Making the Case for Exploratory World Language Instruction in Catholic Elementary Schools

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Making the Case for Exploratory World Language Instruction in Catholic Elementary Schools

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**Introduction**

Dunkel (1912) commented on a common phenomenon occurring in U.S. elementary schools regarding the implementation of world language programs:

…the curriculum of the schools is not elastic, and its contents must be selected on the basis of the relative value of the claims made for various subjects…even the clear superiority of an early start in language learning (a superiority which has not yet been demonstrated) does not necessarily make it possible for languages to be placed in the early stages of school (p. 78-79).

As evidenced by Dunkel, the place of world languages in schools’ curricula has been debated for at least 65 years. Other subjects, seen as more superior, take precedence in the fight for the elementary curriculum. Because of this, young children are missing out on an important opportunity to get a head start on learning new languages. Likewise, language teachers and researchers are missing out on an opportunity to learn about language development in young children. The children themselves are rarely, if ever, consulted on language learning. While working on a case study in the fall of 2011, Dr. Burke and I attempted to advance our understanding of attitude and aptitude of young language learners (specifically, kindergarteners) in a classroom setting. These students were taught French for one hour each week for one semester by me. This pilot study yielded the following results:

- The students expressed overall positive feelings toward the FLEX program.
- The students articulated a desire to learn other languages and become smarter.
- The students understood, on a basic level, the communicative goals of language learning (i.e. socio-cultural competence, travel, communication with others, immersion).
The students believed that language learning is fun.

Particular teacher methods made language learning fun and meaningful (i.e. manipulatives, use of technology).

These results validated further examination. Therefore, we expanded on this study, expanding to other FLEX classrooms to focus on children’s attitudes toward learning new languages and cultures as well as their learning and acquisition of the world language after experiencing extended instruction in a FLEX program.

The goal of the present study was to advance our understanding of the general attitude and second language acquisition of kindergarten, second, and fourth grade language learners after they obtained significant instruction in a world language. By using our data from the previous study as a starting point, we compared and contrasted the attitudes of young language learners of differing ages in an attempt to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their learning processes and their attitudes about world languages and their associated cultures. Such an understanding of young language learners could lead to better instructional practices for world language teachers. It also could help build a case for introducing more world language education programs at younger grade levels in the U.S. Specific research questions are listed below:

1. What effect, if any, does exploratory world language instruction have on children’s acquisition/learning of a world language?

2. What effect, if any, does exploratory world language instruction have on children’s attitudes toward learning world languages and cultures?

The hypothesis for this study was that structured and continuous instruction in a FLEX program would result in the development of communicative competence, as well as a more positive and
expressive outlook on learning new languages and experiencing different cultures for elementary students.

**Review of Literature**

**Acquisition, Learning, and Communicative Competence**

Public school students generally begin world language education in middle school. Conventional wisdom (Tye, 2000) in the U. S. suggests that students younger than grade five or six are not adequately developed to handle what many believe to be strenuous material. Reasons for this trace back to the Committee of Ten, who created the first national standards for education (1894). With regards to world language education, the Committee of Ten declared fifth grade to be an appropriate starting point for world language learning. Since then, world languages at the elementary level have been in a constant struggle for survival against other, superior contents (Dunkel, 1948). This is why world language learning typically begins in middle or high school (Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian, 2001). For the past century, more students have been enrolled in world language programs at the high school than all other levels combined (kindergarten through college)(Watzke, 2003).

Although support and appreciation for early world language learning in the U.S. is severely lacking, research clearly supports that students who begin learning world languages at an earlier age (younger than 11 years) are at an advantage to those who begin learning at a later age (11 years or older)(Muñoz, 2011). Muñoz found that children who start language learning earlier are more likely to develop long-term proficiency equal to that of native speakers. In initial lessons, she found that older children learn more quickly than younger children. However, after about 2,000 hours of exposure to the target language younger children tend to match or exceed the abilities of older children (Muñoz, 2011).
Krashen (1982) made the distinction between the terms acquisition and learning. He defined acquisition as a subconscious acceptance of linguistic knowledge that is stored in the brain through natural communication. It emphasizes meaningful interaction over linguistic code, and is essentially how young children learn their first languages. Learning, on the other hand, for Krashen, is a conscious acceptance of linguistic knowledge about a language (e.g. grammar or form), and is typically viewed as less important than acquisition for long-term proficiency. Learning is the product of most formal language instruction (Krashen, 1982).

Similar to communicative proficiency (ACTFL, 2013), and translingual and transcultural competence (Byrnes, 2008), communicative competence is the ability of a speaker to function in an authentic communicative setting by employing both linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge in order to negotiate meaning (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1997). Communicative competence is composed of four separate but interrelated competences: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences (Savignon, 1997).

Communicative activities (CAs) are tasks in a classroom designed to promote communicative competence (Burke, 2006, 2010, 2012; Ellis, 1982, 1997; Savignon, 2002). While they may differ, all CAs share similar characteristics, as determined by Ellis (1982, 1997). CAs must have a communication purpose, and should focus on meaning of linguistic code. Learners must be presented with an information or opinion gap to overcome through meaning negotiation, and they choose the resources required to do so. The world language teaching community has displayed a growing interest in the use of CAs during instruction, as seen with the use of Integrated Performance Assessments (IPAs)(Adair-Hauck, Glisan, Koda, Swender, & Sandrock, 2006). These IPAs are essentially a formal assessment of students’ progress based on
their performance in three separate, yet interrelated CAs that focus on interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational forms of communication (Adair-Hauck et. al., 2006).

Attitude About Learning World Languages

There has been evidence to suggest that young children from kindergarten to second grade who participate in immersive world language programs develop a more positive attitude about world languages and different cultures than children of similar age who are taught in English-only classrooms (Navarro-Villarroel, 2011). Navarro-Villarroel (2011) believes children who are introduced to new languages at an earlier age have a greater likelihood of being more accepting of other languages and cultures. In addition, Kuhl (2011) states, “children’s early mastery of language requires learning in a social context” (p. 128). Kuhl (2011) might argue that since schools are one of the most influential social contexts in student’s lives, they should be providing more world language programs as early as possible for children.

In a study designed to examine the influential factors of children’s attitudes toward Second Language Learning (SLL), Yao (2002) found evidence suggesting that there are five specific influential factors that affect a child’s attitude toward learning a second language: peer relationships, schools and teachers, parental involvement, television programs and linguistic factors. Piechurska-Kuciel and Szymanska-Czaplak (2013), in addition, promote that “self-esteem is one of the affective factors critical to successful language development” (p. viii) Schools have the ability to influence one or more of these factors directly and can play a part in the influence of the other factors.

According to Krashen (1981), attitude and aptitude of world language learning act independently. Students can be very high achievers and dislike studying world languages. In contrast, Krashen argues students can enjoy the subject and achieve poor results. He also states,
“When the practical value of second language proficiency is high, and frequent use necessary, instrumental motivation may be a powerful predictor of second language acquisition” (p. 23). According to Krashen, the way the teacher conducts lessons on world languages, specifically concerning the relation of the lesson to the student and the frequency of use of the language, can severely impact how a student learns language.

More recently, Csikszentmihályi and Schneider (2000) have proposed the concept of flow, a state of mind during which teenagers derive great joy from a rigorously challenging, yet accomplishable task. To achieve flow, the level of challenge must be high, yet so must be the level of skill that students employ when accomplishing said task (Csikszentmihályi & Schneider, 2000). Csikszentmihályi and Schneider reported that the most rewarding educational experiences for students occur when they reach flow. Although their work specifically discussed teenagers, the concept of flow can be applied to education at an elementary level, especially when learning a new language.

**Methodology**

**Context**

This study was conducted with the support of programs from a medium-sized university in the Midwest. As part of a pre-service placement program, teachers and administrators from the area around this university have been welcoming pre-service teachers into their classrooms for three and a half years in order to teach elementary students various world languages.

The students involved in this study came from two different catholic elementary schools. The first, which we will call St. Arthur’s, is situated in a suburban university town and serves 230 students between grades K-8. 90% of the students in this school are considered to be Caucasian, while 9% are Hispanic and 0.4% are African American (Movoto, 2014). In contrast,
the second school, St. Gertrude’s, plays host to 421 students between grades K-8. This school is in an urban area, 15 minutes away from a major city by car. 60.3% of the students at St. Gertrude’s are considered to be Caucasian, with 36.6% of the student population listed as African American and 2.6% Hispanic (Movoto, 2014).

Over the course of one or two semesters, the elementary students are taught once per week by the pre-service teachers, for 30 minutes to one hour each lesson. This is essentially a FLEX (Foreign Language Exploratory) program, which is designed to introduce language learning and culture to students (Muñoz, 2011).

Participants

Eight 2nd graders from St. Arthur’s and eight 4th graders from St. Gertrude’s participated in this study. This was done on a voluntary basis, and we asked the teachers to help us choose students to participate. These students had various backgrounds, some with multilingual heritage and some without. However, all of these students received eight months of continuous Spanish instruction from the same pre-service teacher. In addition, several students from St. Arthur’s had experienced previous instruction in French at the exploratory level during kindergarten and 1st grade as a result of the program that is established between the university and the elementary schools.

Students’ parents. The parents of the students agreed to participate in the study as well. In total, 18 parents were involved: nine parents from St. Gertrude’s and nine parents from St. Arthur’s. The students had parents of various backgrounds, some with different native languages (English, Korean, Spanish, and Russian). We received questionnaire data from one parent of each student, with the exception of two students, who each had both parents respond to the questionnaire.
Pre-service teachers. Neither of the pre-service teachers had prior experience teaching Spanish to elementary students. They were both enrolled in an introductory world language teaching methods course for the fall semester. For this course, they were required to teach a minimum of 12 hours over the course of the fall semester. These two pre-service teachers opted to continue the experience in the spring as a one-hour independent study with the professor of the introductory course. “Carmen” taught Spanish to the 2nd grade students from St. Arthur’s while “Teresa” taught Spanish to the 4th graders at St. Gertrude’s. Both Carmen and Teresa taught the students once per week from October of 2012 until May of 2013.

Data Collection

Student interviews. In order to collect data from the student participants, we interviewed students in groups of four, so as to prevent students from being intimidated while speaking to the researchers. This resulted in a total of four interviews, two from each school and grade level. Both researchers were present during these interviews in order to facilitate communication and data collection. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes and were tape-recorded for review. Questions were prepared ahead of time and focused on three separate categories: students’ backgrounds, attitude about language learning and other cultures, and acquisition of L2 (Appendix A).

Parent questionnaires. Like the students, the parents were questioned about their students’ backgrounds and attitudes, the parents’ attitudes, and students’ acquisition of L2. This was completed through the use of a questionnaire, which was sent home with the participating students for the parents to complete (Appendix B).

Pre-service teacher questionnaires and blogs. In order to add further validity to the data collection process, the pre-service teachers completed a similar questionnaire, in which they
discussed their instructional content and methods, as well as what they believed about their students’ attitudes and acquisition after the eight month instructional period (Appendix C). In addition, the pre-service teachers’ participated in open-ended online discussions with classmates as a requirement for their coursework, between October and December of 2012.

Data Analysis

Using the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we coded the student interview data, the parent questionnaire data, and the pre-service teachers’ blogs and questionnaire data individually. We then separated the data into categories and subcategories, looking for patterns. Finally, after categorizing each data source individually, we compared and contrasted the sources to triangulate the data in an attempt to further validate or invalidate the patterns that we saw. Triangulation by analyzing data from multiple sources and participants improves credibility, or internal validity, of the research (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 1990).

Results

With regards to learning and acquisition, specific categories that appeared in the data were the alphabet, numbers, colors, food, and animals. Also, communicative activities were often mentioned, and were broken down into the following subcategories: games, greetings, and student to student conversations. Culture, while not discussed in the results of the pilot study, was relevant in this study. Under the theme of attitude and motivation, we identified five categories: positive feelings about the FLEX program, a high level of challenge, heritage, the goal of communication, and the importance of travel. It is important to note that the pre-service teachers did not mention traveling as a motivational factor for the students.

Alphabet, animals, and food. According to the student interviews and parent questionnaires, when it came to reciting the alphabet, students with prior experience, whether
from taking classes before participating in the FLEX program or due to heritage, seemed to have the advantage, because they were much more likely to be able to recite several letters. However, students without prior experience struggled to mention even a couple of letters. Surprisingly, there were only 17 instances where animals were discussed or named in Spanish, but it was still a common theme among the different classes. Richard (2nd grader), mentioned in the interview, “If you go to Spain you can tell people you have a dog.” He believed that it was useful that his teacher, Carmen, had taught him about animals so that he could discuss them with native speakers.

Teresa’s students mentioned in the interviews that they really enjoyed learning animals while playing Animal Bingo. Students were found to be enthusiastic about lessons concerning food, but were not always specific about which foods they learned. Julie (4th grader) described Teresa’s game when learning about food, “…like sometimes she’d put us in groups and we’d get boards and she’d hold up a food [item] and we’d have to write it down on the board.” And Junior (4th grader) also mentioned learning about food, “My favorite category she taught us about is food because I like to eat.” As evidenced by the students’ comments during interviews, many of their favorite lessons revolved around learning about food vocabulary. Maddie (4th grader) described her favorite lesson, which involved both food and a game, “Food! She taught use like spaghetti and all the different foods…chicken and steak…she got these plastic foods out and she’d say the Spanish word and we’d have to hold it up.” Here she makes a distinct connection between a topic that she enjoys (food) and Teresa’s teaching methods.

**Colors.** According to the student interview and parent questionnaire data, students from both grades were able to remember an average of five different colors in Spanish, with a range of between one and ten different colors. Some students also mentioned colors in other languages,
especially in French, as a result of prior experience. The 2nd grade students were able to remember more colors on average than the 4th grade students. This could be a result of a stronger emphasis on colors during instruction of the 2nd graders. In addition, parents’ data confirmed all but one student (2nd grader) were able to name some colors. When asked if their child can recite any colors, only eight students’ parents recorded specific colors on the questionnaire. One parent noted, “She remembers the rainbow.”

Numbers. Numbers, the second highest category of acquisition, were prevalent in all classes according to both student interview and parent questionnaire data. Most 2nd and 4th grade students, as well as the kindergarteners from the pilot study, were able to count from one to ten. Seven out of eight 2nd graders (Carmen’s students) were able to count higher than 10, while five out of eight of them counted in two to three different languages (French, Spanish, and German). In analyzing the parent questionnaires, the researchers noticed that the parents may not have considered asking their children to count beyond 10, as only three students were noted to have done so.

Communicative activities. Communicative activities, by far the largest category, were divided into three subcategories: Games, Greetings, and Conversations (Table 1). These activities included communication in Spanish in the form of Student to Student, Teacher to Student(s), and Student(s) to Teacher. To consider these activities to be communicative, it is necessary to note that the world language was used by both students and teacher (Burke, 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicative Activity Type</th>
<th>Number of Times Students Discussed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Games</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greetings</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Games.** The first category, games, was very popular among students and was often cited during the interviews to have assisted in the acquisition and learning process. The 2nd grade students almost unanimously named the Actividad Monstruo (Monster Drawing Activity) to be one of their favorite lessons. For this activity, students were asked to draw monsters and then identify all of their body parts in Spanish. Carmen, the 2nd grade pre-service teacher, described the lesson in her online blog:

> While creating their monster, they had to label the body parts with how many of each, i.e. 4 brazos, 9 piernas, 5 ojos. After the monsters were finished, the groups presented their monster to the class and pointed out each body part. They really enjoyed this lesson because it involved a fun game where they got to get up out of their seats along with a chance to be creative and work in groups.

The second graders described the activity as follows, “We drew a bunch of monsters…Each pod had a monster…We were learning body parts.”

The 4th graders also mentioned a variety of different games, including board games, bingo, and a food identification game. Junior (4th grader) explained, “…[Señorita Teresa] lets us play games…she had us write down on the board and hold it up…and she let us play Spanish Bingo and that was really fun.” And Julie (4th grade) mentioned, “I liked the little games [Señorita Teresa] did…my favorite game was when we had the boards and she’d hold up the play food or she’d put it up on the board and you’d have to write it down and whoever got it first got a point.”

Clearly, at both the 2nd and 4th grade level, the use of games seem to have had a positive impact on what students remembered about their Spanish instruction.
Greetings and conversations. The other two CAs, greetings and student to student conversation, were related themes that were evident in the interviewing process. Both 2nd grade students and parents provided evidence to support the development of basic communicative competence (e.g. hola, buenos dias, gracias, como estas, bonjour señorita, adios). The same is true for the 4th graders, who were able to greet one another, introduce themselves, and ask how one another are doing (e.g. buenos dias, como estas, muy bien, me llamo Emily).

Culture. According to the questionnaires from parents and pre-service teachers, as well as pre-service teacher blogs and student interviews, it seems that the pre-service teachers focused less on culture during instruction, as many students had very similar responses when asked what they could remember about Spanish or Spanish-speaking cultures. Specific themes that were mentioned include the Day of the Dead, music, Feliz Navidad, Happy Birthday, and fiestas. Parents did not record much about culture on the questionnaires, citing the Day of the Dead, Cinco de Mayo, and fiestas. One cultural lesson that stood out to students was with Teresa, who worked with them to make skulls for the Day of the Dead.

Students’ Attitude and Motivation

When examining the data from collected from students, parents, and pre-service teachers concerning attitude and motivation of the students, we identified five major themes. These included positive feelings about the FLEX program, a desire to travel, influence from students’ heritage, a communicative and cultural goal of learning, and the acknowledgement that world language learning is challenging.

Table 2: FLEX Evidence of Attitude/Motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicative Activity Type</th>
<th>Number of Times Students Discussed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Feelings about Flex</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Challenging, but fun.** Students overwhelmingly agreed that learning another language was challenging. The students, both in interviews and with their parents, often described it as “hard” or “difficult.” They clearly acknowledged that it is not an easy task to learn a new language. Emily (4th grader) described Spanish class as “It’s cool and all but it’s very difficult.” Second grader Richard claimed:

> At first it was a little hard but then it got a little easy…this year Spanish was a little hard, because it was…just learning it was a little hard…in kindergarten it was hard doing French but when I got to 1st grade it was a little easy because we did it already in kindergarten.

In both quotes, we see how students from both 2nd and 4th grade acknowledge the difficulty of learning another language. Also, Richard made it clear he was able to overcome some of the difficulty with time.

Alex (2nd grader), however, states that although it is difficult, he still enjoys learning languages, “It’s just kind of fun to like speak like different words or something…sometimes it’s kind of a challenge, but I still like it….some of them [the lessons] were hard for me…I think the clothes were kind of hard.”

Students continued to elaborate on the idea of learning languages to be “hard,” stating that they often felt confused or misunderstood what was happening. Emily, (4th grader), claimed, “the first day I knew what she was talking about but when it went on I was like ‘huh?’” When asked about his least favorite part of learning Spanish, Philip (4th grade), said, “…when I don’t
know what she’s saying and then I’m confused and I’ll probably get a check for not having the right materials.” Julie (4th grader), also expressed confusion at times, saying, “When she talked I didn’t know what she was talking about sometimes…she would call on me and I didn’t know what to say.” Many of the other students made similar statements about the difficulty of learning another language.

The parents, likewise, mentioned their students’ concerns about the difficulty of learning new languages. One 4th grade parent, when asked if her child likes learning Spanish, replied, “Yes, because she can learn different languages and because it’s hard sometimes.” Another 4th grade parent said, “She likes learning new things – sometimes it is very hard.” A 2nd grade parent mentioned, “He is afraid of miscommunication.” While both parents and students agree that language learning is challenging, they also make clear connections between the challenging nature of language learning and the second theme, positive feelings about the FLEX program and learning languages in general.

**Positive feelings about FLEX.** Despite the fact that students believed learning languages was challenging, they expressed overwhelming positive feelings toward the FLEX program and toward the idea of learning new languages during the student interviews and with parents when they completed their questionnaires. When asked to discuss their feelings about Spanish and other languages, the students called it “fun,” or “cool,” and said they “like it.” The students also expressed an almost unanimous desire to learn more languages (either more Spanish, or a completely new language, such as Arabic). Finally, when asked about the process of learning Spanish and other languages, the some students simply said that they enjoy learning, and learning languages in particular.
Heritage influences. Multiple times, students and parents cited heritage in the interviews and questionnaires as being related to the students’ motivation and attitude about learning languages. Many parents were from other countries, studied or worked abroad, and/or spoke other languages. Languages that were mentioned by students and parents include Chinese, French, German, Greek, Indonesian, Italian, Korean, Russian, and Spanish.

Emily (4th grader) discussed the languages that her mother speaks, saying, “My mom likes when I learn new languages…she knows a lot of Russian…she speaks Russian and Spanish at the same time.” Similarly, Julie (4th grader) talks about her mother and grandmother, “My mom, she’s from Mexico too because my grandma is…she likes it because sometimes she talks to me in Spanish and she expects me to talk back.” The languages that their mothers speak, as well as other family members, play a pivotal role on their outlook toward language learning.

Richard (2nd grader) and Alex (2nd grader) both have families that travel. They cited this as being important for the development of their attitudes. Richard said, “My dad thinks it’s cool when I learned French because he went to France…He said it was really cool there and he wants to take me there…My grandma went to Spain once with my grandpa too.” Alex, stated, “I travel lots of different places…Just a warning, it takes an overnight to get to Austria. I took a 747.” Here, the parents’ opinions about travel and language learning are shown to be reflected in their children.

Most parents were pleased with the idea of their students learning Spanish or another language, with the exception of one parent, who believed that the lessons were not useful or beneficial in any way. Christina’s (4th grader) mother, said:

She is Spanish and half her family is Spanish…Christina’s experience is a little different from the rest of the other students in her class. She has been raised in a
bilingual household and our relatives are from Spain. She loves going to Spain and can communicate fluently with her relatives and friends there. We really appreciate that she is learning Spanish at school. I think she values the language more now!

However, when asked about whether or not he believes it important that his student is learning Spanish, one 2\textsuperscript{nd} grade parent stated that it was “not really important. Most people won’t use it regularly…Not a lot of practical use for it.” Although this one parent was not very supportive of language learning at the elementary age, most of the others expressed joy that their child was being challenged in such a way.

**Ability to expand social network and communicate.** Another theme, the idea of communication with other people, was very apparent in the data as well. Students displayed an interest in speaking with native Spanish speakers and learning about their ways of life. Parents noted that it was important for students to learn new languages in order to obtain a better worldview.

Emily (4\textsuperscript{th} grader) spoke about why she’d like to continue learning Spanish, saying, “When I go somewhere and everyone is speaking a different language I should know how to communicate with them…I would like to learn how to get into more of a conversation.” Junior (4\textsuperscript{th} grader) expressed a similar view, “…like maybe if one day someone spoke Spanish…if someone tried to speak Spanish if I learned Spanish I’d be able to understand what they’re saying…My mom, I think she likes that I’m learning new languages so that I can relate to other people.” Both students very clearly want to communicate and connect with people who speak different languages.
Claire (2<sup>nd</sup> grader) and Alex (2<sup>nd</sup> grader) mentioned a desire to expand on the types of conversations that they have with other Spanish speakers. Claire said, “If someone asks you something you know how to respond.” Alex went a little further, stating, “When I go to all those different places I’ll know how to get in conversations with people and stuff.” Both of these students want to be able to communicate back and forth with others in Spanish, and progress beyond simple conversations.

Ryan (2<sup>nd</sup> grader), instead of wishing to speak with people from other cultures, wants to be able to communicate more with his own parents. He said, “They [my parents] think it’s awesome that I’m learning different languages…they know the languages that I’m learning so they want to speak them with me.” While some of the other students saw language as a way to relate to other cultures, Ryan sees Spanish as a way to relate to his own family.

**Desire to travel and communicate.** In close relation with the communication theme, students expressed a strong desire to travel to places where people spoke languages other than English. Although this was a common theme amongst students and parents, the pre-service teachers never mentioned the idea that their students may want to travel to other countries.

Addie (4<sup>th</sup> grader) and Emily (4<sup>th</sup> grader) both cite travel as a motivational factor for them to learn new languages. Addie said, “If you go someplace like Mexico and you didn’t know Spanish you’d have a hard time communicating.” Emily elaborated, saying “Before [I travel] I’d have to learn more to actually have a conversation with somebody…If I have to go somewhere I want to know how to speak the languages so I don’t have a hard time.” Both Addie and Emily anticipated using new languages while traveling to different countries.

James (2<sup>nd</sup> grader) and Alex (2<sup>nd</sup> grader) reflected some of these same ideas. James was excited about using his newly-learned Spanish, saying, “It’s awesome because my dad says
we’re going to take a vacation to a different country and I want to be able to speak to other people.” Alex also talked about traveling and using the language, arguing, “When you go places like that you know how to communicate with other people and stuff…It’s kind of fun to like speak like different words or something.”

Richard (2nd grade) recognized the necessity for knowing Spanish even when inside the boundaries of the U.S. He said, “If I went to the Spanish part of New York I would be able to speak…like how to have conversations with people.” Even at such a young age, Richard understands the level of diversity in his country and his necessity to learn Spanish to communicate with certain people living within the U.S.

**Discussion**

The results of this study can be directly related to the relevant literature on the learning, acquisition and attitude of students concerning world language programs. In this section the research questions will be addressed according to what was presented in the results. The research questions for the study were:

1. What effect, if any, does exploratory world language instruction have on children’s acquisition/learning of a world language?

2. What effect, if any, does exploratory world language instruction have on children’s attitudes toward learning world languages and about cultures?

Concerning acquisition, we noticed elements of both acquisition and learning (Krashen, 1982) while interviewing students. There was evidence to suggest that both processes promoted the development of communicative competence (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1997) at a basic level. Students were able to greet one another and participate in simple conversations, while focusing on meaning over linguistic form. They also displayed the
social and communicative aspects of language learning, and mentioned basic principles of immersion when discussing travel, providing evidence to support school as an appropriate social context for language learning (Kuhl, 2011).

Teacher methods were seen to impact student learning and were mentioned by students as affecting their learning process (Krashen, 1981; Yao, 2002). The communicative activities (Burke, 2006, 2010, 2012; Ellis, 1982, 1997; Savignon, 2002) were the most methods most commonly occurring in the data, contributing to student acquisition through games, the Actividad Monstruo, greetings, and conversation. Even though students had developed a basic level of communicative competence, the results concerning long-term proficiency were inconclusive. However, long-term proficiency is not the aim of most FLEX programs; focusing more on promoting a positive attitude about language learning and other cultures instead is the ultimate goal (Muñoz, 2011).

In general, after having participated in the FLEX program, the elementary students had overwhelmingly positive attitudes and were enthusiastic about the idea of learning new languages and about different cultures. Most students expressed a strong desire to travel to places with different languages, cultures, and people. These findings are supported by those of Navarro-Villarroel (2011), who suggested a positive correlation between world language immersion programs and positive attitudes of students toward other languages and cultures.

In addition, many, if not all, of Yao’s (2002) motivational factors were mentioned by students during the interviews. However, new factors appeared as well. First, the desire of students to communicate with, and learn about, people of other cultures was shown to be a major motivational factor. Students understood that they were learning Spanish in order to communicate with other people, which is a concept that is often overlooked at the high school
level (Burke, 2010, 2011, 2012). Second, students mentioned language learning as necessary, or at least useful for travel. When asked why they wished to continue taking Spanish or other languages, students stated that they wanted to be able to communicate with the people who live in Spain, or Mexico, or “the Spanish part of New York” when they eventually went to these places.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from this study has to do with the concept of flow, as described by Csikszentmihályi and Schneider (2000). Although originally thought to be for high school students, we found that flow is certainly applicable to students at the elementary level. The students generally found great enjoyment in language learning, and many wish to continue learning Spanish or another language. However, these same students stressed that the process was challenging, calling it “hard” or “difficult.” Clearly, there seems to be a correlation between students’ positive attitudes and the challenge of learning second and world languages. Whether or not correlation indicates causation is unclear. Either way, our findings refute conventional wisdom (Tye, 2000), which suggests that elementary students are unable to study languages at such an early age, and instead support the implementation of FLEX programs at the elementary level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of our study corroborate those of the pilot study, suggesting that FLEX programs are beneficial to elementary students. These students are enthusiastic about language learning. Also, they are capable of developing communicative competence, even if only instructed once per week for one hour each lesson. Elementary language learners are willing to learn about other people and cultures related to the world language, and are aware of the
communicative and cultural aspects of language that are often ignored by older students. Finally, the teacher and instructional methods have a large impact on both learning and attitude.

Our findings support the idea that students should be experiencing world language instruction earlier in elementary school when students are naturally motivated, more open-minded and better skilled. However, they also raise new questions to be considered for further study:

- Is 6th-12th grade too late to be introducing students to world language courses?
- Would the implementation of world language programs at an earlier age improve motivation in students and improve the likelihood for advanced-level proficiency?
- Is waiting until college too late to promote translingual and transcultural competence?

There is much research and advocacy to be done if students in the U.S. are to experience effective world language instruction and achieve Advanced-level proficiencies by the time they graduate high school. If 2nd and 4th grade students can see the value in more comprehensive world language programs, why do we as a nation ignore the fact that we are failing our children by not providing language programs at an earlier age? It is our hope that continued research on the learning/acquisition and attitude of young language learners will inspire others to begin implementing these programs from the earliest years of elementary school.
References


Appendix A: Student Interview Questions

BACKGROUND:

1. Do you know any languages besides English? Which ones?
2. Do your parents speak to you or each other in any different languages? Which ones? A lot? A little?
3. Where were you born? Where were your parents born?
4. Have you ever spoken languages other than English at school? Where? When?
5. Have you ever been somewhere where people spoke different languages? Where? When?

ATTITUDE:

1. What do you think about learning [French, German, Spanish, etc.] lessons? What do you like about it? What do you not like about it? Do you still want to learn more? Why/Why not?
2. Would you like [pre-service teacher’s name) to teach you more [French, German, Spanish, etc.]? Why/Why not? What do you want to still learn about?
3. Would you like to visit a place where people speak [French, German, Spanish, etc.]? Why/Why not? Where would you like to go [Canada, Africa, France, etc.]?
4. Would you like to learn new languages besides [French, German, Spanish, etc.]? Which ones? Why/Why not?
5. What do your parents think about you learning [French, German, Spanish, etc.]?
6. Have you liked learning [French, German, Spanish, etc.] with [pre-service teacher’s name]? Why or why not? What was your favorite lesson?
7. What is your favorite part about learning [French, German, Spanish, etc.]? What is your least favorite part? Why?

8. Would you like other language teachers like me to come in and teach you? Why/Why not?

9. Do you think it is important to learn other languages? Why/why not?

10. Do your parents think it is important to learn other languages? Why/why not?

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:

1. Did you know any [French, German, Spanish, etc.] before [pre-service teacher’s name] started teaching you? What?

2. What [French, German, Spanish, etc.] have you learned from [pre-service teacher’s name]?

3. Can you say your numbers 0-10 in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]?

4. Can you say the [French, German, Spanish, etc.] alphabet?

5. Can you say your colors in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]?

6. Can you greet me in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]?

7. Would you like to try to talk to me in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]?

8. What else can you say to me in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]?

9. What have you learned about [French, German, Spanish, etc.] culture?
Appendix B: Parent Questionnaire

Your name: _____________________________

Your child’s name: ___________________________

PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to be in my study. Please answer the following questions providing me with as much detail as you can. If you have any questions, please call me, Dr. Brigid Burke, at [contact information] or email me at [contact information].

BACKGROUND:

6. Do you know any languages besides English? Which ones?
7. Do you speak with your child in any different languages? Which ones? A lot? A little?
8. Where was your child born? Where were you born?
9. Has your child ever spoken languages other than English at school? Where? When?
10. Have you and your child ever been somewhere where people spoke different languages? Where? When?

ATTITUDE:

11. Do you like that your child is learning [French, German, Spanish, etc.] at school? Why or why not?
12. Does your child like learning [French, German, Spanish, etc.] at school? What does s/he like about it? What does s/he not like about it?
13. Would your child like to learn more [French, German, Spanish, etc.]? Why/Why not? What does s/he want to still learn about?
14. Would your child like to visit a place where people speak [French, German, Spanish, etc.]? Why/Why not? Where would s/he like to go [Canada, Africa, France, etc.]?

15. Would your child like to learn new languages besides [French, German, Spanish, etc.]?
Which ones? Why/Why not?

16. What [French, German, Spanish, etc.] lesson has your child talked about most and why?
Did s/he like it? Why/why not?

17. Do you think it is important to learn other languages? Why/why not?

18. Do you think it is important for elementary students to learn world languages? Why or why not?

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:

10. Did your child know any [French, German, Spanish, etc.] before [pre-service teacher’s name] started teaching him/her this semester? If so, what?

11. What [French, German, Spanish, etc.] has your child learned from [pre-service teacher’s name]?

12. Can your child say his/her numbers 0-10 in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]? Record what s/he remembers here:

13. Can your child say the [French, German, Spanish, etc.] alphabet? Record what s/he remembers here:

14. Can your child say the colors in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]? Record what s/he remembers here:

15. Can your child greet you in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]? Record what s/he remembers here:
16. What else did your child learn to say in [French, German, Spanish, etc.] this semester? Record what s/he remembers here:

17. What has your child learned about [French, German, Spanish, etc.] culture? Record what s/he remembers here:
Appendix C: Pre-Service Teacher Questionnaire

Your name: _____________________________

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to be in my study. Please answer the following questions providing me with as much detail as you can. If you have any questions, please ask me in person, call me at ███████████, or email me at ███████████.

BACKGROUND

1. At what school and what grade level did you teach this semester?

2. What content did you teach? Please list specific lessons, themes, etc.

3. What different methods did you use to teach the world language?

4. How often did you use the world language during your lessons and why?

5. How often did you use English during your lessons and why?

6. If you could, would you like to teach younger children world language again? Why or why not?

7. Do you believe it is important for pre-K/elementary students to learn world languages? Why or why not?
YOUR STUDENTS’ ATTITUDES

1. Do you think your students enjoyed learning a world language? Why or why not?

2. Did any students stand out as particularly liking or disliking the experience? Please explain.

3. What do you think your students enjoyed most about learning a world language?

4. What do you think your students disliked most about learning a world language?

5. What do you think your students’ favorite lesson was and why?

6. Do you believe that your students’ attitudes about learning a world language have changed this semester? Why or why not? Explain.

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

1. What content do you believe your students have acquired and/or learned in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]?

2. What do you think your students can say, write, and/or read in [French, German, Spanish, etc.]?

3. What do you think your students remember about the [French, German, Spanish, etc.] culture you taught them?

Please write any additional comments here that you believe are important for me to know about regarding this study.