

**Realizing the Vision of Quality PreK–5 Spanish Language Programs:
A Longitudinal Perspective**

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RESPONSES

PreK–5 Foreign Language Programs: No Longer an Endangered Species?

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Paving the Way for Quality PreK–5 Language Programs

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Realizing the Vision of Quality PreK–5 Spanish Language Programs: A Longitudinal Perspective



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Abstract: This essay offers a candid overview of the past one hundred years of preK–fifth grade Spanish language teaching and learning in the United States. Among the topics addressed are numbers of programs, program models, and factors that impact the success of learners and programs.

Keywords: early language learning/aprendizaje de idiomas en escuela primaria, FLES, FLEX, immersion/imersión, teaching and learning/enseñaza y aprendizaje

Introduction

When examining a timeline to determine what has occurred in the past 100 years, the changes in science and technology are dazzling. Seemingly every aspect of our day-to-day lives has been touched by change.

Has education also been revolutionized? At first blush, one would say that education in the United States has indeed progressed. For example, the use of technology enhances learning like never before. Nevertheless, there are areas in preK–16 education that have advanced more slowly than anticipated or desired. One of those is teaching and learning Spanish in US preschools and elementary schools.

This essay will begin with a brief 100-year overview followed by a present-day report of what constitutes exemplary programs and the obstacles they face. Finally, this essay will offer the essentials to realizing the vision of quality preK–5 Spanish teaching and learning for all.

Brief History

Number of Programs: 1917–60s

When the American Association of Teachers of Spanish, now the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP), formed in 1917, the main emphasis of the organization was to support the teaching of Spanish at the secondary level. AATSP's first president's platform was to promote teaching Spanish rather than German at the secondary level; he also worked to prevent Spanish from being taught in the elementary school (García 2008).

Teaching foreign languages preK–5th grade in private schools is recorded from the 1910s, but there is no documentation that Spanish was taught. In public schools, only a French program in Cleveland, Ohio in the 1920s received recognition. Post World War II witnessed a flourishing of elementary school foreign language programs. Providing financial assistance to schools at all levels was the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958. The number of elementary school Spanish programs grew quickly (Heining-Boynton 1990).

Even prior to the NDEA, Mildenerger (1956) reported at least 271,617 public elementary school students kindergarten through grade six studying a foreign language, with Spanish having the largest number followed by French and German. In Catholic elementary schools, Mildenerger's report noted 156,000 children studied the following languages ranked in order: French, Polish, Italian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Spanish, and Latin. Other private elementary schools also taught foreign language, with French being the choice.

Driving elementary school world language choices was: availability of teachers; language preference of the parents and community; overall perception of need; and prestige of the target language. Of note is that Spanish was not considered a high-prestige language in the 1950s.

By 1960, elementary school foreign language programs existed in all 50 states. Anderson (1969:101) reported 1,227,000 students studying a language in addition to English in 8,000 elementary schools. By the end of the 1960s, though, few programs remained. Five reasons surfaced for their dramatic decline: lack of qualified teachers; unrealistic and/or inappropriate goals and objectives; incompatible pedagogy; lack of articulation; lack of homework, grades, and assessment; lack of parental support (Heining-Boynton 1990).

Elementary School Spanish Program Models: Bilingual Education, FLEX, FLES, Immersion

While the number of elementary school Spanish language programs for non-native speakers of Spanish declined in the 1960s, a new phenomenon emerged: bilingual education. In 1968, the Bilingual Education Act addressed all language minorities, but bilingual education became most closely associated with the Spanish language. Although well-intentioned, bilingual education programs were problematic. Among the numerous issues, linguistically many teachers were weak in one or both languages, and they lacked appropriate training. Furthermore, many school administrators were ill-equipped to manage and lead such programs, curricula were poorly conceived, and learner outcomes and expectations were very low. In sum, many Hispanic students exited elementary school bilingual education programs with poor Spanish *and* poor English language skills. The early programs created a public relations disaster for bilingual education (Heining-Boynton 2014).

From the mid 1980s and forward, elementary school foreign language programs began to reappear. At that point, three program models emerged, predominantly for native English language speaking children: Foreign Language Exploratory (FLEX); Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES); and Immersion (Curtain and Dahlberg 2015). These program models perpetuate today bearing similar curricular and instructional designs from the 1980s.

FLEX, while well-intentioned at the time of its creation in the mid-1980s, was and remains a superficial overview of multiple languages. FLEX programs expose young learners not only to Spanish but also to three other languages, each for 6–9 weeks. The intention of FLEX has been to entice young learners to all things multicultural. Today, many parents and their children question learning isolated words, songs, and cultural factoids in multiple languages that do not lead to even a low level of communicative competence. The information taught can be easily accessible outside of school via the Internet.

Another elementary school language model is FLES. In typical Spanish FLES programs, teachers deliver instruction one time per week up to five times per week for approximately 30 minutes per class; the norm is once a week. Enhancing the model and its curricula is known as a content-based or content-related approach to FLES. This model reinforces other K–5 curricular areas such as science and mathematics, enriching the curriculum with high-interest topics, useful vocabulary, and expanded opportunities for students to engage in extended discourse on age-appropriate topics.

Long-term commitments to early language learning across the country at the district level and even at the state level, such as in North Carolina, exist. What sets excellent schools and programs apart is their commitment to rigorous standards, a strong content-based, standards-based curriculum, and oral proficiency assessments for grades 1–5 to ascertain annual student progress and program performance. Exceptional Spanish programs, such as the one at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) Melba Woodruff Award winning Hutchison School (Memphis, TN), have been maintaining annual data documenting that non-heritage speakers exit fifth grade, on average, with the equivalent of an intermediate mid level of oral proficiency.

Strong programs have not only a commitment to outstanding curricula and teachers, but also the necessary contact time that students need per week to engage in meaningful instruction in the target language. Schools implementing early world language programs desire to develop communicatively competent children, but based on the number of contact minutes per week, their goal cannot be achieved. If those schools were to calculate the annual number of contact hours, the total would be less than 20 instructional delivery hours per academic year for programs where students have Spanish once a week for 30 minutes per class. No meaningful level of proficiency can be acquired in that amount of time. Additionally, students in programs with non-standards-based, non-content-based curricula may learn vocabulary on common topics (e.g., home, family, food,) but they cannot produce the language in meaningful contexts. Learners are unable to string together sentences.

Still another elementary school program model is immersion. Immersion programs in their three forms (partial, full, dual language) offer promise with the goal of creating communicatively competent bilingual students (Collier and Thomas 2004; Heining-Boynton 2014). In the 1990s, dual language programs (half of the student population is native English speaking and the other half is native Spanish speaking) began to replace the failed, traditional Spanish bilingual education programs. Immersion learners have the best opportunity to achieve the highest level of linguistic competence, in part due to the amount of contact time each day in the target language. Challenges with immersion models include difficulty finding high-quality bilingual administrators and teachers, and assuring that all students acquire high language proficiency in both Spanish and English.

With regard to preschool, some private schools have offered Spanish in their early childhood programs for many years to children ages 3–6 years old. Those programs have focused on some vocabulary, songs, and games. The goal has been to motivate the learner to eagerly anticipate Spanish in Kindergarten or first grade. Current-day preschool Spanish programs remain predominantly a private school phenomenon and exist much in the same format as in the past. They are extremely uncommon in the public school setting.

Number of Programs: 1990s–2008

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) conducted three extensive national surveys in 1987, 1997, and 2008 (Rhodes and Pufahl 2010). In 1987, 22% percent of schools in the United States reported elementary school language programs; in 1997, there were 31%. In 2008, only 14.7% of all public elementary schools and 51% private elementary schools offered world language study. In the 2008 study, CAL reported Spanish as the most commonly taught language with seventy-nine percent of elementary school respondents offering Spanish. The most common elementary model was FLEX, which was offered in 47% of the schools with language programs. Thirty-nine percent offered FLES or content-based FLES with exit outcomes that might or might not include proficiency. Immersion was offered in 14% of schools with elementary language programs. (Rhodes and Branaman 1999; Rhodes and Pufahl 2010:106).

The decline in the number of programs and the move toward the majority of programs offered being non-proficiency oriented (FLEX) can be explained by a series of factors. It is these factors that need to be addressed now and in the future in order to realize the vision of creation and expansion of topnotch Spanish language elementary school programs that exit students with the highest possible levels of proficiency.

Factors Impacting the Future

Indeed there exist exemplary Spanish FLES and immersion programs across the country that are research- and standards-based with high expectations for student outcomes. These schools' administrators and teachers are knowledgeable and well-trained, and students exit 5th grade with appropriate, high levels of proficiency. Nevertheless, these programs are not prolific due to challenges including politics, schools, and teachers. These challenges can be overcome, but not without a concerted effort on the part of all stakeholders.

Politics: Federal, State and Local

Initiatives such as the Partnership for the 21st Century and the Common Core have brought to light the importance of multiculturalism and multilingualism in the 21st century, yet there remains a large voting population who is not in favor of teaching languages in addition to English. The English Only Movement of the 1980s left an indelible black mark on the United States and elementary school foreign language programs. There exist today large xenophobic pockets of citizenry across the United States who work against offering Spanish or any language at the elementary school level.

Also, US political concerns that indirectly impact teaching Spanish at the elementary school are the ongoing challenges of immigration, drug trafficking, and the importation of other illegal commodities. There are individuals in the United States that are anti-Hispanic because of these problems, and one of the ways they express their disapproval is by not supporting the creation and maintenance of quality elementary school Spanish language programs.

Schools: Funding and Administrators

Democracies are ruled by the voting population. Adults cast their vote based on their experiences, beliefs, and perceptions. Many voters studied Spanish or another foreign language, and after many years of study, they remain unsuccessful in communicating even basic concepts with native speakers. This fact leads to disgruntled individuals unwilling to support early language learning. Also highly detrimental are voting adults who have children currently studying Spanish at the elementary school, and unfortunately their children may be making minimal or no linguistic progress in the target language. The voting-age public controls the purse strings that choose to fund or not fund educational programs (Met 2005).

School administrators at the building and district level can also pose challenges to the existence and well-being of preK–5 Spanish programs. Many school leaders had poor experiences studying Spanish or another language in addition to English and are heard to say, "I had six years of Spanish, and I can't say a thing!" These individuals are highly unlikely to support Spanish or any language at the elementary school level, especially if there are no state or local mandates to do so (Met 2005).

On the other hand, there do exist administrators who are indeed interested in creating elementary school Spanish language programs. Unfortunately, many are unfamiliar with the literature that reports what constitutes excellent programs, and why and how programs failed in the past. They risk creating programs filled with the same mistakes of the 1950s and 1960s (Heining-Boynton 1990; Heining-Boynton and Redmond 2013).

Teachers: Teacher Training, Professional Development, Curricula, and Advocating

A number of universities nationwide are struggling to recruit the best and brightest pre-service candidates to fill their cohorts and supply the continued need for highly-qualified elementary school language teachers. Included in that concern are the teacher training institutions that are unable to graduate candidates with at least an ACTFL OPI rating of Advanced Low in addition to basic knowledge of instructional delivery, how students learn, and the myriad of other necessary topics for initially licensed candidates.

After securing teaching positions, quality, ongoing professional development is essential. Also critical is educating *all* school personnel regarding the need to create and maintain a long, articulated sequence of Spanish or any world language, as well as the expected student proficiency outcomes at each grade level. Additionally, elementary school Spanish teachers must create a rigorous, standards-based curriculum. Schools are encouraged to develop immersion programs or a content-based FLES program. Also important for elementary school Spanish teachers is the need to be constant advocates in their schools and districts. They need to continuously nurture parent and voter support. Even schools with long-running elementary school Spanish programs will recount the numerous worrisome instances when they have had to justify their programs' existence. Just because elementary school Spanish teachers know the importance and value of early foreign language learning does not mean the rest of the world knows or believes that to be true.

Effectuating the Future

Over the decades, clear steps have been delineated for schools to deliver quality preK–5 Spanish language programs. What follows is a recapitulation of those steps to help communities across the United States to have a laser focus on the necessary steps.

The word “accountability” is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the quality or state of being accountable, especially an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions.” For those in education, accountability translates into creating an outstanding standards-based curriculum with appropriate learner objectives and desired outcomes, delivering instruction based on the curricula, and then assessing to what degree learning has occurred. If desired learning outcomes have not been achieved, then recursive remediation is necessary.

The lowest common denominator to maintain quality early Spanish language programs now and in the future and to demonstrate accountability is to provide proof that students are making adequate annual progress in Spanish language proficiency. Annual oral proficiency assessments that are based upon high standards for all learners are crucial.

Additionally, preservice teacher candidates need instruction on how to create, review, and revise curricula as well as deliver instruction at the elementary school level. At many universities, the teacher training foci are on middle and high school grades. Even experienced teachers without training on what constitutes preK–5 learners, how they learn, and what is appropriate to learn can stumble when working with elementary school programs and children. Also important is providing preservice teacher education candidates with valid and reliable ways to assess young learners, including oral proficiency assessments.

Among the many necessities that will set both teachers and learners up for success is the need to control class size and total number of students taught by individual teachers. Administrators must commit to hiring a sufficient number of well-trained teachers in order to create equitable class sizes for teachers. In an ACTFL Policy Goals document (2013), we are reminded that only 9% of Americans speak a language in addition to English. This is due in part to non-existent or perhaps non-rigorous elementary school language programs. Rhodes (2014) lists ten strategies based on the Center for Applied Linguistic’s research that encapsulate and synthesize what will produce quality programs in the future. They are:

1. Focus on good teachers and high-quality instruction.
2. Identify and clearly state intended outcomes from the beginning.
3. Plan for K–16 articulation from the start.
4. Develop and maintain ongoing communication among stakeholders.
5. Conduct ongoing advocacy efforts to garner and maintain public support.
6. Advocate for district- and state-wide language supervisors pre K–12.
7. Dispel common misperceptions about language learning.
8. Monitor language development through continual assessment.
9. Harness the power of immersion.
10. Remember that money matters.

In conclusion, this essay offers a future vision for Spanish teaching and learning preK–5. Its intention is to provide encouragement as well as deliver a wake-up call. We must make the effort to expend the time, energy, and resources that will ensure high-quality programs. Committing the same mistakes of the past should not be an option.

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Response 1 to “Realizing the Vision of Quality PreK–5 Spanish Language Programs: A Longitudinal Perspective”



PreK–5 Foreign Language Programs: No Longer an Endangered Species?

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Keywords: early language learning/aprendizaje de idiomas en escuela primaria, FLES, FLEX, immersion/imersión, teaching and learning/enseñaza y aprendizaje

Challenges facing foreign language instruction in the United States are particularly acute in preK–5 programs. However, the rise of dual language immersion programs in this country represents a bright light in regard to elementary foreign language instruction. Dual language programs are being added and expanded across the country at a quick pace. Two years ago, the *New York Times* reported, “40 dual-language programs for elementary, middle, and high school levels would be created or expanded for the 2015–16 school year” (Harris 2015). In North Carolina, over the past ten years the number of dual-language and immersion programs has grown from programs at seven schools to over 100 programs, many of which start in Kindergarten (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction). Maryland’s Howard County Public School System is leading the way in their state by significantly increasing their K–12 language offerings. The state of Utah boasts 138 schools offering dual language immersion programs, 106 of which are in elementary schools (Utah State Board of Education).

Despite the growth of these programs, there are very few teacher-training programs that exist to prepare such teachers. With the rapid expansion of dual immersion programs, our profession may be faced with a teacher shortage. Dual immersion and elementary foreign language education require unique skills. Teacher training programs are critical to ensure sound, developmentally appropriate pedagogy. According to the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) report from 2009, “More than one quarter of all elementary school foreign language teachers are not certified at all. The percentage of elementary schools that reported having uncertified language teachers increased from 17% in 1997 to 31% in 2008” (Rhodes and Pufahl 2009: 4). More than ever, teacher training and certification programs will need to be accessible and affordable for new teachers entering the profession and for those that need additional training in order to be qualified to teach in dual immersion programs. A 2011 report on the effect of quality teachers on student achievement concluded, “The year-long and cumulative effects on student achievement of having a qualified teacher can be measured and have been found to be substantial” (Hightower et al. 2011).

A Call for Research

The need for strong elementary school foreign language programs must be made evident. However, these programs are expensive. To convince parents, school districts, and taxpayers of their value, strong evidence must be provided of their value. In a recent article by Kissau,

Adams, and Algozzine (2015), the researchers call for further research to support early language programs. Research on the motivational and proficiency related benefits of beginning language at an early age must be a priority. There is very little research conducted in the United States on the benefits of learning a language starting at a young age, yet there are plenty of excellent FLEX, FLES, and immersion programs that could offer valuable data and insight to proficiency outcomes in relation to early start programs.

A Call for Excellence

Public and private schools that offer early language programs (e.g., FLEX, FLES, immersion) need to be models and advocates for early language education. Many elementary school language teachers are responsible for developing curriculum and may not have the resources, training, or funding to guide their efforts in order to ensure program excellence. Therefore, teachers in early language programs must become professionally active in national and state foreign language associations such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL), their respective language association, such as the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP), and state organizations such as the Foreign Language Association of North Carolina (FLANC).

If we desire a globally competent United States population, we must raise our students starting at a very young age to be so. We know that advocacy efforts have been in full force for decades, and are shown to be effective and therefore, must continue. Important advocacy events, such as Language Advocacy Day, forces politicians in Washington to listen and focus their attention at least for a day on the decades-old conversation surrounding America's foreign language deficit. As language educators, we must continue to advocate, educate, and engage our students, parents, and administrators and ensure that these stakeholders understand and support the need for, and benefit of, early start foreign language education.

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Response 2 to “Realizing the Vision of
Quality PreK–5 Spanish Language Programs:
A Longitudinal Perspective”



**Paving the Way for Quality
PreK–5 Language Programs**

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Keywords: bilingual education/educación bilingüe, dual language/dos lenguas, early language learning/aprendizaje de idiomas en escuela primaria, immersion/imersión, teaching and learning/enseñanza y aprendizaje, Seal of Biliteracy

The intention of Audrey L. Heining-Boynton’s essay is to take a look back at the early beginnings of language programs and provide a vision for high-quality programs for the future. Building upon the themes in Heining-Boynton’s essay, a comprehensive review of the advances in the field of early language learning continues to invite further research and inquiry.

According to Abbott et al. (2014), the United States can provide “100% of learners in the US education system with exposure to international perspectives, culture, and/or language, in order to inform lifelong decisions about work and learning, and to support language and international efforts broadly in society” (256). In attempts to make this vision a reality, Abbott et al. envision a collaborative effort by which nonprofits collectively act, “in a grassroots effort in collaboration with the national security entities in the federal government and the economic interest in state governments” (259).

Grassroots initiatives like the Seal of Biliteracy address concerns such as appropriate learner objectives, desired proficiency outcomes, and developing and maintaining support among stakeholders. This initiative began as an award for high school students who have attained proficiency in two or more languages; however, the Seal of Biliteracy has now expanded to dual language immersion programs at the elementary and middle school levels (see sealofbiliteracy.org). The Seal of Biliteracy is open to both native English speakers who have attained a predetermined level of proficiency in an additional language and to English language learners who have retained their native language or developed their heritage language. As acknowledged in a joint policy statement between the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education, the majority school age, dual language learners come from homes where Spanish is the primary spoken language (“Fact Sheet” 2016). This policy statement also suggests that not recognizing a child’s culture and language as an asset may contribute to the achievement gap. In 2014, nine states had adopted the Seal of Biliteracy. At the time of this submission, at least 27 states have adopted the the Seal of Biliteracy which is often awarded at special ceremonies. This emphasizes the value of proficiency in another language. The Seal of Biliteracy raises the bar from just something to be completed to one that recognizes language acquisition as a skill.

In order to meet the demand of qualified language teachers, candidates must demonstrate advanced proficiency in the language that can be only achieved by a native speaker or by immersion learners. The number of immersion schools is rising in states like New York, Utah, Delaware, and North Carolina. In 2015, the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL) presented New York City Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña with the NNELL Award

for Outstanding Support of Early Second Language Learning (“Awards” 2015). Fariña created 40 dual language programs in 2015, with more programs planned; she claims parents are driving the push for the programs (“Chancellor Fariña Announces Programs” 2016).

According to Gregg Roberts, the World Language Specialist for the Utah Office of Education, Utah plans to add 20 to 25 more dual language schools per school year as dual immersion programs have increased from 1,400 students in 25 schools in 2009 to 29,000 students in 138 schools in 2016 (qtd. in Wood 2016). As part of Governor Jack Markell’s World Language Expansion Initiative, Delaware hopes to reach nearly 10,000 students in K–8 immersion programs by 2022 (“World Language Immersion Expands” 2015).

Thomas and Collier (2012) claim dual language schools in North Carolina are so popular with English-speaking parents that there is a waiting list at each school for admission (69). As North Carolina implements and expands bilingual immersion programs, Thomas and Collier outlined the implementation process as well as research and data analysis that supports the effectiveness of bilingual immersion programs. “In summary, results from all of these North Carolina analyses indicate that all groups of students benefit greatly from dual language programs” (83).

When exploring what it takes to realize the vision of quality preK–5 Spanish language programs, one must look to the past and to the future to create a successful and sustainable early language learning environment. By raising awareness of successful language learning programs we strengthen advocacy efforts and can identify characteristics that make these programs effective. North Carolina, Delaware, Utah, and New York are just a few states that are paving the way for future early language learning programs. These schools provide models that produce data and provide evidence that students are making progress in proficiency in another language.

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