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THE MEANING OF FLES.

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BY STUDYING VARIOUS FLES PROGRAMS, CERTAIN PROGRAM PATTERNS EMERGE THAT ARE WORTHY OF RECOMMENDATION FOR GENERAL IMPLEMENTATION. FOR EXAMPLE, THE THIRD OR FOURTH GRADE SHOULD BE THE OPTIMUM STARTING POINT FOR FLES, 15 TO 20 MINUTE CLASSES SHOULD BE HELD EARLY EACH DAY, CONSCIOUS ANALYSIS OF GRAMMAR SHOULD BE DIMINISHED, THE THREE-FOLD INTERPLAY OF HEARER, SPEAKER, SITUATION SHOULD BE EMPHASIZED, AND READING AND WRITING SKILLS SHOULD FOLLOW THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUDIOLINGUAL SKILLS. FLES PROGRAMS ALSO SHOW THE NEED FOR COURSE REVISION AT THE UPPER LEVELS, AND FOR IMPROVED PROGRAM ARTICULATION. (SS)

The Meaning of F L E S

by Nelson Brooks

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These four letters--sometimes pronounced as a word, rhyming with "chess"--stand for Foreign Languages in the Elementary School and refer to a phenomenon that appeared in all parts of the United States after the second World War. In 1952 its existence was recognized officially by the Office of Education in Washington, D.C. and by the Modern Language Association in New York.

FLES is essentially an adaptation of a supreme psychological fact clearly demonstrated in the learning of one's mother tongue: that any child can learn any language with nothing to go on save what he is born with and the "language in action" of those about him. The FLES pupil is of course no longer an infant. We recognize that he already knows one language well, that he is learning in school rather than at home, and that he is usually far away from the culture in which the new language is in current use. How much of the certainty that he will learn his mother tongue still applies when he starts to learn a foreign language during the school day? It turns out that the degree of certainty is surprisingly high, provided the right conditions are created and the right things done. From a study of many programs that vary considerably with regard to starting point, time schedule, course content, and continuity, there emerges a curriculum pattern that appears to typify the best both in what may be observed and may be recommended.

There are many considerations that suggest the third or fourth grade as an optimum starting point. On the one hand, the child of eight or nine has already become familiar with the school world in which he is to spend so much of his time. He has already become literate in his mother tongue--an intellectual achievement of immense significance--and has, by now, a sharpened sense of awareness of the business of learning. On the other hand, he is still young enough to enjoy talk for its own sake, to imitate new sounds with an almost mirror-like accuracy, and to accept and use new verbal expressions without feeling a strong urge to take them apart or to compare them word for word with English. Time will bring about many changes in these attitudes and will make the beginning of a second language markedly more difficult if he postpones his start until later years. A beginning even as early as the first grade is sometimes suggested, and there are many points in favor of this. But an earlier beginning calls into question the child's readiness for a foreign language as a school subject, and accentuates the difficulty of providing adequately trained teachers. Yet we should no doubt cherish the notion of an early start as an ideal.

There appears to be general agreement that the best time schedule for FLES is a 15 to 20 minute class daily, occurring in regular school hours and as early in the day as possible. The pupil's participation in the new language experience involves him in the three-fold interplay of hearer, speaker, and situation. By relating to scenes and surroundings with which he is already familiar, these being presented first in linguistic terms and eventually in cultural terms authentic to the area

where the new language is spoken, the learner is gradually led toward bilingualism within the limits of possibility. This is done by making only the slightest use of the mother tongue, by greatly diminishing any conscious analysis of "grammar," and by avoiding all translation from one language to another. The skills of reading and writing are postponed until the learner is sufficiently secure in hearing and speaking the new language. In the elementary school this usually means about two years' time before reading and writing are begun. The language that is then read and written consists of what is thoroughly familiar to ear and tongue.

Language achievement at this level is necessarily restricted in extent but it is of a special quality not attainable later, and it will be enhanced or negated according to the learning that follows in subsequent years. Successful continuity implies that the skills of hearing and speaking shall not be permitted at any point to become dormant, and that the learner be given full credit for accomplishment in these skills (traditional measurement in terms of grammar and translation are wholly inadequate for this). It implies that the audiolingual skills shall be fully integrated with those of reading, writing, and structure control that will, of course, be encountered as learning proceeds. By the same token, what is done in FLES must be definable and measurable in terms that are valid in the upper schools. Probably the greatest potential disservice to FLES is to consider it as a mere grace note, an hors-d'oeuvre, a prelude to the serious business of a language course. Unless and until a FLES program can be an integrated part of an extended and well-planned sequence of learning, it had far better not be started at all.

The preparation of materials to be used in FLES classes is a serious and difficult matter of great complexity. It requires the collaboration of experienced and expert teachers whose efforts need to be confirmed and reinforced by constant reference to several adjacent disciplines: descriptive linguistics (with regard to language), psychology (with regard to learning), cultural anthropology (with regard to meaning), and literature (with regard to the selection of texts for memorization and reading).

To qualify as a FLES teacher, an individual must, of course, understand and like children, and should have a sufficient degree of speaking competency to "model" what the pupils are to learn. He or she must also have made a special study of the discipline of second language learning and must have an acquaintance with the American school world at the elementary school level. FLES teachers now in service are usually either specialists who have trained for teaching positions of this kind, or are high school (occasionally, college) teachers who can readily accept the Protean transformation required by the change in level. Some are classroom teachers at the elementary level who have acquired the necessary language competency and have received training in the teaching of a second language to children.

The outcomes of FLES are of at least three kinds: language achievement, attitude shifts (toward those who speak the new language), and individual growth. The first of these is readily apparent and accessible to measurement. The second and third are no less apparent, but when we wish to measure and label changes in attitude and in personality we lack the devices and the neat symbols that seem adequate when we are dealing with language achievement. For the time being, evaluations of FLES in these last two areas will probably have to be content with anecdotal records that reflect attitudes and the improvement of self.

Important as it is for its own sake, FLES is no less so for having shed much light

upon the nature of language learning at the secondary level and in college. The principal elements found in FLES coincide with those of any basic language course at any level that is founded upon the present day understanding of second language learning in formal education. The most important of these may be briefly stated as follows:

Language is first of all something we say.

Reading and writing must wait until hearing and speaking are well established.

The learner must be involved in the three-fold interplay of hearer, speaker, and situation.

Nobody talks in single words: the memorization of word lists is a waste of time.

It is better for the student to think of language not as problem solving but as habit formation.

Language functions essentially by analogy rather than by analysis. To dismantle an instrument is instructive, but one cannot take it apart and play it at the same time.

At the start, the learning of forms and syntax should be maximized while vocabulary is minimized.

Until the learner is well along in his control of the new language, translatio (by him) from one language to another is not only pointless but often detrimental.

No skill once developed should be allowed to fall into disuse.

Anyone with an intimate knowledge of the possibilities and achievements of FLES programs soon realizes how thoroughly most language courses at the upper levels need to be revised, not only if justice is to be done to the products of FLES, but also if these advanced courses are ever to accomplish even a modest part of what is claimed for them in secondary school syllabi and college catalogues. A wholly new understanding of the language skills and the order in which they may be mastered, of the harmful effects of the book, of grammar, and of translation when they are ineptly used, of the radical difference between the learning of Latin and of a contemporary language, of the importance of a model to go by, a person to talk with, and a suitable situation to talk about, of the relationship of talk to writing and of language to culture--all this is apparent or implied, vigorously, in FLES.