Elementary School Foreign Language Programs

Elementary school foreign language programs generally fit into three major categories: immersion, FLES (foreign languages in elementary schools), and FLEX (foreign language exploration or experience).

**Immersion education.** Foreign language immersion programs, in which the content of the school curriculum is taught in the foreign language, are among the most influential innovations of the final decades of the twentieth century.

Immersion goals are twofold:
- fluency in the foreign language and
- mastery of the content of the school curriculum.

Most immersion programs begin in kindergarten or grade one, and many continue through the middle and high school levels.

In **total immersion** programs all instruction during the school day is conducted in the target language, beginning with four- or five-year-olds in kindergarten, and children learn to read first in their new language. English language instruction is usually introduced in grade two or three, commonly for a half hour per day, and is gradually increased each year until by grade five or six, 20 to 40 percent of the day is taught in English.

**Partial immersion** programs deliver the curriculum in the English language for approximately half the school day and in the foreign language for the other half of the day. Children learn to read in both languages simultaneously or in English first and then in the new language. This balance of English and foreign language instruction continues from the beginning of schooling until grade five or six.

**Two-way immersion, or bilingual immersion.** In this approach, native speakers of English and the target language learn together, half a day in one language and half a day in the other. Each group of students is learning in its new language during half the school day, and student native speakers serve as language models for one another.

**FLES (foreign languages in elementary schools) programs.** As generally defined, FLES programs are part of a long sequence of language study, beginning before middle school, that lead to continuing courses at the middle and high school levels. The programs of the late 1980s emphasized integrated, thematic planning and a close connection with the general elementary school curriculum. Some "content-based" or "content-related" programs make a special effort to reinforce student learning in other content areas. Class periods range from ten to forty minutes in length, from once to five times per week.

This variability of starting points, instructional time, and degree of content orientation has made it very difficult to evaluate the overall results of FLES programs. The task force that developed the "ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K–12 Learners" addressed this problem by recommending that "the accomplishment of such content standards (in the
ACTFL Standards document) required students to be enrolled in elementary programs that meet from 3–5 days per week for no less than 30–40 minutes per class' (Swender and Duncan, p. 482).

**FLEX programs (foreign language exploration or experience).** Some school districts that find it impossible to fund more intensive foreign language programs for all students offer short-term programs that give learners a sample of one or more languages over a limited period of time. In 1994 Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Bjornstad Pesola characterized FLEX programs as "frequent and regular sessions over a short period of time or short and/or infrequent sessions over an extended period of time" (p.30). These programs have limited goals, usually stated in terms of interest and awareness, and in some cases they are taught mostly in English. Sometimes FLEX programs are offered as a way of helping students choose which language they will later study in depth. When carefully designed and well taught, FLEX programs can serve to enhance cultural awareness and motivate future language study, but they do not claim measurable language skills as an outcome.


### Elementary Programs in surrounding districts

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Surrounding Districts – additional information

Bloomington
- Valley View Elementary (k-5), 2010-2011 is year one of IB with a World Language (Spanish) component

Edina
- Countryside Elementary – FLES (3-5)
- Normandale French Immersion (k-5)

Eden Prairie
- Eagle Heights Spanish Immersion Elementary School
- FLES (k-4), once every four days for 45 minutes
- FLEX (5-6)

Minnetonka
- Immersion: School-within-a-school (k-5)
  - 4 schools: Spanish immersion
  - 2 schools: Chinese immersion

Robbinsdale
- Spanish Immersion (k-5)

St. Louis Park
- Park Immersion (k-5)

Wayzata
- FLES (4-5), twice per week, 1 hour 30 minutes per day

Articles and notes on the benefits of early language learning

Center for Applied Linguistics

Learning a second language at an early age...
- Has a positive effect on intellectual growth.
- Enriches and enhances a child's mental development.
- Leaves students with more flexibility in thinking, greater sensitivity to language, and a better ear for listening.
- Improves a child's understanding of his/her native language.
- Gives a child the ability to communicate with people s/he would otherwise not have the chance to know.
- Opens the door to other cultures and helps a child understand and appreciate people from other countries.
- Gives a student a head start in language requirements for college.
- Increases job opportunities in many careers where knowing another language is a real asset.
Early Advantage

- Higher test scores
- Better and more advanced reading skills
- Greater confidence
- Gives brains a boost
- Natural-sounding, native-like accent
- Greater opportunities for college and careers
- Bigger view of the world
- Greater grasp of one's first language—including a bigger, richer vocabulary
- Building and keeping cultural connections

Language Link

Importance of early language learning

Young brains are hard wired to acquire language. Research has shown that young children have a unique ability to absorb a second language naturally. Experts estimate that by age 8-12, humans already begin to lose the ability to hear and say new sounds. Taking advantage of the window of opportunity that exists between birth and adolescence allows a child to optimize his or her learning potential, and speak the second language with a native accent and absorb grammatical structure naturally. In addition, studies show that young children who learn a second language enjoy many additional cognitive benefits:

- They do significantly better at tasks requiring divergent thinking, problem solving, and figural creativity (Landry, 1974);
- They score higher on standardized tests in language arts, reading, and math than students not enrolled in foreign language programs (Rafferty, 1986; Garfinkel and Tabor, 1991);
- They score higher on the SAT and ACT than students not enrolled in foreign language programs (Cooper, 1987; Olsen and Brown, 1989);
- They have the ability to excel in the pronunciation of a foreign language (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982);
- They show greater cognitive development in higher order thinking skills (Foster and Reeves, 1989);
- They are more open to cultural diversity (Carpenter and Torney, 1974; Hancock and Lipton et al., 1976); and
- They have an improved self-concept and sense of achievement (Masciantonio, 1977).
A Rationale for Teaching Kids Spanish, French, Chinese, German, and More.

Associated Content

In the 21st century, communication and problem solving must be done in more than one language. It is necessary to provide quality K-12 foreign language programs for all children in school districts across America.

Extensive research supports the benefits of early language learning: better brain development, higher test scores, cultural understanding, national security, and economic prosperity. Consider the rationale for early language learning:

Brain research indicates that children are at an optimal age for language learning. Although language study is beneficial and effective at any age, some studies suggest that the human brain is more open to language learning from birth to preadolescence. Fortunately, researchers have not found an age in which the language window closes completely, especially in the areas of grammar and vocabulary.

Early language learners have the ability to develop native-like pronunciation. While learners of all ages are capable of developing bilingual skills, young learners have an edge when it comes to pronunciation. Children who learn a language before adolescence have the ability to develop native-like pronunciation.

Elementary foreign language programs offer the opportunity to support, re-teach and reinforce content across the curriculum. The 1983 congressional report, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," called for high expectations and a rigorous core curriculum that includes English, science, math, social studies, as well as foreign languages. Twenty-five years later, our schools continue to grapple with the same challenge of delivering a rigorous curriculum. We are still a nation at risk. Content-based foreign language instruction not only addresses the call for foreign language education, but it uses foreign languages as the vehicle for teaching subject content. American students will be able to benefit from learning a language, and they will also receive additional review and reinforcement in other subject areas.

Students who study languages score higher on both the verbal and math portions of the SAT. The more years of language study, the greater the results. Likewise, students who study a foreign language achieve higher reading and math scores on the ACT. AP French, German, and Spanish exam survey data also indicates a strong connection between a long sequence of language learning and higher AP scores.

The United States has a critical national security need for proficient, bilingual speakers. Especially in the post 9/11 world, our nation's security and prosperity are strengthened when we have the ability to communicate and encourage reform, respect, and cultural understanding worldwide. The National Virtual Translation Center reports that only 9% of Americans can speak their native language and another fluently, versus 53% of Europeans. Yet, only 44% of high school students study a foreign language. This
deficiency compromises U.S. security interests.

Bilingualism offers career opportunities to individuals and is crucial to U.S. economic success. Knowing another language will be a vital skill to graduates as they enter the work force. Many U.S. jobs are directly tied to international trade and most of the future growth will most likely be in overseas markets. Not only will graduates with these necessary linguistic skills be in high demand, but they will also help insure our economic success in a global economy.

Languages help children develop cultural understanding to live in a multi-lingual society. There is no denying the fact that we live in a pluralistic society and a global community. According to the National Virtual Translation Center, we are far from a being monolingual country. There are, in fact, 311 different languages spoken in the U.S. A language other than English is spoken in 14 million U.S. homes, and one fifth of the population over the age of 5 speaks a language other than English. English-only households account for just 82.1% of the population. Cultural understanding is a vital skill children will need throughout their lifetimes.

If it's true that everything we need to know we learn in kindergarten, then that is when we must start teaching world languages and cultures to our children. It's crucial for delivering the best possible education to American students.