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CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

At a Glance

This Information Capsule summarizes the characteristics of elementary school foreign language programs that research has found to be most important to their long-term success. The characteristics are divided into three categories: scheduling considerations, instructional strategies, and quality of teachers. A review of the research indicates that foreign language programs are most effective when:

- *students begin an articulated sequence of instruction at an early age and attend classes frequently throughout the school year;*
- *they incorporate research-based instructional strategies, such as emphasizing communication over grammar and vocabulary, planning lessons around themes, and teaching students about the culture of the language they are studying; and*
- *they are staffed by highly qualified teachers who receive ongoing opportunities for professional development.*

There is great diversity in elementary foreign language programs, with teachers using a range of methods to introduce a new language to young students. Although there is no one best way to teach students a foreign language, researchers have identified characteristics of elementary school foreign language programs that are critical to their long-term success. These characteristics are summarized below, divided into the following three categories: scheduling considerations, instructional strategies, and quality of teachers.

SCHEDULING CONSIDERATIONS

As indicated below, research shows that the manner in which foreign language programs are scheduled has an impact on students' language proficiency.

Foreign language instruction begins at an early age. Since research shows that younger learners are far more likely to attain and retain native-like pronunciation than older learners, experts recommend that children begin sustained sequences of foreign language instruction in the elementary grades (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011a; Roman, 2011; Center for Applied Second Language Studies, 2010a; The National Language Conference, 2005; Conzemius & Sandroock, 2003; Walker, 2004; Met & Phillips, 1999).

Students attend foreign language classes for 30-40 minutes at least three times per week.

Experts agree that foreign language proficiency is directly related to the number of instructional hours students receive. Researchers recommend that students be provided with at least 90 minutes of foreign language instruction per week. Most suggest that foreign language classes at the elementary school level meet 3-5 times per week for a minimum of 30-40 minutes per class (Lewis, 2012; American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011a; Center for Applied Second Language Studies, 2010b; Conzemius & Sandroock, 2003; Curtain & Pesola Dahlberg, 2000; Gilzow & Rhodes, 2000).

The Center for Applied Second Language Studies and the New Jersey Department of Education studied the proficiency outcomes of over 12,000 students completing elementary world language programs in Spanish or French. The researchers found that increasing the number of instructional hours led to an increase in the percentage of students who reached speaking proficiency: approximately 200 hours of instruction were needed for 25% of students to reach proficiency and approximately 700 hours were needed for 50% of students to reach proficiency (Center for Applied Second Language Studies, 2010b).

The Center for Applied Second Language Studies and the New Jersey Department of Education study also compared two groups of students who received the same number of instructional hours, but in different class formats: students whose classes met 1-2 times per week for longer class periods versus those who met 3-5 times per week for shorter class periods. Results indicated that students were more likely to attain speaking proficiency when their classes met 3-5 times per week than when their classes met 1-2 times per week. The authors concluded that when the number of instructional hours was held constant, more frequent practice of language skills led to higher levels of student performance (Center for Applied Second Language Studies, 2010b).

Foreign language instruction is provided throughout the school year. Researchers emphasize the importance of an uninterrupted sequence of foreign language study throughout the school year (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011a; Walker, 2004; Conzemius & Sandroock, 2003). The study conducted by the Center for Applied Second Language Studies and the New Jersey Department of Education compared a group of students who received 216 hours of instruction in a single school year to another group of students who received the same total number of hours of instruction over the course of two different school years. Results indicated that more students met the proficiency target in foreign language speech when classes met throughout the whole school year, rather than when classes were spaced out over two school years (Center for Applied Second Language Studies, 2010b).

Class size is kept to a minimum. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2011a) recommends that foreign language classes contain no more than 15 students. The Council suggests that teachers be provided with additional support when class sizes are larger in order to maintain sound pedagogical practices.

Students are provided with a continuous K-12 sequence of foreign language instruction.

Foreign language programs are most successful when planned and implemented in the context of both the total elementary school program and the K-12 foreign language sequence. Elementary foreign language programs cannot succeed in isolation; they must link to higher grades to build the long sequence of instruction that is critical to developing linguistic proficiency (New Jersey Department of Education, 2008; The National Language Conference, 2005; Met, 2004; Conzemius & Sandroock, 2003; Lipton, 2003; Curtain & Pesola Dahlberg, 2000; Gilzow & Rhodes, 2000). The Center for Applied Linguistics conducted a survey of foreign language

programs in over 5,000 public and private schools across the U.S. They found that only 39% of elementary schools with foreign language programs reported some type of articulation from elementary to middle school foreign language instruction (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009).

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Successful elementary foreign language programs incorporate instructional strategies that have been confirmed by research to lead to optimum language learning. These instructional strategies are summarized below.

Standards for foreign language learning are incorporated into instruction. A commonly accepted set of foreign language educational standards was developed in 1996 through the National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center at Iowa State University and the U.S. Department of Education (Iowa State University, 1997). The standards, used in conjunction with state and local standards and curriculum frameworks, help educators plan lessons and determine reasonable expectations for students (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011b; Hanover Research, 2010). The Center for Applied Linguistics' nationwide survey of over 5,000 foreign language programs found that the percentage of elementary school foreign language teachers incorporating national or state standards into their instruction increased from 25% in 1997 to 76% in 2008 (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009).

National Standards in Foreign Language Education

- Communication. Students communicate in the target language; they engage in conversations, exchange opinions, and provide and obtain information.
- Cultures. Students gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures.
- Connections. Students make connections with other disciplines and acquire information, recognizing the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the study of the foreign language and its cultures.
- Comparisons. Students develop insight into the nature of language and culture by comparing the foreign language and culture they are studying with their own native language and culture.
- Communities. Students use the foreign language both within and beyond the school setting and for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

Source: Iowa State University, 1997.

Communication is emphasized. The ultimate goal of elementary foreign language programs is students' acquisition of the speaking skills needed to interact in the foreign language in real-life situations. While grammar and vocabulary are essential tools for communication, they should be taught implicitly through the modeling of correct language usage and through tasks that provide relevant examples and visual support (Borich, 2012; Marsh, 2012; American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011b; Georgia Department of Education, 2010; Sherris, 2008; Met, 2004; Lipton, 2003; Gilzow & Rhodes, 2000).

Lessons are planned around a theme. The curriculum should be organized around a broad subject (such as family members, zoo animals, shapes, or colors) that allows students to

connect the language they are learning to meaningful content (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011b; Georgia Department of Education, 2010; Hanover Research, 2010; Haas, 2000; Atlanta Public Schools, n.d.).

Teachers create a student-centered classroom. Studies have found that learning is most meaningful when topics are relevant to students' lives and interests and when the students themselves are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge. Researchers agree that lessons should be planned to include a wide range of culture-rich, age-appropriate activities, such as singing, dancing, rhyming, playing games, watching videos, and using the Internet. Teachers should guide learning as students work independently, in pairs, and in groups (Lewis, 2012; Marsh, 2012; American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2010; Georgia Department of Education, 2010; Conzemius & Sandrock, 2003; National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Languages, 1999; Atlanta Public Schools, n.d.).

Teachers use a variety of authentic, culture-rich, and age-appropriate materials. Foreign language teachers should use materials that encourage young students' interaction and involvement, including stuffed animals, puppets, storybooks, videos, and games (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011a; Georgia Department of Education, 2010; Met, 2004; Walker, 2004; Gilzow & Rhodes, 2000; National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Languages, 1999; Atlanta Public Schools, n.d.).

Technology is integrated into instruction. Foreign language teachers are increasingly using technology to encourage interaction and collaboration with native speakers of other languages through email, Skype, and chat rooms. Technology also allows students to access authentic information and entertainment in the foreign language, such as television programs, movies, storybooks, computer games, and music videos (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011a; Sams, 2011; Georgia Department of Education, 2010).

Teachers consider students' individual learning rates and styles. Foreign language teachers must take into account how young learners acquire language at different rates. While there are identifiable universal aspects of second language acquisition, there is also considerable variability in students' rates of learning and their ultimate level of achievement (Ellis, 2008; New Jersey Department of Education, 2008).

Researchers have also found that instruction is more successful when it is differentiated to accommodate students' diverse learning styles. They suggest that lessons be divided into different segments that appeal to various learning styles; for example, videos for visual learners, class discussions for aural learners, and group activities for kinesthetic learners (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011a; Sams, 2011; Georgia Department of Education, 2010; National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Languages, 1999).

Students are not taught through rote memorization. Foreign language teachers should engage students in activities, such as storytelling, that emphasize the gradual acquisition of language rather than the memorization of vocabulary and rules. They should also use a minimum of "listen and repeat after me" instruction. Students are more likely to become proficient in a foreign language when they learn through association, since it is impossible to memorize every word in a new language (Borich, 2012; Lewis, 2012; Berg, 2003; Gilzow, 2002).

Students are taught about the culture of the language they are studying. Foreign language teachers should incorporate cultural activities into instruction, such as introducing the foods, music, and dance that are enjoyed in the countries that speak the language being studied. Many

classrooms collaborate with students living in other countries to gain an understanding of their cultural conventions; contributions to the world; social, political, and economic institutions; and most admired historians, authors, and artists (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011b; Sams, 2011; Georgia Department of Education, 2010; Hanover Research, 2010; California Department of Education, 2009; National Language Conference, 2005; Met, 2004; Conzemius & Sandrock, 2003; Gilzow & Rhodes, 2000).

Students and teachers use the foreign language in the classroom as exclusively as possible. Experts recommend that teachers and students use the foreign language in the classroom 90% to 100% of the time. If a student asks the meaning of a word in the foreign language, the teacher should use both gesture and description to explain the word, rather than reverting to English. The foreign language should be used for classroom management as well as for instruction (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011a; Sams, 2011; Georgia Department of Education, 2010; Ellis, 2008). The Center for Applied Linguistics' survey of educators from over 5,000 public and private schools across the country found that only about one-third of elementary schools with foreign language programs reported that their teachers used the foreign language in the classroom at least 75% of the time (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009).

Use of the foreign language is encouraged outside of the classroom. Studies have found that students demonstrate increased retention and enthusiasm for language learning when they hear the foreign language being spoken throughout the school and by more than just the foreign language teacher. Language fairs, competitions, and cultural events provide opportunities for students to use the foreign language outside of the classroom and serve to integrate the foreign language into students' everyday lives (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011b; Georgia Department of Education, 2010; Conzemius & Sandrock, 2003; Lipton, 2003; Gilzow & Rhodes, 2000). Ellis (2008) stated: "If the only input students receive is in the context of a limited number of weekly language lessons based on a course book, they are unlikely to achieve high levels of second language proficiency."

Students are provided with ample constructive feedback. Constructive feedback assists students and improves their ability to interact in the foreign language. Experts recommend that teachers provide students with a balance of positive and negative feedback, making sure that critical statements do not embarrass students or discourage them from participating in classroom activities (Marsh, 2012; American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011a; Sams, 2011; Pessoa et al., 2007; National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Languages, 1999).

Frequent student assessments are administered. Experts recommend that frequent formative assessments be administered to provide teachers with precise data on students' strengths and weaknesses in specific areas of foreign language learning, such as vocabulary, letter-sound awareness, or syntactic understanding. Researchers have concluded that ongoing formative assessments better inform instruction than formal, standards-based summative assessments. Examples of formative assessments include performance-based products, such as writing samples, multimedia presentations, oral interviews, essay assignments, and quizzes (Georgia Department of Education, 2010; Sherris, 2008; Schneider et al., 2007; National Association of District Supervisors of Foreign Languages, 1999). Ellis (2008) stated that constructed response items (i.e., those that require students to create their own written responses, such as fill-in-the-blank responses or short answers) are a more accurate indicator of students' foreign language proficiency than multiple choice items.

QUALITY OF TEACHERS

Research has found that the quality of elementary foreign language teachers has a strong influence on students' acquisition of a foreign language. Studies have concluded that districts and schools must consider the following factors when staffing their foreign language programs.

Highly qualified teachers are hired. Foreign language teachers should have a high level of proficiency in both English and the foreign language, an understanding of the culture associated with the language, elementary certification, a background in child language acquisition and foreign language teaching methods, and general knowledge of the elementary school curriculum in the different grade levels (Vuchic & Arden Robb, 2006; Lipton, 2003; Conzemius & Sandrock, 2003; Curtain & Pesola Dahlberg, 2000; Gilzow & Rhodes, 2000). Researchers from the Center for Applied Linguistics surveyed educators in 19 different countries about their foreign language programs. Respondents indicated that hiring teachers who had received rigorous pre-service training was a key component of successful foreign language programs (Pufahl et al., 2001).

Teachers are provided with ongoing professional development. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2011a) recommends that experienced teachers be provided with ongoing professional development and new teachers be provided with mentoring services in order to advance their knowledge of language, culture, and instruction. A study conducted by researchers at the U.S. Department of Education identified seven model early foreign language programs across the country. One characteristic that was found to be critical to the success of all seven programs was the provision of ongoing professional development opportunities, including in-service workshops, demonstration lessons, participation in professional association conferences, and collaboration with other teachers (Gilzow, 2002).

Foreign language teachers' schedules are planned carefully. Curtain and Pesola Dahlberg (2000) described difficulties schools and districts frequently encounter when developing early foreign language programs. One such difficulty is the planning of schedules and workloads that lead to teacher burnout. Elementary school foreign language teachers may teach as many as 14 classes in a single day. Their classes are often scheduled back-to-back and they rarely have their own classrooms. They frequently lack professional support and opportunities for in-service training, and their schedules usually do not allow them time to collaborate with other foreign language teachers. Curtain and Pesola Dahlberg (2000) concluded that foreign language teachers should be provided with time for their additional responsibilities, such as developing lessons and materials for the multiple grade levels they teach, interacting with other classroom teachers, and communicating with parents and community members.

SUMMARY

This Information Capsule summarized characteristics of foreign language programs that researchers have found to be most important to their long-term success. Characteristics were divided into the following three categories:

- Scheduling considerations. Studies have found that foreign language programs are most effective when students begin an articulated sequence of instruction at an early age and attend classes frequently throughout the school year.
- Instructional strategies. Successful elementary foreign language programs incorporate instructional strategies that have been confirmed by research to lead to optimum language

learning. Research-based instructional strategies include emphasizing communication over grammar and vocabulary; planning lessons around a theme; integrating technology into instruction; teaching students about the culture of the language they are studying; and using the foreign language in the classroom as exclusively as possible.

- Quality of teachers. Research has found that elementary foreign language programs are most effective when they are staffed by highly qualified teachers who receive ongoing opportunities for professional development. In addition, schedules and workloads should be planned carefully so foreign language teachers do not experience unnecessarily high levels of stress.

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