

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN INNOVATIVE
FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAM: REFLECTIONS FROM
A SCHOOL DISTRICT – UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

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1. Introduction

Recent federal legislation enacted in the United States, the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, calls for American students to leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having “demonstrated competence over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, [and] foreign languages”. Although every European country has a national policy for the introduction of at least one foreign language into the elementary school curriculum of every child (Dickson – Cumming 1996; Pesola 1992), it is estimated that foreign languages are only offered in approximately 31% of the elementary schools in the United States (Branaman – Rhodes 1997). However, studies indicate that, as a nation, we are generally receptive to teaching foreign languages in the elementary school. Forty percent of the American population believes that there should be a foreign language requirement in the elementary schools and seventy-five percent think that foreign language study should be an option available in the elementary school (Eddy 1980).

If American students are to leave grades 4, 8 and 12 with demonstrable proficiency in a foreign language, the number of foreign language programs at all levels will need to be significantly expanded and improved. This is particularly true at the elementary level. The importance of including foreign language study in the elementary school is also supported by the research on the amount of instructional time required for developing functional proficiency in a foreign language (Carroll 1967) and by the widely held professional view that language competence can only be achieved in well articulated, sustained sequences of

foreign language instruction (Donato – Terry 1995). By expanding foreign language instruction in the elementary school, students will have an extended opportunity to achieve the goals that have recently been developed and disseminated as the National Standards for Foreign Language Education (1996) and develop truly functional ability in a language other than their first language.

The major objection to incorporating foreign language instruction into the elementary school curriculum seems to be that there is not enough time in the instructional day (Baranick – Markham 1986). Our present national concerns with systemic educational reform and with competitiveness make this a critical time to explore more fully factors related to the implementation of elementary school foreign language programs. A number of major issues are often raised when considering foreign language education in the elementary school (FLES) for majority language speakers in the United States, that is for speakers of English as a mother tongue: (1) which model of instruction should be implemented – an immersion or standard FLES model; (2) at what age should foreign language instruction begin; (3) in what language(s) should instruction be offered; (4) what are realistic proficiency expectations for elementary school students studying a given language within a given model; and (5) how can we best assess the language proficiency of young children.

The goal of this article is to describe the systematic planning and subsequent implementation and evaluation of a new system-wide Spanish program at the elementary level in a small school district in suburban Pittsburgh, PA. (The system is a relatively small one comprising approximately 2,800 students who come from mostly European-American, working-class families.) In the sections that follow we will briefly discuss: (1) the active participation by all senior administrators including the superintendent in a year-long planning effort that culminated in choice of language, teacher selection, curriculum development and in-service training for all elementary school faculty members, (2) the ways in which the language program which is intended ultimately for all children in the district has been incorporated into the overall curriculum of the district, (3) the status of the current program which is presently nearing its second full year of implementation, and (4) plans for the future. We conclude by discussing factors that have contributed to the initial success of this exemplary program.

2. Genesis of the program

In May 1995, we were invited to attend an informal meeting with the Superintendent of Schools of Chartiers Valley School District and several of his administrative staff. The invitation resulted in part from our previous research evaluating the diverse aspects of the implementation of a Japanese program at the elementary school (see, e.g., Donato – Tucker – Antonek 1996; Tucker – Donato – Antonek 1996), and partly from the fact that Donato directs

the major foreign language education teacher preparation program in the region. This meeting was the beginning of a mutually beneficial and thoroughly enjoyable school district-university partnership which continues to the present day. Bernie Sulkowski, the superintendent, opened the meeting by articulating a vision for his students and for his district – a vision that included doing something different, something daring. He proposed that a new program be developed so that all of the district's pupils would study a common foreign language throughout their entire scholastic career. He described clearly how American secondary school graduates in the 21st century will be competing for positions in which numeracy, literacy, problem-solving and communication skills will be increasingly valued and moreover how students with bilingual language proficiency will possess a comparative advantage in comparison with their monolingual English-speaking counterparts. He predicted that tomorrow's graduates will compete for positions in Beijing, Paris, Tokyo and Zurich and not only for jobs in Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit and New York.

A number of questions were raised at the initial meeting. Was his vision plausible? If so, in which language(s) should instruction be offered? Were there teachers available? Would the community support such a program? Would the members of the School Board support such a program – and provide the necessary budgetary authorization? How could the school district and the universities (Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh) work collaboratively to their mutual benefit?

The group decided to form an "Elementary Foreign Language Committee" to oversee the planning and implementation of a new and innovative foreign language program. Committee members consist of the director of curriculum, Kathy Gori, who chairs the group, the superintendent, principals from the elementary and intermediate schools, selected elementary school teachers, the chair of the secondary school foreign languages department, and the university collaborators. To date (that is, through April 1998), the entire group has met on 12 occasions to plan, review accomplishments, and make decisions concerning priorities for future work. As appropriate, subgroups or individuals carry out specific activities which they report back to the Committee.

2.1. Choice of language and timetable for implementation

One of the first issues confronting the group was choice of language(s). A number of options were considered including French, German, Japanese and Spanish. At the time the district offered French, German and Spanish to students in grades 9-12 on an elective basis. In addition, members of the university partnership proposed that Japanese be considered because of their work with a local innovative program. A number of factors were considered such as likely

availability of prospective teachers and materials, potential community support, utility of proficiency in the target language for graduates, etc. For pragmatic reasons, the decision was made to select one language only, and to make its study compulsory for all children. At this point, the Committee decided that it would be useful to conduct a community survey to ascertain level of support for the program and to obtain feedback concerning the choice of language. A survey instrument was developed, piloted, revised and administered to a broad sample of parents as well as to all members of the school board. The results revealed broad general support for an innovative foreign language education program and support specifically for the teaching of Spanish. The second major issue was whether to begin the program from the bottom up, that is at the kindergarten level; from the top down, that is working backwards a year at a time from grade 9 where instruction then began; or from both ends to meet in the middle. After much discussion centering around issues such as scheduling, teacher availability and the necessity of ensuring long term articulation, a decision was made to propose to the School Board the implementation of a Spanish FLES program in September 1996 for all kindergarten children in the district. Data from the FLES Community Climate Survey developed by a Committee member and distributed to selected parents, the School Board, and a district Steering Committee (n=60; 78.3% response rate) indicated that 34% of the respondents preferred a program that introduced children to Spanish (the other third of the respondents were split among Japanese, German, French, or indicated that they had no preference) and that this new FLES program should have the goals of developing cultural knowledge (93%), engaging students in the excitement of language learning (80%), and building basic language proficiency (19%).¹ It was also decided to extend the program to grade 1 in September 1997; to grade 2 in September 1998 with the systematic introduction of new cohorts of kindergarten youngsters. With this plan, the district will have a fully articulated foreign language program from kindergarten through grade 12 in 2004. The Board of School Directors formally approved this plan in April 1996.

2.2. Development of an action plan

After deciding on the target language (Spanish) and the model for implementation (bottom up), the Committee next turned its attention to: (1) recruiting an appropriate teacher, (2) planning for curriculum development activities, (3) informing members of the community about the new program,

¹ It is interesting to note that these desired outcomes are quite similar to the rank-ordering of goals expressed by parents in our longitudinal study of a Japanese FLES program (Donato – Tucker – Antonek 1996; Tucker – Donato – Antonek 1996; Donato – Antonek – Tucker 1994).

and (4) orienting other teachers and administrators working in the system. These activities continued during late winter and spring of 1996. A major benchmark was the hiring of the first kindergarten Spanish teacher, Ms. Cassie (Quince) Kuzniewski who was a dually certified graduate from the University of Pittsburgh in elementary education and in Spanish. The early hiring of Ms. Kuzniewski meant that she was able to devote a substantial block of time to curriculum development activities during summer 1996 preceding the start of the program. She worked with other curriculum specialists in the district and in continuing consultation with Donato. Curriculum development activities benefited from and reflected work that had been done on the National Standards as well as innovative work that had been completed in the school district on “Standards in the Arts”.

2.3. Overview of the Spanish program

The Spanish program was begun in September 1996 with 11 classes comprising a total enrollment of 223 kindergarten students. Each class meets for 20 minutes per day, five days a week. The Spanish specialist (Ms. Kuzniewski) goes to the students in their regular classroom, and in effect, team teaches with the regular classroom teacher. Growing spontaneously from the enthusiasm for the program, a strong collaboration between the kindergarten teachers and the language teaching specialist developed and continues to mark this program as unique (see Donato – Tucker – Antonek 1994, concerning the problem of marginality of FLES programs). Rather than expressing indifference toward the new program by neither working to support it nor repudiate it, the kindergarten teachers established close contact with the FLES teacher and freely shared materials during the curriculum development phase of the program and learned Spanish during Ms. Kuzniewski’s lessons in their classrooms. The program and its teacher were clearly positioned from its inception as an integrated part of the kindergarten program and equal participants in the total school curriculum.

The curriculum was developed following the school-district template for planned courses of study. That is, each thematically organized unit (e.g., colors and shapes, numbers, greetings, calendar and weather, clothing and body parts, fiesta and foods, etc.) was specified according to: (a) student learning outcome, (b) content, materials, and activities, and (c) procedures for assessment. The main focus of each lesson is on vocabulary building and comprehension rather than production. The curriculum reflects this orientation in its assessment procedures including such activities as coloring, baking brownies, movement activities, and the playing of games. Every attempt is made to integrate Spanish with ongoing activities in art, music, library, physical education, and the computer curriculum. The integrated nature of the Spanish class is explicit and

obvious in the curriculum. Children learn numbers by accompanying jumping jack calisthenics with counting, listen to age-appropriate fairy tales in Spanish, and learn days of the week in Spanish when learning them in their regular classes. The teacher uses Spanish whenever possible in the classroom for classroom management and outside the classroom to greet her students in the hallways. She makes extensive use of manipulatives and visuals and brings in a wide variety of authentic materials. Her classes are enriched with visits by Spanish speakers and through a partnership begun in collaboration with students studying Spanish at the secondary level (e.g., the FLORES program – Foreign Language On Request Elementary Spanish program).

Ms. Kuzniewski keeps parents informed about the goals and the actual content of the program by means of a monthly newsletter, and by her frequent tape-recorded updates on the “homework hotline”. There have also been a number of special presentations for parents, and other interested community members, at regular back-to-school nights and by means of an informational videotape that was prepared for broadcast on a local cable channel. In addition, on several occasions parents have been asked to complete questionnaires designed to elicit their attitudes toward various aspects of the program. During the course of the 1996-1997 school year, the Committee continued to meet regularly to monitor the implementation of the program, to plan for an assessment of student progress during Spring 1997, and to begin planning for the extension of the program into grade 1 together with the introduction of a new kindergarten cohort in September 1997.

3. Formative evaluation of the program

Members of the Committee decided that it would be important for all of the stakeholders (e.g., the pupils, their parents, members of the school board, etc.) to systematically evaluate the progress of the pupils near the end of their first year of instruction. Accordingly a curriculum-based interview protocol was developed, pretested and revised with the assistance of the university partners. Approximately 44 pupils (two boys and two girls from each of the 11 classes) were randomly selected to participate in a 10 to 12 minute “interview” conducted by the high school Spanish coordinator and one of the elementary school counselors during June 1997. The subtasks of the interview provided a basis for assessing the students’ listening comprehension (e.g., responding to a command with an appropriate action “point to the letter M on the rectangle”), their range of vocabulary (asking the child to name in Spanish a range of visuals such as *elephant, book, school*), and their emerging sense of grammaticality (by asking them to make grammaticality judgments and by asking them to perform sentence repetition tasks with increasingly long sentences designed to exceed short term memory capacity).

Interviews were recorded for later transcription and analysis. In terms of interview data, children’s scores ranged from 55% to 100% with a median of 89% leading the evaluator to conclude that “based on the results it is evident that our children are certainly learning Spanish.” The results of the formative assessment of the children coincided with our general expectations about their expected progress (e.g., the children’s listening comprehension exceeded their oral production; their production was limited to learned material; production began as single word utterances and formulaic expressions; signs of emerging syntax have begun to appear but the children focus more on content than on the form of their utterances; language mixing was not uncommon; and the children have developed good pronunciation ability in Spanish).

The children and their parents were unanimously positive about the Spanish program and in wanting it to continue. Likewise the views of the regular classroom teachers were equally positive and supportive. None expressed the view that the Spanish program was somehow detracting from other elements of the school district’s program. The classroom teacher noted that “we are most pleased with the level of achievement our students have attained [and] inspired by the enthusiasm they demonstrate in so doing.”

4. Expansion of the program

The Committee continued to meet quarterly to discuss various aspects of the program and to plan for its expansion in the 1997-1998 school year. Ms. Lisa Bischoff, another dually certified teacher from the University of Pittsburgh program, was hired and the two teachers again spent time with Donato during Summer 1997 revising the kindergarten curriculum in light of the first year’s experience and developing the curriculum for the new grade 1 program.

When classes began in September 1997, all kindergarten and grade 1 children in the district participated in this innovative Spanish FLES program. They follow the model established during the first year – namely 20 minutes of instruction in Spanish 5 days a week with the specialist teacher who comes to their home classroom. Curriculum development for the second year of the program built on concepts and vocabulary learned during the first year and expanded students’ participation in the lesson to include more oral production. That is, the curriculum retained its integrated, thematic focus but moved toward greater oral participation in the lessons by the students.

The Committee has addressed a number of major issues thus far during the 1997-1998 school year. In general, members want to ensure that parents of current students, parents of prospective students, members of the school board, and other teachers in the district are as well informed about the program as they can be. To this end the Committee drafted and is currently piloting a “report card” for parents intended to convey information about the content of

the curriculum and whether their children are progressing to master the material presented. The reporting procedure has undergone several revisions attempting to make a "report card" that capitalizes on what children can do well rather than on where they are deficient. Beginning this year parents will receive a checklist of several functional language abilities (e.g., saying the date and month, identifying classroom items, telling time) with an indication of whether the child has *mastered* the material or is *progressing*. Care has been taken in the design of the report card not to discourage children by sending the unintended message to parents that their children lack an aptitude for language study or are not progressing adequately. Given that we do not know what "adequate achievement" is at this level of instruction, highlighting achievement over failure in a formal report procedure inspires confidence in parents concerning their children's ability to learn another language and bolsters the image of the program in the home. This report card is also an innovative development since the school district has not previously assigned grades or provided other formative information to parents about children's progress in foreign language programs at the elementary grades.

In addition, several back-to-school nights have been held for parents with a focus on the Spanish program; plans have been developed for an evening orientation program for parents of prospective new pupils; an informational video has been produced featuring the children and the teachers that will be shown on local cable television; and an in-service program has been planned for the Spring to inform other teachers in the elementary and middle school about the FLES program.

Lastly, the Committee turned its attention to revising the assessment measures for Spring administration. The general plan remains the same – namely to interview a randomly selected sample of four children from each classroom (2 boys and 2 girls) at grade 1 and grade 2 for a total this year of approximately 80 students. The interviewing will again be done by the high school Spanish coordinator and one of the elementary school counselors. The interview protocol will be revised to include more opportunities for the students to demonstrate creative use of language through story telling in relationship to visuals that are composed of images representing lexical items the children have learned in class. Our goal is to be able to describe when the children are able to produce phrases or sentences that involve their combining previously learned material into novel utterances. The assessment instrument will be based on tasks linked to what the children do in their classes (e.g., describing a picture, singing a song, talking about the family). These tasks will elicit language that allows for fine-tuned evaluation of discrete phonological, lexical, and grammatical items yet are sufficiently open to assess creative and spontaneous production that draws upon, combines, and recombines these discrete features of language. We

find this refinement of the testing procedures encouraging given the dearth of valid and reliable tests for the early language learner and the frequent approach to early language learning assessment that relies often exclusively on comprehension, lexical recall, and production of formulaic speech. This testing is scheduled to occur during early June 1998.

5. Plans for the future

The Committee has several short term tasks, and one major longer term goal. In the short run, another teacher must be hired for September 1998 when the program will again expand to encompass all kindergarten, grade 1 and grade 2 pupils in the district. Then the group will need to turn its attention to curriculum revision and development, materials selection, etc. for the Fall. The middle school staff has also expressed a strong desire to "be prepared" when foreign language enters their program in three years. As the middle school representative on the committee voiced during a recent meeting "our teachers want to be prepared and some have even started to review their college Spanish." However, the major goal which the Committee has begun discussing is the forthcoming need for smooth and effective program articulation when these elementary pupils reach secondary school. The current high school Spanish program will need to be thoroughly revised for subsequent cohorts of students who will bring to the high school language class a "beyond-the-basic" level of proficiency. The district and the current Spanish teachers will face a major challenge in developing a rich content-based Spanish program that will allow these students to continue to develop cognitive and academic language proficiency in both English and in Spanish by the time of their graduation. This concern for articulation is well founded in light of the failures of FLES programs in the 1960s. One commonly observed phenomenon during that period was that former FLES students often repeated basic language lessons when they entered high school. This repetition of previously learned material resulted in a severe lack of motivation in students and diminished their interest and enthusiasm for language study. The source of this instructional discontinuity in language study has been traced to the lack of clearly articulated shared goals and outcomes for language learning in a seamless sequence of instruction. It is not surprising that in foreign language education today articulation programs and studies still dominate the professional literature, grant-funded projects, and conference presentations. The Committee is fully aware of these issues and is currently taking steps to assure that transitions between instructional units and course outcomes will expand student proficiency rather than recycle rudimentary skills each year.

6. Reflections on a successful and satisfying partnership.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the success of this project to date. The first that comes to mind is the key role played by the superintendent. By his active participation in all of the Committee meetings, he has provided immediate and visible credibility and value to the activity. He continually reminds the Committee that they are embarking on an innovation by "navigating uncharted waters" that will have far-reaching consequences for the school district in terms of its visibility and reputation. We have also been struck by the extent to which the Committee members – themselves mostly monolingual and monocultural – have embraced the goal of multiple language proficiency and cross-cultural competence for their students and themselves "act as if" they were multilingual and multicultural. Throughout our association with the Committee, we have found the representatives from the district to be continually and genuinely concerned with providing the best possible education for their students that they can. We have never heard a disparaging remark about a pupil, a parent or a community member – rather Committee members express genuine knowledge about and concern for the students' educational, social, and personal well being. We have found it enormously satisfying to be a part of this Committee.

What are some of the issues that have intrigued us over the past two and a half years? Clearly, we have appreciated the opportunity to attempt to extend the generalizeability of some of our ideas about language program evaluation to another setting. But perhaps more importantly, we have enjoyed the challenges (in the words of the superintendent) of "navigating uncharted waters" in helping to write a curriculum for the early grades; in examining the relationship between what goes on in the language arts curriculum to what we are trying to accomplish in the FLES curriculum; in thinking through and sharing with other Committee members various issues related to the introduction of second language literacy in relationship to mother tongue literacy; in examining the complex set of issues related to reporting student progress to parents (we are intrigued, for example, by how parents evaluate the progress of their children in areas in which they – the parents – themselves have no experience); and more generally with the responsibility of injecting substantive issues from time to time into what might otherwise become a procedural dialogue. We have enjoyed our engagement thus far, and look forward to its continuation.

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