

# ELC<sup>2</sup>

*Student teachers and children are making friends*

students and students with disabilities, as well as considerations for heritage-language students. Charts of sample middle school schedule options, Bloom's Taxonomy for world language learning and an Instruction and Assessment Rubric will also prove beneficial to readers.

To be sure, this book does more than comment generally on world languages in the curriculum. It provides details, examples, clear explanations, advocacy tools and specific resources that will be invaluable to language educators of all levels. The only low note is that currently this book is only available to ASCD institutional members. Later in 2006, however, this book will be made available to the public.

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**W**hen designing a foreign language methods course, one important consideration should be the manner in which theory is connected with practical experiences, thus giving students an opportunity to use newly-gained knowledge in an actual classroom setting. This is even more essential when it comes to teaching young children. Most students who take a FLES methods course have never taught children before. Moreover, there are often mixed feelings: some students are eager to work with children, while others have a high level of anxiety.

Most children in Delaware's public schools are not exposed to foreign languages until they reach the seventh or eighth grade. By that time they have passed *the critical period*: the years before the onset of adolescence when children are much more likely to acquire native-like proficiency and pronunciation. As a result of this late introduction of foreign languages, learning a different linguistic code becomes a struggle. Foreign languages appear to be a sudden and disconnected "add-on" to the core curriculum and are often considered a waste of time.

Another aspect of this dilemma is the lack of suitable teaching/practicum placements for those foreign language pedagogy students who are seeking certification in FLES. A practicum in the form of an after-school FLEX program can serve both the students, who get a unique learning opportunity, and the children, who are exposed to a foreign language in a relaxed and fun environment.

## Background

In the fall of 2003, the University of Delaware (UD) announced the fall 2004 opening of its Early Learning Center (ELC), a state of the art child care facility serving children age 6 weeks to 12 years in various programs and settings. At the same time, the Department of Foreign Languages called for a major overhaul of its existing FLES methods course. An idea was born.

The concept was to have foreign languages for children taught by language students, thus creating a mutually beneficial cooperation between the Department and the ELC. In the spring of 2004, the UD Global Citizenship Fellows Program awarded \$1000 to the initiative in order to purchase instructional materials. The plan was to introduce an after-school Spanish program that would run 60 minutes, once a week, for the duration of the fall semester. The students tak-

# Early Language Contact *at the* Early Learning Center

*around the world and getting to know themselves better.*

Iris Busch and Erin Blackson

ing the FLES methods course would work with the group of after-school fifth graders at the ELC.

Based on the following three criteria, Spanish was chosen as the language of instruction. First, all but one student in the methods course were Spanish majors. (The one exception was studying Italian.) Additionally, the largest non-English speaking community in Newark speaks Spanish. It was safe to assume that several children at the ELC had Spanish-speaking family members. Finally, Spanish is offered in all of Delaware's junior and senior high schools.

guage learning. It was crucial for the student teachers involved to make a great first impression upon these children in their first Spanish classes so that they would grasp the importance of learning languages and hopefully continue their foreign language education throughout their lives.

Although the curriculum and the lesson plans provided consistency for the content taught, the fact that the children would be exposed to many different teaching styles was also a factor of concern.

## The Course

The course "Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages in the Elementary Schools" is a three-credit course designed for both graduate and undergraduate students. The course meets for three hours once a week. The textbook is *Languages and Children: Making the Match* by Curtain and Dahlberg (2004), which provides the framework for the course with its historical, theoretical and practical elements. In addition to addressing the various chapters of the textbook, the fall 2004 course included the practicum portion at the ELC. Each student taught and observed twice during the 15-week course. For the teaching sessions, the students worked with a partner and were supervised by the methods course instructor and classroom teachers. During every session at the

ELC, four students were working: two teaching and two observing. This required the students to sign up for four Thursdays during the semester in addition to the regular course meeting time on Tuesdays. They needed to complete their teaching sessions after having observed the session taught the week before. Moreover, their second teaching session needed to occur considerably later than their first one. To accommodate this, the graduate students volunteered to teach the second and third sessions after having observed the first session, which was taught by the methods course instructor.

Teaching was based on a curriculum and lesson plans (provided by the methods course teacher) specifically designed



## The Challenge

When the ELC opened its doors in the fall of 2004, not all of the programs were up and running. As it turned out, in September, only four fifth graders were enrolled for after-school care at the ELC. Furthermore, there were only a total of 15 school-age children altogether. Nevertheless, it was decided to start the Spanish program and to include all of the eligible and willing school age-children, ranging in age from 6 to 11 years.

For the majority of the children, this would be their first encounter with a second language, an experience that could potentially shape their life-long perceptions of foreign lan-

for the program (short term FLEX, ten-year-olds and their life experiences and interests, focus on listening and speaking, lots of culture and hands-on activities). Although the students were provided with the appropriate lesson plans, they were required to make necessary adjustments and to use their own creativity, to give the lesson plan their own "handwriting."

A major part of the experience was the time for reflection after the teaching session. Students were asked to provide a written protocol about their preparation, methods and techniques used, as well as an overall assessment of their own work and of the children's reactions and participation. The students who observed the sessions also provided feedback and handed in an observation report. Each meeting of the methods course started with a discussion of the ELC class. This dialogue was particularly valuable, since it allowed all students in the course an insight into each teaching session of the ELC, and guaranteed a level of necessary consistency for the children.

### A Graduate Student's Perspective

During the fall of 2004, I had the privilege to participate in the short-term FLEX program at the Early Learning Center (ELC) in Newark, Delaware. The children at the ELC were always excited and enthusiastic to have visitors in their classroom. They would greet us with an upbeat exclamation of ¡Hola!—our introductory phrase each time we arrived. All the material that was taught and all the activities were centered on the theme "Making a Friend in a Spanish-Speaking Country." Thus, the focus was on making introductions, identifying and using colors, describing states of being, describing themselves, as well as various aspects of the target culture. For a typical lesson the children were seated on a rug in the classroom. The children transitioned to worktables at the front of the room for activities such as drawing and craft projects, e.g., creating a passport (complete with a real passport photo) for a future trip to a Spanish-speaking country, or writing a letter to a Spanish-speaking friend. When planning an ELC lesson, we tried to think of creative ways to engage all children, since our goal was to make this experience fun for them and to make it appeal to six- and eleven-year-olds alike. For example, when integrating mathematics into the lesson through counting and graphing the children's ages, we designed a human graph. Each age was written on an index card and placed across the x-axis, and children who fell into that specific age category stated their ages in the target language and took their places in the graph behind the appropriate index cards.

Two major characters were utilized throughout the course: Pablo, the Chihuahua (particularly important for the younger children), and Yordi, a ten-year-old boy from the Dominican Republic. Pablo was introduced very early on through the use of giant stuffed Chihuahua and a song, *Un perro grande tengo yo* (I have a big dog) set to the tune of the childhood favorite, *B-I-N-G-O*. The children loved to sing this song, and it was useful in keeping order during transitions. In an effort to introduce Latin American culture, Yordi was presented via several video clips depicting his everyday life. Among other activities, the children were asked to compare their lives with Yordi's, and to develop Venn diagrams. The children wrote him letters and he "responded" with some help from our coordinator, Dr. Iris Busch.



One of the final lessons focused on a virtual field trip to Mexico. The children received a letter from Pablo the Chihuahua, inviting them to visit. They boarded an "airplane," passed through "customs" with their "passports," and were able to visit Pablo. The simulated plane ride, passing through customs and entering Mexico made the experience very realistic for the children. I am hopeful this will inspire them to continue with their study of Spanish and eventually to travel to a country where Spanish is spoken.

Our sessions at the ELC came to an end in December 2004. To celebrate the fantastic progress the students had made, Dr. Busch helped us to organize a *fiesta*. The children walked the red carpet to receive a certificate of participation

and a small gift, played with a piñata that “Yordi had sent” in a big package, and danced to salsa and merengue music. The fiesta was the perfect way to reward the students for completing the course and continue to integrate the Spanish theme. All children went home with a thick folder that was filled with all of their writing, drawing and craft projects.

As a result of the practical experience I gained in the ELC program, I was able to understand the need for advocacy for early language learning, something I would have never ascertained through simple book and classroom instruction. Throughout the semester, I witnessed a transformation of the ELC children. Although some of the children seemed shy and skeptical in the beginning, soon all children were wholly engaged in our lessons. They were enthusiastic about learning and trying out new things. The children practically jumped out of their seats to help a teacher or answer a question. Their reactions were measurably different from the majority of undergraduates I have taught, most of whom take Spanish only to fulfill a requirement. Since the college environment is usually calmer, more routine and even more predictable, the children definitely challenged me as an educator through their inquisitive, energetic and persistent spirits. It was impressive to hear their almost perfect pronunciation; they repeated words and sentences without hesitation, retaining them effortlessly. Learning Spanish seemed to empower them. The ELC children were afforded the opportunity to learn Spanish and hopefully discovered yet another avenue in which they could express themselves and hone their talents. Every child should be so fortunate.

## Conclusion

At the end of the semester, all students and children agreed that the Spanish program had been a huge success and were sad to say *Adiós*. The practicum students considered the ELC experience invaluable to their education and regretted not having had more teaching and observation sessions. Even those students who hesitated in the beginning felt comfortable around the children and thoroughly enjoyed working with them by the time their second teaching session approached. The fact that the methods course and the practicum went hand in hand and depended on each other allowed the students to immediately try out, implement and reflect upon their newly gained knowledge and skills. The ELC children never seemed to have a problem with the ever-changing student teachers. In fact, it was just the opposite. They were always excited to greet the students and proudly used their Spanish by asking, *¿Cómo te llamas?* (What’s your name?). The staff at the ELC kept telling us that the children walked into the classroom on any given day and greeted ev-

eryone with *¡Hola!*, and that they spoke and sang in Spanish just for fun. The Spanish class created a sense of community for the group, something that made “our children” special. This was of particular importance in a center that had just recently opened its doors.

One unforeseen challenge was the classroom setup. The class was held in a multi-purpose room where the children did their homework, ate, played, took naps and kept their personal belongings. The student teachers sometimes lost the attention of the children who became distracted by the objects displayed in the room, or by parents arriving early to pick up children. The next FLES methods class will be offered in the spring of 2006. By then, the class at the ELC will be more homogenous, allowing the practicum students to target one particular age group. Hopefully, a special classroom will be available for the Spanish class.

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