A Tale of Two Schools

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION
Series Editor: Professor Viv Edwards, *University of Reading, Reading, Great Britain*
Series Advisor: Professor Allan Luke, *Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia*

Two decades of research and development in language and literacy education have yielded a broad, multidisciplinary focus. Yet education systems face constant economic and technological change, with attendant issues of identity and power, community and culture. This series will feature critical and interpretive, disciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives on teaching and learning, language and literacy in new times.

Full details of all the books in this series and of all our other publications can be found on http://www.multilingual-matters.com, or by writing to Multilingual Matters, St Nicholas House, 31-34 High Street, Bristol BS1 2AW, UK.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION
Series Editor: Professor Viv Edwards*, University of Reading, Reading, Great Britain*

A Tale of Two Schools

Developing Sustainable Early Foreign Language Programs

Richard Donato and G. Richard Tucker

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS
Bristol • Buffalo • Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.
Donato, Richard.
A Tale of Two Schools: Developing Sustainable Early Foreign Language Programs/
Richard Donato and G. Richard Tucker.
New Perspectives on Language and Education
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Language and languages–Programmed instruction. 2. Language and languages–
Study and teaching. 3. Children–Language. 4. Language acquisition. I. Tucker,
G. Richard. II. Title.
P53.D66 2010
372.65–dc22 2010026209

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-310-5 (hbk)
ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-309-9 (pbk)

Multilingual Matters
UK: St Nicholas House, 31-34 High Street, Bristol BS1 2AW, UK.
USA: UTP, 2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA
Canada: UTP, 5201 Dufferin Street, North York, Ontario M3H 5T8, Canada.

The policy of Multilingual Matters/Channel View Publications is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products, made from wood grown in sustainable forests. In the manufacturing process of our books, and to further support our policy, preference is given to printers that have FSC and PEFC Chain of Custody certification. The FSC and/or PEFC logos will appear on those books where full certification has been granted to the printer concerned.

Typeset by Datapage International Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Short Run Press Ltd.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction: A Tale of Two Schools

Rationale for this Monograph

Similar to Charles Dickens' novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, creating and sustaining foreign language education programs for all children in the elementary grades can be viewed as 'the best of times and the worst of times'. Despite intense efforts by national organizations, such as the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the development and implementation of extended sequences of well-articulated foreign language instruction in K-8 schools has been vigorous and healthy in some cases and inconsistent and unsustainable in others. The story we wish to tell is about this contrast and difference. Just as the main characters of Dickens' novel represent two contrasting personalities, Darnay, the romantic French aristocrat, and Carton, the cynical English lawyer, the story of K-8 foreign language programs is also one of passionate commitment or wavering optimism toward the inclusion of foreign language education in the school's curriculum.

This story is based on our continuing work since 1991 with two different schools that wished to implement foreign language education in the elementary grades.[1] Our work in these two schools involved collaborative planning meetings, curriculum development and longitudinal research to assess the progress that students made as they moved through the grades. What we hope to show in this educational narrative is that, although both schools aimed to provide the best world language education possible for their students, only one school produced a program that was sustainable and fully integrated into the life of the school. In the case of the other school, the program was closed two years before we began to write this story. Why this occurred, what we learned from our research and how others can learn from these two experiences is the purpose of this book.

How to read the story

Our claim in this account is not to provide the definitive formula for successful programs. As Eggington (2005) states, any language planning activity – including policies for the teaching and learning of additional languages in school districts – is embedded within a series of immediate and interconnected eco-systems. That is, one program model or set of considerations for program development cannot be applied to all school districts without careful consideration of specific local factors that influence educational change. For example, parental attitude toward language learning and their own histories as language learners, faculty support for language learning, time for instruction, the position of a program in the school curriculum and monetary resources are a few of the myriad factors that are consequential to what gets implemented, received and regularized. However, based on our experience with acquisition planning and research in the eco-systems of these two schools, we have identified prominent themes through research that form a profile of a successful program. It is our hope, therefore, that this story will offer guidance to school districts, administrators and teachers seeking to implement early foreign language learning programs (EFLLP). Where programs already exist, we hope our research will provide assistance to those who wish to assess current practices and program outcomes. We maintain that the credibility and sustainability of early language programs nationwide depend largely on serious research investigations of program practices and outcomes. Through research into programs, we can ensure consistent and sustainable quality instruction for all children in world language programs (see also Rosenbusch & Jensen, 2005; National Association of State Boards of Education, 2003).

As our story unfolds, we hope that those involved with the foreign language education of young children will be able to identify experiences that connect to their own programs or realize that our tale may contrast with theirs in whole or in part. Moreover, comparing and contrasting local experiences through the lens of the context of specific programs allows for an understanding of why programs function as they do. Thus, the generalizability of this research is not found entirely in external factors such as *all* elementary school children or *all* elementary school foreign language teachers who teach them. Rather, our research is centrally concerned with deepening our understanding of the educational activity of teaching children ages five to 13 in a foreign language in American schools. In this way, we believe that

our research generalizes to the concept of early language learning programs rather than to specific groups of individuals or practices involved in these programs. Moreover, we believe that the research plan that we present in detail in later chapters can serve as a framework for research into other programs. This research framework illustrates how various aspects of a school's ecology come into play when evaluating foreign language education programs.

Why is this story important to tell?

Understanding the dynamics of early language learning programs in the local context in which they occur is important for two reasons. First, recent professional concern for the lack of advanced and superior levels of language proficiency on the part of graduates has led to the national priority of achieving stronger proficiency gains as an outcome of our programs. EFLLPs clearly play a role in addressing this priority. Second, the idiosyncratic and variable structure of foreign language teaching in the elementary school makes comparative research all the more difficult and complex. Given the lack of comparability of early language programs, making general claims about the young language learner, the level of his/her achievement and the relationship of this achievement to program characteristics is extremely difficult and highly context bound. As Hamayan (1998) has so aptly pointed out, understanding early foreign language programs and how children achieve in these programs is like painting a chameleon. Just as the animal's colors depend on its physical surroundings, any one representation becomes inaccurate as soon as this background changes. Language programs in the early grades, especially one teaching a language that is perceived as non-essential to the daily life of the community, is similarly hard to depict.

Over the past few years, many professional language organizations and regional conferences and consortiums have turned their attention to the issue of advanced and superior language proficiency. As we write this monograph, hardly a day goes by that some individual or organization does not call for the implementation of programs or innovative practices that will help to develop graduates with higher degrees of proficiency in various languages of so-called strategic importance to the USA. For example, at an international education event at the State Department in Washington, which brought together university presidents from around the country, President George W. Bush (January 5, 2008) said that the USA must promote the study of foreign cultures and languages and encourage students from overseas to

attend colleges and universities here as part of the strategy against terrorism. The US government, he noted, needs diplomats, soldiers and intelligence officers who are fluent in the languages of the Muslim world in order to promote the spread of freedom and fight the battle against terrorists. Language skills are 'part of the strategic goals to protect this country'. Although one may argue with this rationale of why language should be taught and learned, it represents, nonetheless, a renewed national awareness of the importance of language proficiency as central to the education of the country's citizenry and to the strength of the nation.

The impact of political events on the language teaching profession has been significant in our history. Four decades ago, the launching of Sputnik led to a temporary growth in the number and variety of language programs. More recently, the current world political situation has led to a growth of language programs aimed to develop advanced and superior ranges of proficiency and research centers devoted exclusively to demonstrating how this goal can be achieved (e.g. the Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research (CALPER) located at Pennsylvania State University, the Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) at the University of Maryland and others). Despite recent initiatives to address the widespread lack of advanced and superior language outcomes of programs, it is ironic that foundational language education programs in American K-12 public education are often viewed as 'problematic, difficult, and undesirable' (Tucker, 2001). This perception is particularly applicable to foreign language education in the elementary grades where current nationally mandated testing has created the need for schools to spend the majority of their time and resources on mathematics and reading English. If foreign language learning has been perceived as difficult in the past, this scenario is even more pronounced under the current requirements for the assessment of 'basic skills'.

Thus, a major question that these current initiatives seek to answer is how can students in American schools graduate with advanced proficiency and cross-cultural competence as a matter of course in the foreseeable future? We believe that by reporting on the successes and the challenges of the programs with which we have been involved, important issues can be brought to light concerning the design of sustainable early foreign language programs and how these programs can connect to the broader professional agenda of fostering a language competent society. It is now clear that advanced level competence cannot be achieved after two years of language study in high school

or at a university. Advanced and superior level proficiency require systematic study of a foreign language across several years of instruction. As our story will show, academically serious and well-designed foreign language programs in the elementary and middle school are the prerequisites to advanced and superior levels of language proficiency in later years.

We have found consistently over the years that students can make steady progress in elementary school programs that are designed with language proficiency and cultural competence as explicit goals. It is also well known that students who begin the study of a foreign language in the later years of schooling often do not surpass intermediate levels of proficiency as defined by the ACTFL (1999) proficiency guidelines. Beginning instruction in a foreign language in the early years of school increases the probability that students who continue their study will graduate from university with advanced proficiency and cross-cultural competence as a matter of course in the foreseeable future. But this scenario can only be achieved if early language learning programs provide adequate instructional time and resources, equate the importance of language learning with the learning of other academic subjects and incorporate language learning centrally into the school curriculum and into the life of the school. Our story documents these issues and describes what the pathway to advanced proficiency may look like. Conversely, our story also illustrates how this pathway may lead to a dead end under certain unfavorable conditions.

A second reason why research is needed on elementary school foreign language programs is that foreign language program models vary greatly from state to state and even within school districts, unlike other subject areas such as mathematics and English language arts. We see program variability in the myriad configurations of foreign language programs. These configurations include exploratory programs, regularly scheduled time for instruction during each school day, irregularly scheduled instructional time during the week or school year, programs beginning at different grade levels in either elementary or middle school, and even after-school programs when, for whatever reasons, time in the school day cannot be found for language instruction. Compounding this array of program models is the inconsistency across schools concerning time allocated for instruction. It is fairly well accepted that 75 minutes a week constitutes the minimum amount of time required for a *bona fide* elementary school foreign language program (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004). But as many in this field know, the amount of time devoted to foreign language study is almost always *less* than the time given to other

subject areas. Unfortunately, adjustments to the expectations of student outcomes based on time for instruction are often not considered when assessing whether a program is successful.[2] For reasons such as these, conducting research and making research claims about foreign language education in the elementary school is extremely difficult.

Due to the variability of program models, our story will focus solely on programs considered by the profession to be *bona fide* and legitimate foreign language programs for children. That is, these programs provide adequate instructional time and were not, at least initially, what some would call 'minimal courses'. Both schools made efforts to allot consistent amounts of time during the school day for foreign language instruction and the curricula were developed to reflect a proficiency-oriented, standards-based approach. The teachers were certified in foreign language teaching and, in some cases, held an additional certification in elementary education or an advanced degree in education (e.g. a master's degree in foreign language education). In other words, the schools in which we worked could be considered best-case settings for foreign language programs in the K-8 environment, based on what we know about the vast programmatic differences in how foreign language instruction is currently delivered across the country.

Essential Questions

A number of essential questions that have shaped the direction of our research in these two schools over the years motivate this story. These questions derived from previous research, our conversations with school district personnel and our observations of the two programs. As we consulted the research literature, we soon realized that studies of early language learning were relatively scant. The studies and position papers that were available often involved programs outside the USA and they needed to be read and interpreted carefully in light of the American educational context (see, e.g. Cameron, 2001; Clyne *et al*., 1995; Genesee, 1987). In some cases, comparisons between research findings from other countries and the USA were not possible. In other cases, the particular program model precludes deriving insight from research, such as the case of immersion or dual language programs. Although other countries initiated and examined early language programs (see, for example the case of Clyne *et al*. (1995) for Australia), it was clear that naive cross-national comparison was not the best way to understand and shed light on language learning in the American elementary school context. Contextual factors, such as national consciousness for the value of

language study, language education policy, the degree of bilingualism or multilingualism of the country and attitudes toward users of languages other than the national language preclude making claims from research in these contexts.

Additionally, a majority of studies concerning the young language learner in the existing research literature were restricted, for the most part, to the learning of English as a second language in American schools (see, e.g. Genesee *et al*., 2006) or to the learning of additional languages in immersion programs, such as French in Canada (Lapkin, 1998; Johnson & Swain, 1997; Lambert, 1984). From a contextual perspective, neither of these two settings involved programs that were similar to the types of early foreign language programs that were beginning to take hold in American K-8 schools.

Because of our interactions with teachers, administrators and parents, a number of important and essential questions emerged within our particular context. These questions can be grouped into three broad categories: (1) planning program implementation, (2) monitoring and documenting program outcomes and (3) unanticipated issues and challenges. As we began detailed planning discussions with administrators and teachers at each of the two schools, particular questions emerged that were idiosyncratic to each school, an issue we will discuss later in this volume. Although the overarching themes remained the same for the two schools, how the questions emerged and were answered, and what was discovered differed considerably across the schools. These answers, as we will see later, were consequential to each program's future sustainability. The purpose of reviewing the essential questions guiding our research is to provide the rationale for how we approached our examination of these two early foreign language education programs. We will look closely at these questions and their significance, how they were answered and our findings in the later chapters of this book.

The question of language selection surfaced as a central concern early on in discussions with both schools. Following language selection, the choice of program model emerged as an important concern. Finding time in an already overcrowded school day required careful deliberation both with the schedule and with teachers – especially those in other subject areas where a sacrifice of a few minutes would have to be made. As program models took shape, assessing program outcomes within given years of instruction and across years was raised as an important issue. Here, the university partners (see Chapter 2) played an important role in working with the schools' personnel to decide what was important to

assess, how to conduct these assessments, and when and by whom assessments should be carried out. Related to this matter of assessment were questions concerning how the assessment measures were to be constructed, who was to be involved in developing the instruments, how assessment results were to be used and to whom information should be communicated. Given the dearth of valid and reliable assessments for early language learners (Donato, 1998), this aspect of our work occupied a large portion of our collaborative efforts with the schools and was a prime source of information for much of what we now know concerning foreign language programs for the young learner.

Unexpected issues also surfaced in these schools, leading to an additional set of unanticipated and complex questions. As students moved through a particular program model, questions arose relative to program priorities and practices. For example, how to maintain student motivation to ensure continual language development across years of instruction was a theme that was central in both schools. Moreover, what counts as progress came into focus as an essential question. As students progressed in their comprehension and speaking skills, it became clear that assessing reading and writing development was also crucial. This was particularly true in the Spanish school where the program model shifted in the middle school grades (6–8) to content-based instruction.[3] Content-based instruction requires strong literacy skills for interpreting and producing academic language and for engaging in academic and text-based discussions. This issue led to other concerns that required questioning the time-honored assumptions about content-based or content-related instruction. That is, what does the connection look like in terms of classroom talk and text, what are the challenges when making the language and content connections, and how can teachers be assisted in understanding and carrying out content-based instruction when their training and experiences were based on traditional models of standards-based instruction. The modes of communication as specified in the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (NSFLL) (2006) do not delineate between varying genre of language use in particular textual domains. Thus, we faced the issue of assessing clearly and differentiating between student language gains in the K-5 setting and the type of language needed when the focus of instruction shifted to language as the content and vehicle of instruction in a content-based language program.

In the context of all these questions, the teacher and those associated with the programs remained central to our investigation. School ambiance, or the attitudes, assumptions and dispositions of program constituents, was believed to influence the evolution of the program,

student progress and attitudes, and school board satisfaction (Donato *et al*., 1996). In this way, our research at these two schools yielded both quantitative data in the form of language achievement measures as well as results from attitude and opinion questionnaires, as well as qualitative data in the form of observations of classroom interactions and artifact analysis that served as an interpretive lens for understanding various aspects of student achievement and teacher practices. Taken together, these data points resulted in a comprehensive profile of a program's effectiveness, or the lack of it, and reasons for a program's success or challenges.

In the next section, we will describe the state of contemporary foreign language education in the USA and, by contrast, the state of foreign language education in other selected countries throughout the world. One purpose of this review is to highlight the relative scarcity within the USA of programs such as the ones with which we have been working.

Brief Review of US Experiences

Approximately a decade ago, federal legislation was enacted in the USA, the so-called Goals 2000: Educate America Act, that called for American students to leave grades 4, 8 and 12 having 'demonstrated competence over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, [and] foreign languages'. Although *every* European country has a national policy for introducing at least one foreign language into the elementary school curriculum of every child (see, e.g. Pufahl *et al*., 2000; Dickson & Cumming, 1996), the situation is much bleaker in the USA. Today, nearly a decade later, we are far from achieving the goal of *offering* foreign languages to every student in grades 4, 8 and 12; much less certifying that all students can demonstrate age and grade level competence in a foreign language.

Foreign language education in US schools

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) and ACTFL, with support from the US Department of Education, have periodically examined the state of foreign language education in the USA. CAL has documented (in 1987, 1997 and is doing so again in 2007–2008 as this monograph is being written) the percentage of schools that offer instruction in public and private elementary schools (operationally defined in their research as comprising kindergarten through grade 8) and secondary schools (defined as grades 9 through 12). Their most recent report (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999) indicated that only 31% of American elementary schools offered any