

Teaching Languages to Children: Lessons Learned Over Three Decades



Nancy Rhodes, Richard Donato, Myriam Met, Shuhan Wang
ACTFL Conference, San Antonio, Texas, November 21, 2014
1:15 – 2:15pm, Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center, Room 217A

Goal of session

- ▶ Present research that, through oral interviews with 16 leading educators, investigated the successes and challenges of teaching language to children from 1980-2010.
- ▶ Discuss ten lessons learned that emerged from common themes in the interviews and are presented in the form of recommendations for expansion of proficiency-based language instruction.
- ▶ Provide the opportunity to hear views of 3 leading language educators on specific lessons learned.

Format of Session

- ▶ Overview of research study
- ▶ Each of the other three presenters, Rick Donato, Mimi Met, and Shuhan Wang, all of whom were interviewed for the study, will describe one of the lessons learned from their perspective
- ▶ Final 15 minutes: Audience members are invited to participate in discussion with panelists on factors essential for future program success

Background of Study

- ▶ Major fluctuation in elementary school WL teaching in the last half of the 20th century and into the 21st century
- ▶ How this study came about . . .
- ▶ Wanted to conduct a retrospective on the successes of many of the early language programs since the 1980s

Methodology

- ▶ Interviewed 16 leaders in the field of early language education, including educators, administrators, parents, and researchers
- ▶ Interviews, by phone or in person, lasted 45-90 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and notes were also taken.
- ▶ Transcripts were coded independently by the researcher and research assistant; code assignments reviewed to identify major themes and specific responses to overarching questions

Interview Questions

- ▶ How would you describe some of the **high points of the growth of elementary school foreign/world language teaching in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s?**
- ▶ What were some of the **program models, language teaching philosophies, instructional approaches, and new organizations** that were successful?
- ▶ What are the most **important lessons you have learned** about building a strong elementary foreign language program?
- ▶ Survey results show a downturn in the number of elementary schools offering languages through the FLES model and an increase in the number of immersion programs. We also see that there are more foreign language experience (FLEX) than FLES programs. **What do these trends tell us?**
- ▶ What specific roles do you see for **immersion (one- and two-way) and heritage language programs** in the future?
- ▶ What do you see as the **major challenges and opportunities** for K–8 language education now and in the future?

Results: Lessons Learned

- ▶ Interviewees agreed on certain core features that are necessary for successful, sustainable, long-sequence language programs that begin early:
 - Program supported by a team
 - Instruction designed to continue after start-up funding
 - Sufficient instructional time allotted
 - Language of instruction appropriate for community
 - Language program seen as central to curriculum

- ▶ Data obtained from the interviews revealed ten strategies – or lessons – for developing and maintaining successful, long-sequence language programs.

Results: Lessons Learned

- ▶ 1. Focus on Good Teachers and High Quality Instruction
- ▶ 2. Identify and Clearly State Intended Outcomes From the Beginning
- ▶ 3. Plan for K-16 Articulation From the Start
- ▶ 4: Develop and Maintain Ongoing Communication Among Stakeholders
- ▶ 5. Conduct Ongoing Advocacy Efforts to Garner and Maintain Public Support
- ▶ 6: Advocate for District and Statewide Language Supervisors
- ▶ 7: Dispel Common Misperceptions About Language Learning
- ▶ 8: Monitor Language Development Through Continual Assessment
- ▶ 9: Harness the Power of Immersion
- ▶ 10: Remember That Money Matters

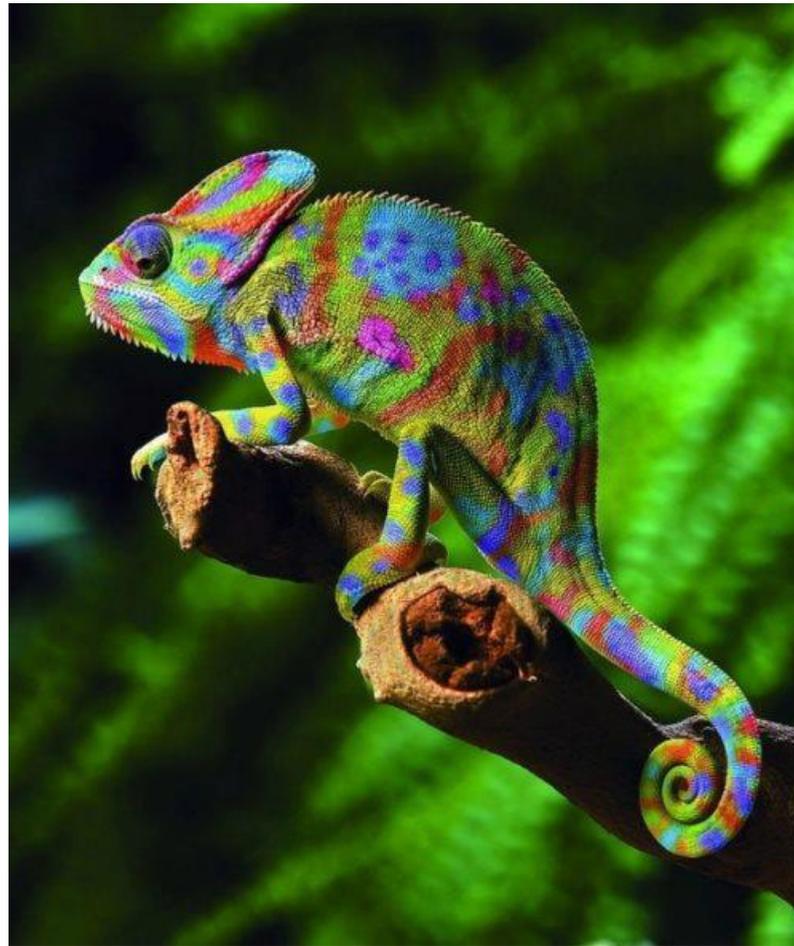
Lesson learned: Identify and clearly state intended program outcomes from the beginning (language, content, and culture)

Richard Donato, University of Pittsburgh

Identify Goals and Outcomes

- ▶ Important for research
- ▶ Important for program planning, monitoring, and implementation
- ▶ Important for program credibility and sustainability

Research: Painting the Chameleon



- ▶ Establishing clear and reasonable goals for language, content and culture provides benchmarks for learning across years of instruction, leads to curricular modifications and refinements, and results in improvements in student learning.

- ▶ Elementary school FL programs are fragile and vulnerable.
- ▶ Subject to dramatic reductions in time or elimination.
- ▶ Clearly stated goals that are assessed, articulated, and connected to the school curriculum lead to credible and sustainable programs.

Three decades ago ...

- We were experiencing a resurgence of elementary school foreign languages programs.
- Programs were mostly FLEX (less than 90 minutes per week), FLES was close behind, and far behind was immersion.
- Programs were expanding but the teacher supply was inadequate to meet the demand.

+ Then or Now?

A good teacher is the key to a good program.

It is precisely because the teacher is crucial to the continued growth and success of ... programs that there is concern about the number of teacher candidates, who will prepare them to teach, and what constitutes an appropriate program of teacher preparation.

Good instruction is associated with higher student outcomes regardless of the instructional model (FLEX, FLES, immersion) ...

One of our biggest challenges is creating and sustaining a steady supply of teachers who are highly qualified to do the challenges that these programs pose.

+ Then or now?

- Elementary school teaching was (and is) hard work.
- Well-prepared teachers were (are) in short supply.

EFFECTIVE TEACHERS
LIE AT THE HEART OF STUDENT
LEARNING.



+ What's different today?

Immersion is growing faster than FLES and FLEX.

That means ...

+ What's different today?

Teachers need to know more than ever about proficiency targets and how to determine student progress toward them.

- Teachers carry out classroom-based formative and summative performance assessments.
- Teachers need to plan and implement lessons that move students toward targets.

+ What's different today?

- Increased linguistic diversity in our student population
- Increased pressure from high stakes expectations (e.g., Common Core) and related assessments

+ Some Core Teacher Competencies Then and now

SKILLS

- Know and apply the developmental characteristics of the learners to instructional planning and delivery
- Apply child SLA theory to children who are still acquiring their first language
- Integrate the elementary school curriculum with language development
- Plan intentionally for progress toward higher proficiency
- Use a variety of approaches to measuring student learning

STRATEGIES

- Make yourself understandable without the use of English
- Check for comprehension and monitor student learning
- Provide for student interaction and other output
- Ensure cognitive engagement of all learners



WHAT IS NOT DIFFERENT TODAY

TEACHERS ARE

ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL VARIABLES

AFFECTING STUDENT LEARNING

It is our professional and moral obligation

to our students

to be better each day at what we do

than we were the day before.

Lesson learned: Dispel common misconceptions about language learning, especially about how children learn language

Shuhan Wang, ELE Consulting

Myth 1: *Young children are the best language learners because they learn effortlessly and efficiently.*

(Genesee, cited in Rhodes, 2014, pp. 8-9)

✧ Teenagers and adults are more efficient learners than young children. (Hakuta and Snow, 1985)

Myth 2: *Young learners are “deficient” who can’t do much with language.* (Donato, cited in Rhodes, 2014, p. 9)

✧ Children can learn a lot more than singing and dancing.

Implication: We need to understand how children learn and develop proficiency in the first and second languages.

Lesson learned: Dispel common misconceptions about language learning, especially about how children learn language

Myth 3: *Time in class (seat time) determines how much proficiency students will gain.* (Genesee, cited in Rhodes, 2014, pp. 8-9)

- ✧ Time on task is necessary but not sufficient.
- ✧ Input, interactions, intake, and output are key to language acquisition.
- ✧ Classroom discourse facilitates negotiation of meaning and language learning.

Myth 4: *One can attain language proficiency in a two year sequence in high school.*

- ✧ It takes a long time to learn a FL in a classroom setting, especially in a non-immersion setting. (Genesee, cited in Rhodes, 2014, pp. 8-9)
- ✧ Language learning is a lifelong process that needs to be validated in and outside the classroom.

Lesson learned: Dispel common misconceptions about language learning, especially about how children learn language

Myth 5: Children don't need to learn how to read and write in a second language at the beginning.

- ✧ Literacy development from the beginning to the end supports language development. (*Donato, cited in Rhodes, 2014, p. 9*)
- ✧ The more points of connection we can help children make between oral language, literacy, content, and context, the easier it is for them to develop biliteracy. (Hornberger and Wang, 2008)

Myth 6: Once a program is established, it will run by itself.

- ✧ It takes a whole community to support a language program, with a special need for parent advocacy and trust.
- ✧ Create opportunities for children to share and showcase their language learning in and outside the classroom.
- ✧ Build a brand for the program; make the community proud! Make language learning “cool”!

How can we best learn from these lessons?

- ▶ What steps do we (as a profession) need to take to ensure that we don't repeat errors of the past?
- ▶ What is one step that we each can take now, in our schools, districts, or states, to help expand high quality K-8 language teaching?
- ▶ Where do you see elementary school language teaching 10 years from now?

iGracias!

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- ▶ Myriam Met, Language Education Consultant
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Interviewees for the study

- ▶ **Martha Abbott**, ACTFL Executive Director; Former Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools Foreign Language Supervisor
- ▶ **Christine Brown**, U.S. Department of State, Education Resource Officer for Western Europe; Glastonbury (CT) Public Schools, Former Asst Superintendent
- ▶ **Donna Christian**, Center for Applied Linguistics, Past President
- ▶ **Helena Curtain**, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Emerita; Former Milwaukee (WI) Public Schools Foreign Language Supervisor
- ▶ **Carol Ann Dahlberg**, Concordia College, Emerita
- ▶ **Richard Donato**, University of Pittsburgh, Associate Professor of Foreign Language Education
- ▶ **J. David Edwards**, Joint National Committee on Languages/National Council for Languages and International Studies, Past Executive Director
- ▶ **Madeline Ehrlich**, Parent; Founder, Advocates for Language Learning
- ▶ **Fred Genesee**, McGill University, Professor of Psychology
- ▶ **Catherine Ingold**, National Foreign Language Center, Director (University of Maryland)
- ▶ **Myriam Met**, Language Education Consultant; Former Montgomery County (MD) Public Schools Foreign Language Coordinator, Former Acting Director, National Foreign Language Center
- ▶ **Mary Lynn Redmond**, Wake Forest University, Associate Professor
- ▶ **Martha Semmer**, Elementary School Foreign Language Teacher, Summit County, CO (ret.); Walt Disney Teacher Award Honoree
- ▶ **Marcia Rosenbusch**, Iowa State University, Past Director of the National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center
- ▶ **G. Richard Tucker**, Carnegie Mellon University, Paul Mellon University Professor of Applied Linguistics; Center for Applied Linguistics, Past President
- ▶ **Shuhan Wang**, Language Education Consultant; Formerly of Delaware Department of Education and Deputy Director, National Foreign Language Center

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