

Learning Languages: A KWL Chart

Myriam Met

The tenth anniversary of Learning Languages provides an opportune moment to reflect on what we know, what we wish to know and what we hope the next decade might bring to early language learning. In the tradition of best practices in elementary school classrooms, I've organized my reflections into a KWL chart: what I know, what I wonder about and what we might learn in the exciting years to come.

© Photograph by Rudolf Ammann



What we KNOW

We *know* that early language learning is brain compatible. The last decade has provided concrete evidence of the value of beginning at an early age, and in particular, the value of learning two languages. Extensive research into brain growth and development, made possible in part by new technologies, has demonstrated that the young brain is uniquely poised to learn many languages. While later language learning is certainly possible, the processes of language learning in young children are different from those when languages are formally studied by adolescents and adults. Older learners are likely to use different parts of the brain. Moreover, recent research has shown that there is no developmental disadvantage when children are exposed to more than one language from a very young age. In fact, young language learners have more gray matter in their brains than do young monolinguals.

We *know* that now more than ever, language competence is vital to the well being of our nation, and that the very high levels of language proficiency that are needed cannot be attained in short periods of time. We also *know* that because language competence takes a long time to develop, and time is a scarce and precious commodity in schools, we need to make every minute and every hour of instruction count. Fortunately for our nation, and for our profession, research in second language acquisition has provided powerful new insights into how language learning proceeds, and how that knowledge can be exploited in instructed settings. Most importantly, we *know* that early language educators tend to use highly effective instructional practices that are likely to result in language growth.

We *know* that early language educators are dedicated professionals. These professionals often work in isolation. Unlike most elementary teachers who have several colleagues in their own buildings who are teaching (or who have taught) the same content and/or grade levels, foreign language teachers are usually the only ones in their school and often teach multiple grade levels. We also *know* that the leadership that NNELL has provided early language teachers over the last decade has supported their work in numerous ways. NNELL's publications provide rich resources in terms of theory and practice. NNELL sessions at state and regional conferences have reduced the isolation of classroom practitioners. The annual NNELL swapshop at ACTFL usually hosts a sell-out crowd. The growth of NNELL from a small network of early language educators in the late 1980s to a strong, vibrant organization that clearly meets the needs of its constituency is proof of what we *know*: early language educators are highly committed to their work.

What I WONDER

While we know more than ever about language acquisition and effective language instruction, many questions remain to be explored. For some of these questions, hints of answers are beginning to emerge; for others, the field is ripe for exploration. Many of the questions I have were first raised in an article Nancy Rhodes and I co-authored for *Foreign Language Annals* in 1990, and so may seem familiar to those who have read them before.

I wonder... What are the comparative outcomes of increased minutes per week over fewer years vs. a longer sequence with fewer contact hours? For example, how do learner outcomes compare for students who have two 30-minute sessions per week beginning in kindergarten as opposed to students who receive instruction in five 30-minute sessions per week beginning at grade 3?

I wonder... What is the role of formal grammar instruction in early language learning? Should grammar be taught? When? How? How much?

I wonder... What data do we have to support our belief that integrating content from the school curriculum enhances growth in language proficiency?

I wonder... Is there a difference in learner outcomes when curriculum is based on thematic units that may not be tied to the school curriculum (e.g., a unit on ‘The Circus’ or centered around an authentic folktale) as opposed to a unit that only draws on grade level appropriate content?

I wonder... What would we find out if we had assessment tools that are finely tuned to measure how well students understand what they hear? Because we have always measured our successes by what students can produce, we may have inadvertently given short shrift to the substantial and significant gains students make in understanding the target language as spoken by native speakers at native-like rates of speech. *I wonder*, too, how we could communicate this important accomplishment to parents and the public so that they would see the value of early language learning beyond simply what students can say.

I wonder... Where is the point at which the use of technology (at least in its current form) provides diminishing returns? Schools are finding remarkable successes using video, multimedia and other technology resources as primary delivery systems or as complementary resources to teacher-delivered instruction. When current technological resources serve as the primary delivery system (e.g., videotapes or satellite broadcast), is there a point where students need increased face-to-face interaction in the target language in order to continue to progress at the same rate as previously?

I wonder... What effect does the presence of heritage speakers have on the language skills of immersion students? We know from extensive research that students in foreign language immersion programs have near-native listening and reading proficiency, but their oral and written output is not native-like. Given the large number of native speakers built into the design of dual language (two-way immersion) programs, *I wonder*, is there an ameliorative effect on the L2 (second language) oral and written proficiency of the English speakers?

I wonder... Are there developmental stages at which young learners are more receptive to or capable of understanding cultural perspectives?

I wonder... Are there predictors of success for early language learners? How do age, aptitude, motivation and personality interact? Does program design moderate the effects of any or all of these variables?

What I LEARNED

As users of KWL charts know, the last column —what I learned— is completed long after we have first brainstormed what we already know and what we would like to know. Careful research, hard work, collaborative investigations and guided inquiry result in new learnings to be summarized as the unit of study nears completion.

Our unit is just getting started. A decade from now, let us hope that together we will provide a lengthy summary of all that we have learned, all that we have wondered, and be able to reflect positively on our progress. As Nancy Rhodes and I concluded in our 1990 article, our work “...should lead to a decade in which we grow both older and better” (Met & Rhodes, 1990).

References

Met, M. & Rhodes, N. (1990). Elementary school foreign language instruction: Priorities for the 1990s. *Foreign Language Annals*, 23, 433-443.



Myriam Met is a Senior Research Associate, National Foreign Language Center, University of Maryland, where her work focuses primarily on K-12 foreign language policy. Her previous positions include supervisor of foreign language programs K-12, English for Speakers of Other Languages, and bilingual education for major urban and suburban school districts. Mimi is co-chair of the New Visions in Foreign Language Education and currently serves on the Executive Council of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

She has been a president of the National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Languages and a founding member, and later president, of NNELL.