

Research-Based Responses for Common Administrator Questions Compiled by Nicole Sherf and Daniel Bouvier

- “How can we find time in the schedule for an additional course?
Won’t teaching FL take time away from tested core subjects?”

Terry Caccavale, Past President of NNELL, shared an analogy that for which she was quoted in the Wayland Town Crier in 2003. She explained, "Adding foreign language to an already full elementary course of study is in no way comparable to trying to add a fifth quart of water to an already full gallon bucket. It is, rather, a question of coloring the water in the pail, thereby changing its appearance and tone without adding one ounce to its volume."

Research shows that FL teaching at the elementary level supports other subjects, improves overall literacy, and enhances creativity and problem solving even if time is taken away from Math instruction to make room for foreign language instruction.

Armstrong, P. W. and J. D. Rogers. (1997). Basic Skills Revisited: The Effects of Foreign Language Instruction on Reading, Math and Language Arts. Learning Languages, Spring, 20-31.

This study demonstrated that third graders who were taught Spanish for thirty minutes, three times per week showed statistically significant gains in their Metropolitan Achievement Test scores in the areas of math and language after only one semester of study. This study verifies two earlier studies that showed that foreign language instruction either had no detrimental effect on basic skills or a positive effect on students’ achievement in basic skill areas. *The results of this study are particularly interesting since one class of students in the experimental group had actually received one-and-one-half fewer hours of math instruction per week, yet still outperformed the students in the control classes in math.*¹

Rafferty, E. A. (1986). Second language study and basic skills in Louisiana. U.S.; Louisiana, from ERIC database.

A statewide study in Louisiana revealed that third, fourth, and fifth graders who participated in 30-minute elementary school foreign language programs in the public schools showed significantly higher scores on the 1985 Basic Skills Language Arts Test than did a similar group that did not study a foreign language. Further, by fifth grade, the math scores of language students were also higher than those of students not studying a foreign language. Both groups were matched for race, sex, and grade level, and the academic levels of students in both groups were estimated by their previous Basic Skills Test results and statistically equated. *The results of the analysis suggest that foreign language study in the lower grades helps students acquire English language arts skills and, by extension, math skills.*²

Robinson, D. W. (1992). The Cognitive, Academic and Attitudinal Benefits of Early Language Learning. In Met, M., ed. Critical Issues in Early Language Learning. White Plains, NY: Longman.

From the 1960’s through the 1990’s, some 12 dozen studies were conducted on the relationship between learning a second language early in life and cognitive ability. Robinson summarized many of them in this article, concluding, "the picture that emerges is . . . a youngster whose experience with two language

systems seems to have left him or her with a mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, and a more diversified set of mental abilities." ¹

Samuels, D. D. and R. J. Griffore (1979). The Plattsburgh French Language Immersion Program: Its Influence on Intelligence and Self-esteem. *Language Learning*, 29/1, 45-52.

Comparison of a group of students who participated in a French Immersion program for one year to a group of students who were enrolled in a regular classroom revealed that the first graders who learned French showed significant gains in measures of performance I.Q. ¹

- How can all students be involved in foreign language instruction at the elementary level? Can all students learn another language?

It is interesting that this question is never posed regarding ESL students' need to learn English. All ESL students are expected to learn English as a natural consequence of daily interaction in English. There are no English language waivers nor would anyone argue that two languages are too many for an ESL student, even if that student had learning disabilities.

Research indicates that those who benefit most from early foreign language instruction are not students with above average intelligence, but rather those of average intelligence who have more room to grow as a result of early foreign language instruction.

Garfinkel, A., & Tabor, K. E. (1991). Elementary school foreign languages and English reading achievement: A new view of the relationship. *Foreign Language Annals*, 24(5), 375-382. from Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts database.

In a four-year study of the relationship between the length of elementary foreign-language education & English reading achievement, 672 students from a Midwestern elementary school were administered reading tests after they had received two or four years of foreign-language instruction - up to grade six. *The sample represented varying intelligence levels. Results indicated that students of average intelligence profited most from the two extra years of instruction in terms of English reading skills.*²

Holobow, N. E., Genesee, F., Lambert, W. E., & Gastright, J. (1987). Effectiveness of partial French immersion for children from different social class and ethnic backgrounds. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 8(2), 137-151. from PsycINFO database.

Evaluated a half-day French immersion in kindergarten. The English and French language development of 122 native English-speaking children from both working and middle class backgrounds was assessed. Results indicate that the 73 experimental students progressed just as well in English as 70 matched controls who followed a conventional all-English program. *It was also found that socioeconomically underprivileged students (both Black and White) benefited from an immersion-type introduction to a foreign language as much as students from middle class homes did.*²

- Isn't it good enough to start foreign language study in 7th or 9th grade?

It would be unthinkable to wait to begin the study of Math, Science or English until the seventh grade. Likewise, the young child is primed for acquiring language proficiency at an early age. The initial building blocks of foreign language study most naturally connect with the elementary core curriculum. It makes developmental sense to teach a kindergartener how to greet and present oneself, to identify colors, numbers and calendar components in the target language at the very same time that these curricular components are being presented and reviewed in the child's native language. Content connections can easily be made in the following grades with the child's increasing proficiency.

The book, Language and Children: Making the Match says: "One of the most important factors influencing the development of language proficiency is the amount of time spent working with the language." It is a statement of the obvious, though it is infrequently put into practice with foreign languages. "When language learning begins earlier, it can go on longer and provide more practice and experience, leading ultimately to greater fluency and effectiveness."

Winslow, R. (1997). How Language is Stored in Brain Depends on Age. The Wall Street Journal, July. (Summary of Distinct Cortical Areas Associated with Native and Second Languages, Nature, 388, 1997)

A study of 12 healthy bilingual volunteers at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York revealed that the capacity to speak a second language is stored in different areas of the brain depending on when in life a person becomes bilingual. Children who learn a second language store that capacity, together with their native language, in one sector of the brain. Adults language learners store each new language learned in a separate area. This finding helped explain why children who learn two languages develop the ability to speak both with native proficiency and supported the argument that foreign language instruction should be part of the elementary and middle school curriculum. ¹

Holman, J. R. (1994). Learning A Language. Better Homes and Gardens, January, 41 & 43.

Holman stressed the advantages of learning foreign languages as early as possible. She cited the benefits in other areas of study, as well as recent neurobiological research that strongly suggested that the best time to learn a second or third language is before age 10. Holman also emphasized that adequate time must be devoted to language study in order to achieve the desired results; she quoted Dr. Lightbrown of Concordia University as saying, "Twenty minutes three times a week is not a very effective way to acquire a language, no matter when you start." ¹

Met, M. (1991). Foreign Language: On Starting Early. Educational Leadership, September.

Met summarized both the advantages and the shortcomings of three different approaches to early language learning: immersion, FLES and FLEX. In immersion, the content is taught through the foreign language. Since the classroom teacher is also the language teacher, this is a cost-effective model that achieves excellent results, but teachers with the language skills and certification to teach such classes are rare. FLES programs are sequential programs beginning at any grade K-6 that meet for a minimum of 90 minutes two to five times per week. If a FLES program is part of a well-articulated, long sequence of study, students will typically gain useable levels of proficiency in the language and also improve their

knowledge of and attitude toward other cultures. FLEX programs are short-term classes that focus primarily on culture. These programs can provide students with strong motivation to continue their language study later, but do not result in any meaningful level of language development.¹

- These kids can't understand what is happening in class. Why can't you talk more English or translate for them?

ACTFL's position statement on the "Use of the Target Language in the Classroom (May 2010)" states: "Research indicates that effective language instruction must provide significant levels of meaningful communication and interactive feedback in the target language in order for students to develop language and cultural proficiency. The pivotal role of target-language interaction in language learning is emphasized in the K-16 Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century. ACTFL therefore recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom."* (<http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=4368#targetlang>)

2009 ACTFL President Janine Erickson said in the August 2009 issue of the Language Educator that "Learning a foreign language in English, rather than in the language itself, has been compared to learning how to swim without water." Think up your own analogy: like learning to play baseball in a basement, like learning to write without using a pencil, like learning to travel by watching TV...

Please note that the above is not a comprehensive list of research, but rather a selected list of research and literature. For further studies, please refer to the sources listed below.

¹**"Minnesota New Visions: Languages for Life: The Effect of Second Language Learning on Test Scores, Intelligence and Achievement"** An annotated bibliography prepared by Elizabeth L. Webb, Program Specialist for Foreign Languages and International Education, Georgia Department of Education

²ACTFL web site – "Academic Achievement- Resources- What the Research Shows" (<http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID=4525>)