

## Working against the Odds in FLES Instruction

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It would have been difficult to predict, in the 1960s, the height of the surges and the depths of the troughs that the “*nouvelle vague*” of elementary school foreign language classes would experience over the coming decades. The popularity of FLES had as many rises and falls as hemlines during that period. Through the years since the initiation of the first foreign language classes in grades K-8, many fine programs have disappeared, brought down by the dissatisfaction with other programs that were hastily created and poorly conceived. Many programs were dismantled due to general misconceptions about the process of learning another language, particularly about children learning another language. In so many ways, it has been history repeating itself.

The list of questions and difficulties, over these many years, provides the one constant— Should foreign languages be elective or selective? Are there sufficient funds available? Do parents and teachers have expectations that are too high? At what time in the school day should languages be taught? And so on. One of the significant stumbling blocks in the early days of elementary school FL programs was the lack of teachers with the required skills in the target language and trained in elementary pedagogy. While staffing shortages may be less acute now, this matter does remain a concern for the profession.

Although students are the greatest stakeholders in the public school system, parents are the greatest risk takers. They invest their most valued assets, their children, in an enterprise over which they, seemingly, have little control and about which they often appear to have insufficient knowledge. Parents have direct access to those implementing a foreign language program, teachers and principals, and those who control the existence of the program, the Board of Education. The district superintendent is responsible to the Board and the Board is responsible to its constituency, the members of the community who elected them. Parents are invested with influence on all of those in control but this influence is only valuable if it is supported with knowledge.

In trying to put some of these concerns in perspective and in context, it is important to remember that all parents are consummate and dedicated foreign language teachers. They start with an immature, generally disinterested “student” with a limited attention span, who has entered into the world with no previously imprinted linguistic patterns. At the end of 4 or 5 years of every-waking- minute, daily, one-on-one, “introduction/practice” patterning, their student can hold a conversation, albeit limited in vocabulary and content, with a native speaker of the language. Proficiency achieved, and it was (people seem to think) so easy!

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Perhaps forgetting all the frustrations in communication over the years, parents who think of their exceptional if still limited success in language teaching, may be subject to misconceptions about an elementary school foreign language program. Yet look at what has been involved in effort and time in helping a child to speak a first language. They need to be aware of one fact:

*It takes a long time to learn a second language in a school setting. Most students do not have that time unless they start language learning in the elementary school.*

### **Dealing with Unrealistic Expectations**

The fact that children have unique language learning abilities is constantly observable. When families are required to move to an area in which a new language is spoken, the children, who learn it at play, are the first to be able to function comfortably with the new sounds, vocabulary, and modes of expression. Their pronunciation and intonation are those of their playmates. Based on this scenario, it is often assumed, and even stated, that elementary school students should emerge from their 30 to 90 minutes per week of exposure to another language with the skills necessary to converse with ease with a native speaker of the language. This assumption may even have been the result of statements by those within the school district. Why is this an unrealistic expectation?

One immediate answer is “Time on task.” In almost all skill subjects, it is accepted that the introduction of the initial aspects of the skill will be followed by practice, the length and quality of the practice determining the degree of eventual proficiency or expertise. Unless the piano lesson or the gymnastics lesson is followed by the student’s individual repetitions at the keyboard or in the gym, there is little gain from the lesson. Even in a school setting, the introduction of math concepts and the rules governing the spelling of families of words is supported by homework as well as daily practice in class. No one expects immediate absorption of arithmetic facts, math concepts, or spelling lists.

Exposure to foreign language in school (K-5) is frequently limited to a small slice of the day (20-30 minutes) in a class containing 20 to 30 students. The introduction of the language concept as well as the practice of its usage, for all students in that class, must occur within these parameters. Although elementary school age students may have certain unique language learning talents, expecting immediate high-fidelity imprinting and recording of this input on the language areas of the brain, with only limited repetitions, may be patently unrealistic.

If elementary school students are to engage in a meaningful exchange with an adult, then words, phrases, meanings, contexts will all be thrown into their cerebral hoppers and ground up. From this linguistic potpourri, students must

retrieve the specific vocabulary and the verbal glue to put it into a meaningful context. And this all must be accomplished instantaneously. Incredible! Yet it took them years to gain this skill in a language that they were surrounded by 24 hours a day.

Even for the finely tuned abilities of young children, learning a language is a progression of small steps when exposure occurs only in the classroom. Proficiency builds slowly and in small increments when it is confined solely to class time. These are the first steps.

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Another answer is “Content.” The goal in an elementary FL class is to provide students with the skills (how to say what and to whom) necessary to communicate in another language. If they are to exchange opinions and information in the classroom with their classmates and teachers, they need to learn vocabulary dealing with school and family life (their own and that of the target culture). They are not being prepared to deal with travel emergencies or with the creativity of restaurant menus. In class, students will talk about sports and family activities (their own and those of the target culture), not lost luggage. They will learn about the types of food that they prefer, like apples, chocolate, and ice cream, and not *escalopes de veau florentine à la Michel*. In the middle school, they may explore the fascinating world of haute cuisine nomenclature where few dishes are identified by a single word. However, in programs aimed at elementary school students, basic foods in their own and the target cultures will prevail.

A third answer is “Time in the School Day.” Classroom teachers complain that the school day is impossibly crowded. Additions come frequently, subtractions rarely. Classroom teachers have become responsible for more and more testing of a greater inventory of content and skills. Music, art, physical education and foreign language periods also impact their schedule. The increased incursion into the day of a greater variety of special areas [cultural and performance assemblies, DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) programs, fire, tornado, lock-down drills, etc.] further diminish classroom teachers’ time to accomplish the tasks which are their specific responsibilities. If foreign language instruction is viewed as a core subject—and it has been so declared in the U.S. Department of Education “Goals 2000”—it should be considered an inclusion instead of an incursion.

But why should foreign language instruction be considered that important? As well as being a valuable life skill, foreign language learning provides a number of benefits, which support many of a student’s other academic endeavors. The many

research projects on the effects of early grade school foreign language programs verify the positive effects that elementary foreign language programs have had on students' reading and math scores as well as documenting the increase in their scores on tests of higher order thinking skills, such as divergent thinking and figural creativity. Seen in this light, the foreign language class period may well be considered a support to classroom instruction not a usurper of class time. FL instruction supports an academic curriculum in extrinsic as well as intrinsic ways. The effect of the time spent in language instruction as well as the content it involves is actually recycled into other instructional periods. Some elementary school foreign language programs have made specific connections with daily classroom instruction by incorporating the content of other subjects into the foreign language curriculum. It results in content-based instruction, e.g., ecology units in the foreign language class.

Yet another answer is "Scheduling." "Difficulty in scheduling" is the reason most often given for the exclusion of a particular foreign language in a school district's multiple language program. To disallow more than one language in an elementary school district on this basis is to imply that difficulties are never to be overcome. To disenfranchise, on that same basis, the students who have chosen this language is also to imply that they are less deserving of consideration than the majority. (It is, of course, assumed that scheduling will and must always accommodate the majority.)

School districts have an avowed purpose of serving each student's special needs, interests, and talents and they generally tend to do so for the general school population in PE, music, math and reading. To provide instructional periods for these smaller or fewer student groups requires a more creative schedule. Scheduling is, more often than not, in the hands of administrators, most of whom have little time to devote to searching out remote solutions. Experienced and knowledgeable administrators involve those in the scheduling task who will be implementing the eventual schedule. They who work within the schedule see it from the inside out and tend to find in it many more feasible options than appear from the outside.

The stumbling blocks in the schedule can often be overcome by the addition of a part-time instructor. In many school districts then, the problem is not really scheduling, but priorities in the allocation of funds. School districts that are dealing with scheduling problems of their low enrollment languages need to consult the programs of districts that have dealt successfully with the situation.

In one district where French and Spanish are core subjects in elementary and middle school and where the number of elementary school students choosing French was considerably lower than those choosing Spanish, the following system has been successful for a number of years:

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There are three sections of the grade level. Individual students are placed in each classroom of the grade level based on achieving a harmonious personality mix of students, matching students' learning styles with teacher characteristics, separating certain individual students who do not work well together, accommodating an occasional ability grouping, etc. Simply placing all of the French students in one of the three homerooms would not allow the desired technique of mixing personalities and learning styles or allow equal numbers of students in each homeroom. Therefore, there are French students in each of the 3 homerooms. Three FL teachers (1 French, 2 Spanish) are scheduled into the building at the same time. At the beginning of the FL period, each of the FL teachers occupies one of the classrooms. French students from the other two homerooms move into the classroom where the French teacher is stationed. Spanish students from that French classroom move to one of the other homerooms for their daily lesson. This exchange is very orderly and is accomplished in a very few minutes. This system works with two to four classroom sections. If siphoning off the French students would cause the Spanish sections to be too large, then the French students would be accommodated in a temporarily unused room, such as a regular classroom vacated for PE, art, or music, the music or the art room, or the stage. In the middle schools all students take either French or Spanish so scheduling is handled in the same way as math or social studies.

*It takes a long time to learn a language in a school setting.  
But it's worth it!  
Just ask our students who have done it.*