

ATTENTION! Are You Seeking a Position with Excellent Long-term Benefits? Be an Advocate!

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As early foreign language learning gains attention nationally and the public looks more seriously at the academic and personal benefits of a long sequence of language study, elementary school foreign language specialists may find themselves called upon more frequently to take the role of the advocate. To help them become more effective in promoting early language learning, the following strategies are offered.

Strategy 1: Take every opportunity to inform parents, administrators, and the local community about the foreign language program and your students' accomplishments.

The foreign language specialist can play an important role as an advocate by raising public awareness about foreign language study and helping the school and community recognize excellent foreign language instruction. An important way to begin this process is to send home student work samples to inform parents about current topics being studied, to paint a clear picture of the connections between language learning and the elementary curriculum, to clarify how learning processes develop through language study, and to demonstrate student progress. In addition, the foreign language specialist can write articles for the school newsletter informing school administrators, other teachers and parents, and the community about the purpose and content of the program, the anticipated language

outcomes, and how the program articulates with upper level foreign language study.

Strategy 2: Clarify the nature of the foreign language curriculum and its connectedness to the elementary school classroom.

The foreign language specialist will want to help the public understand that, in the foreign language program, language concepts are taught in the context of the elementary school curriculum. Math, science, social studies, language arts, and other content areas provide the source for themes of the units and lessons taught in the foreign language class. It is important to emphasize the link between the language class and the elementary school curriculum because most people still have the image of language learning as that of learning lists of words, translation, and repetition and drills focused on language structure.

Modelling a lesson to an audience of parents and community members is an excellent strategy. It helps them understand the excitement of learning interesting content taught in the language and the feasibility of doing so when the teacher uses techniques (such as objects, gestures, facial expressions, and active learner participation) to make meaning clear. It is important for the audience to know, for example that the focus of the foreign language class is not on students learning to count by rote from 1 to 30, 50, or 100; rather, they learn to count

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objects and to use counting in meaningful contexts. Using an example from a unit on the market could be helpful in demonstrating that students use their counting skills in real-life situations; e.g., “I would like six tomatoes.” The foreign language specialist can emphasize that activities carried out in a meaningful context result in better understanding and retention of the language.

Strategy 3: Show parents and the community the skills attained and the purposes for the language learned.

Seek opportunities for children to demonstrate their language skills to parents and the community. Remember, however, that the perspective the audience gains about the value of the foreign language program will be shaped by what they observe. Because many adults do not know about recent findings in brain research and language acquisition, they may view a carefully selected song as a fun activity but one that is not a necessary part of education. And, if a member of the audience happens to be a school board member or politician involved in determining the future of the program, an image of children singing songs at a PTA program may ultimately lead to the conclusion that language study is not needed in the curriculum.

In such settings, it is better to have students use language that is “real,” not rehearsed or memorized. You must carefully plan what you will have the children share so that the audience can readily observe the skills attained and clearly understand the purpose of the language learned. For example, several children could read aloud a Big Book, or individual books they have created, and then answer the teacher’s or classmates’ questions. If the class has done a science experiment that has been a joint project with the grade level classroom teacher, the foreign language specialist could select students at random to describe the experiment in simple language. A song could then be used as a culminating activity, but the teacher

should make clear to the audience its relevance to the language and content learned.

Strategy 4: Invite guests to visit your classes to observe the children “in action.”

Special occasions such as cultural events and PTA programs are a good way to reach a number of people at once, but don’t overlook the everyday opportunities. Parents, principals, and others in the community can best gain understanding about foreign language learning by observing day-to-day classes. Seeing classes “in action” may also help observers appreciate the way in which language study addresses various learning styles.

Extend an open invitation and suggest that guests come to several classes throughout the year so that they can see students’ progress over time. It is also a good idea to invite reporters from the local newspaper and television stations to feature a story or series of articles about the program so that the local community can see what is involved on a daily basis. This can help the public understand that foreign language is an integral part of the curriculum.

Strategy 5: Assess students’ progress both informally and formally and make parents aware of the results.

It is not easy to maintain an individual record of progress for each student when the foreign language specialist teaches many children. Without a tangible product that shows what children are able to do in the foreign language, however, it is difficult for others to understand and support the teacher’s efforts no matter how great they are. There are many possible ways to show a student’s progress, and in the elementary grades, it is extremely crucial to show ongoing language development—or, in other words, what the child is accomplishing.

The foreign language specialist can work with the classroom teacher

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to maintain a compilation of products from the foreign language class in the student's portfolio. Or, the specialist may find it more manageable to keep a portfolio for each student. Contents may range from language samples to many different kinds of work products. For the pre-reader, these may be listening discrimination activities and semantic maps based on pictures. For the emergent reader, they may be little books, illustrated stories, or poems that are student published.

The important point is to be able to show observable growth over a period of time that both the specialist and parents can monitor. Taking the time to include a variety of products to show progress can prove to be both a positive public relations strategy and a way for the specialist to document and evaluate the strengths (and weaknesses) of the program.

Strategy 6: Keep politicians, school board members, and other decision-makers informed about your program.

On the local level, include policymakers together with parents on the list to receive the school newsletter and invitations to visit the foreign language classes. Letters of invitation in themselves create an excellent way to communicate news about the program and emphasize the benefits of early language study. Legislators, school board members, the school superintendent, and other elected leaders can be invited to submit an article for publication in the state foreign language association's publication or can be asked to deliver an address at the annual meeting. They can also be included on the association's mailing list so that they receive the same correspondence that the membership receives. Whether or not the individual is a true supporter of languages, the invitation to write a feature article accompanied by a personal photograph is hard to turn down, and consequently, this can become a strong way to encourage support while informing elected officials about the program.

Strategy 7: Thank your supporters!

Write letters to decisionmakers such as school board members, the governor, the state superintendent, and the local school superintendent to thank them for supporting language study and to encourage their continued support. Even if they do not realize that they have done something worthy of praise, a thank-you letter may "plant a seed" about foreign languages that may prove helpful to the program's future.

Strategy 8: Change the mindset of those who studied a language unsuccessfully.

There is always an opportunity to promote early language learning with people we encounter on a daily basis. Unfortunately, while many people may have the idea that learning a language at an early age is an interesting endeavor, most have little knowledge of the learning processes that are enhanced through language study. It is important to present the "vital statistics" about learning languages when the moment presents itself. These benefits include the development of critical thinking skills, acute listening skills, enhanced imagination and creativity, as well as better communication skills and greater opportunities for living and working in the 21st century. In other words, languages are a tool for life!

Several versions of an informational speech, or talking points, can be very handy. The person in line at the grocery store who has heard about the elementary grades program and wants to know more may be willing to listen for two minutes, while the school board chair may be attentive for five minutes or longer. Be prepared at any time and on any occasion to adapt the talking points to the audience and the kind of information that is needed.

Many people may be intrigued to learn that early language study enhances cognitive ability and taps thinking processes in the brain that affect other learning processes.

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(Begley, 1996; Caine, & Caine, 1991; Nash, 1997; Winslow, 1997). They may find it interesting that language learning in general has changed immensely since the 1970s, and may ask, "Well, if students don't conjugate verbs, then just what do they learn?" This can be a wonderful opening to a conversation that may really change the person's understanding of foreign language study.

Strategy 9: Network with colleagues and unify efforts in grades K–16.

One of the most beneficial ways to make foreign languages in the elementary grades more visible is to come together with colleagues and unify efforts for successful program implementation. The annual state meeting of the foreign language association is a perfect setting for foreign language specialists to collaborate and to network with colleagues who teach more advanced levels. The foreign language profession has long faced the challenge of bridging the gaps between the elementary, middle, high school, and post-secondary levels. We stand to strengthen our mission by working together and understanding the K–16 sequence. Foreign language collaboratives for teachers in grades K–16 and in-service meetings in the school district provide a forum for sharing ideas and concerns and for offering resources and support. Partnerships between K–12 and university instructors benefit both students and teachers.

Strategy 10: Establish regular planning sessions with both elementary classroom teachers and K–12 foreign language colleagues.

By participating in grade level meetings, the foreign language specialist can become a part of the school "team" and will have the opportunity to help the elementary grade teachers see how he or she is reinforcing concepts taught in the various subject areas of the curriculum. Consulting with each other on a regular basis will help form a positive partnership. Many elementary

grade teachers want to be involved in the foreign language program and will offer assistance willingly. Those who are less enthusiastic about the program may simply need time to understand how the specialist is helping the classroom teacher by linking the foreign language to math, science, social studies, language arts, etc.

The specialist can keep the classroom teacher informed about what is taught in the foreign language classes and, by doing so, help promote the program. The same holds true for creating a well-articulated program in grades K–12. Teachers at the elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary levels should all be advocates for foreign languages at all levels. In-service meetings where K–12 foreign language teachers come together can include a time for teachers to discuss curriculum, share ideas for articulation between and among grade levels, and develop strategies for promoting the program in the community. Foreign language teachers at every level can benefit greatly by networking with colleagues. The elementary school foreign language specialist can be particularly instrumental in improving the continuity of the program by working to increase enrollment in language study at the upper levels.

Strategy 11: Use your state conference to organize advocacy efforts.

Many state associations, including North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin, have formed political action and advocacy committees to promote language study in their states. This is critical to foreign language programs, especially in states that do not have supervisors or coordinators to assist language teachers. All language teachers can contribute to advocacy efforts by attending advocacy meetings at the state conference, gathering advocacy materials at the booth in the exhibits area to use at the local level, and by staying informed about issues that may impact foreign language programs. K–12 foreign language specialists can

help each other by writing letters of support for programs that may be in jeopardy.

Conclusion

This is an exciting time for the foreign language profession, and it is the optimum time to create awareness about early language study. As parents and the community become knowledgeable about the opportunities children will have in a rapidly growing global community if they attain a high level of proficiency in a foreign language, they will realize the importance of beginning language study early. Perhaps the next time a parent says, "I took two years of Spanish in high school and can't speak a word," you'll be prepared to respond: "Well of course you can't, and here's why. . ."

Sample Advocacy and Political Action Resources

The materials listed below provide effective strategies and reliable information for advocates to use. By drawing on these and other resources, you will be well prepared to play a strong advocacy role.

Advocacy 101 Packet. (1997). Joint National Committee for Languages/National Council for Languages and International Studies. 4646 40th St. NW, Washington, DC 20016-1859; 202-966-8477; E-mail: 76306.535@compuserve.com.

Advocacy for FLES Packet.* (1997). Baltimore: National FLES* Institute, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, MD. Gladys Lipton, Director, Department of Modern Languages, 1000 Hilltop Cir., Baltimore, MD 21250; 301-231-0824; Fax: 301-230-2652; E-mail: lipton@umbc2.umbc.edu.

Begley, S. Your child's brain. *Newsweek*, 19: 55-61, February 19, 1996.

Caine, R., & Caine, G. (1991). *Making connections: Teaching and the human brain.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. 1703 Beau regard St., Alexandria, VA 22311-1714; 703-578-9600.

Cohen, P. (1995). Understanding the brain. *Education Update*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 37 (7), 1, 4-5.

Curtain, H., & Pesola, C. A. (1994). *Languages and children: Making the match.* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.

Gray matters: The developing brain (1995). Madison, WI: Wisconsin Public Radio Association. Produced in association with Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives; order tapes through 1-800-65BRAIN, transcript and real audio available on www.dana.org.

Met, M. (Ed.). (1998). *Critical Issues in Early Second Language Learning: Building for Our Children's Future.* Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley.

Nash, J. M. (February 3, 1997). Special Reports: Fertile Minds. *Time*, 149 (5): 49-56.

National Network for Early Language Learning Advocacy Packet. Contact Kay Hewitt, NNELL Advocacy Committee Chair, Lexington Elementary School, 116 Azalea Dr., Lexington, SC 29072; 803-736-1916; E-mail: leslib@lex1.k12.state.sc.us

Public Schools of North Carolina. (1997). *Foreign Languages: The Road to Success in a Global World—Information for School Counselors.* Contact Dr. Fran Hoch, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 301 North Wilmington St., Raleigh, NC 27601-2825; 919-715-1797; E-mail: fhoch@dpi.state.nc.us

Sylvester, R. (1995). *A celebration of neurons: An educator's guide to the human brain.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Why FLES?* (1996). Brochure available from AATF. Contact Gladys Lipton, President, 1000 Hilltop Cir., Baltimore, MD 21250; 301-231-0824; Fax: 301-230-2652; E-mail: lipton@umbc2.umbc.edu.

Why, how, and when should my child learn a second language? (1997). Free Brochure. Contact ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, ACCESS ERIC, 2277 Research Boulevard, 7A, Rockville, MD 20850-3172; Tel: 1-800-538-3742; E-mail: acceric@inet.ed.gov.

Willis, S. (Winter 1996). Foreign language learning to communicate in the real world. *Curriculum Update*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Winslow, R. How language is stored in the brain depends on age. *The Wall Street Journal*, Thursday, July 10, 1997, Section B, 1, 6.
