 1989), Marianne Fuchsen wrote that "Foreign language study necessitates the acquisition of new learning strategies because it is foreign; basic to preparation for a changing world is the development of abilities to meet new challenges" (p.6). This idea that exposure to "foreignness" can lead to cognitive change was well known to Piaget; he believed that cognitive development takes place when a child is faced with an idea or experience that does not fit into his or her realm of understanding. The cognitive conflict becomes the catalyst for new thinking. Thus, foreign language study becomes the catalyst for cognitive and psychological development in young children because of the "conflict" that such study presents.

Children who are adequately exposed to two languages at an early age experience gains: they are more flexible and creative, and they reach high levels of cognitive development at an earlier age than their monolingual peers (Hamayan, 1986).

Enhancement of communication skills. The study of foreign languages has also been shown to have positive effects on memory and listening skills. While children are developing the ability to communicate in a different language system, they also learn to see language as a phenomenon in itself. Children become aware that language and its objects are independent of one another, and that there are many ways in which to refer to one object. This may also be the reason why language learning skills transfer from one language learning experience to another. Knowledge of one foreign language facilitates the study of a second foreign language (Curtain & Pesola, 1988).

Personal Benefits. Many personal benefits can be gained from the study of foreign languages; individuals who study foreign languages and cultures help themselves toward international and intercultural communication. They expose themselves to a global perspective, and enhance their career potential in the ever growing arena of international trade and cross-cultural professional exchange. (For more information on the personal benefits gained through foreign language study, see the ERIC Digest entitled Personal Benefits of Foreign Language Study, by H. Jarold Weatherford, 1986.)

#### **INFORMATION SOURCES FOR DEVELOPING A RATIONALE**

Research reports and studies can provide useful information on developing a foreign language program rationale. Strength through Wisdom, the President's Commission report on foreign language and international studies, provides a series of studies that highlight the need for providing students with opportunities for studying foreign languages. Paul Simon's book, *The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis* (1987), is a very useful source for constructing a rationale for foreign language learning. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) states that "achieving proficiency in a foreign language takes from four to six years" and suggests that such study should begin in the elementary school (Curtain, & Pesola, 1988, p.3).

State curriculum guides can also provide helpful information on developing a rationale. In Wisconsin's A Guide to Curriculum Planning in Foreign Language, for example, a number of long and short-term benefits of studying foreign languages are listed, including facilitating the learning of additional foreign languages, improving knowledge of geography, and achieving higher SAT and ACT scores, especially in verbal areas.

School curriculum guides are particularly important sources of a rationale for foreign language study at both the elementary and secondary level. "The local curriculum and philosophy provide the best information about the values and priorities of the school and community in which the language program will take place" (Curtain, & Pesola, 1988, p.7).

### **CONCLUSION**

If education is a means by which to prepare children for the complicated world that they inhabit, to give them tools with which to understand new challenges, then the educational system should offer an expansive curriculum as early as possible. Research has shown that through foreign language study, elementary school children receive the opportunity to expand their thinking, to acquire global awareness, to extend their understanding of language as a phenomenon, and to reach an advanced proficiency level in that foreign language. Parents, educators, and policymakers should find these reasons more than enough to prove the benefits of beginning foreign language study in the elementary school.

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