THE 'FUN WITH LANGUAGES' PROJECT:

Making learning another language an early priority

By Thérèse Saint-Paul, Ph.D. and Valérie Hendley

There is no denying the importance of multilingualism in the 21st century; increased travels, student exchanges, global business, diplomacy, and security are mediated by communication. Education is the key to building a strong multilingual world community that will work for peace and stability. However, it may be often overlooked that a successful educational system is measured in part by the investment that governments place in early education ("Equality and Education" OECD report 2012). The first part of this paper reviews the essential benefits of early foreign language exposure and learning for the development of the whole child. It also looks at the historical changes of Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) in the United States, along with some comparisons to European trends. In the second part, the article describes a FLES initiative at the K-12 level, launched three years ago in partnership with Murray State University in Kentucky that aims to kindle a love of and interest for foreign languages at an early age and whose cutting–edge approach aligns itself with some of the recent studies and trends mentioned below.

PART 1

"Make learning a second language a top priority as early as possible" is one of the ten tips that Nevadomski Berdan recommends for raising global children (2015). Research has identified why an early start to learning languages is seen as beneficial, and under what conditions (Nikolov and Mihaljevi-Djigunovi- 2011). One essential condition is described by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)–as defined in cognitive science and neurobiology–establishing the early years as the time during which learning a foreign language is optimized (Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic 2006). Research in brain development also correlates density in the Inferior Parietal Lobe with how early the individual began his or her language acquisition and how fluent a person is in a second language (Tindell 2015). Brain research has further corroborated what educators have found: instruction for beginning language learners, in particular, should take into account their need for context-rich, meaningful environments. For instance, Genesee stated that individual difference in learning styles exists in the structure of the brain and is thus beyond individual control, hence the importance of engaging all senses and skills (Genesee 2000).

Research reports on FLES over the past thirty years has systematically indicated a correlation between early foreign or second language learning and improved learning in general: for example, students who learn or are exposed to another language on a regular basis early in life perform significantly better on both verbal and nonverbal intelligence tests, show increased development of verbal and spatial abilities, and score well above anticipated national norms in reading and mathematics (Stewart 2005; Early Language Learning Research White Paper Report 2008). A recent study from the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences I-LABS at

the University of Washington goes further in establishing that bilingualism-related differences in brain activity are associated with higher executive functions (problem-solving, shifting attention, and other desirable cognitive traits) at a very early stage, when babies are about to speak their first words (Ramírez et al. 2016; McElroy 2016). The study also shows that compared with children from monolingual families, the brains of babies stimulated in early childhood through immersion in a bilingual context will remain open to learning new language sounds.

Despite the consistency of research findings that confirm the benefits of early foreign language exposure and the arguments for foreign language learning and cross-cultural education that accompanied the push toward globalization in the 1990s, such as the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century first published by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in 1996, the last two decades have seen a decrease in interest in the learning of foreign languages in many schools in the United States (Rhodes, "Elementary School Foreign Language Teaching"). The Association for Early Learning Leaders' 2016 conference clearly shows this: not a single presentation devoted to early language learning seems to be included in their program. This phenomenon did not happen for lack of will on the part of school children or teachers, but – as Nancy C. Rhodes concluded in her longitudinal study, Elementary School Foreign Language Teaching: Lessons Learned Over Three Decades (1980–2010) – for lack of understanding and appreciation by administrations of the role that acquiring another language early can play in the development of the whole child. "Envisioning a country where educators have taken heed of these lessons and in which the educational system promotes high-quality multilingual and multicultural education for all children is a wonderful dream" (Ibid. 129).

According to this article, although FLES programs experienced rapid growth in the 1950s and 1960s, many had disappeared by the late 1960s and early 1970s because of planning issues and a still developing consensuses on appropriate methodologies for children. In response to the report of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (Carter 1979) the early 1980s saw an increase in early foreign language education programs until the 2000s. "A downturn in the economy, coupled with the effects of federal education legislation (No Child Left Behind), led to the closing of many public school early language programs" (Rhodes, "Elementary School Foreign Language Teaching" 116). In her bibliography, Rhodes cited many studies that identified key factors and the broader historical context that influenced elementary school language education at that time. When President Barack Obama recently emphasized the need to train linguistically competent, globally competitive students in the 21st century (Ibid.), foreign language educators across the country responded with well-designed

curricula. Sadly, budget cuts, poor planning and lack of qualified teachers have affected the implementation of such programs (Ibid. 117). As a result, Rhodes concludes, the overall position of foreign language learning within the curriculum at the elementary and secondary levels in the United States has not significantly improved over the last fifty years (Ibid. 127).

Another factor that has contributed to the low interest for FLES appears to be the lack of qualified teachers (Ibid. 128). Ideally, elementary school teachers should have the skills to teach the basics of a foreign language, but in many universities there is often not a faculty member with a specialization in foreign language teacher education. In response to this, collaboration and partnership between World Languages departments and Colleges of Education are becoming more prevalent (see the 2010 second edition of the World Languages Standards, produced by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards for teachers of students from 3 years of age to 18 years and over).

In contrast, studies have shown that multilingualism is prominent in most European countries (Heinzmann 2013). As surveys show, the majority of Europeans learn languages only in school; this indicates the effectiveness of the European educational system in promoting the early learning of languages. In Finland, at least two foreign languages are part of the core curriculum for basic education beginning in the third year of elementary school (Kumpulainen 2015, 16-21). To note, Finnish 15-year-olds scored the highest in all four domains assessed by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2003 survey comprising forty-one countries (Korhonen 2006). Adding to their success is the high proportion of teachers per student ratio. The success of Finnish education can be attributed to the fact that the country invests heavily in teachers. In Finland, any child who falls behind, in foreign language learning or another subject. is immediately taken care of by remedial classes until s/he is able to reintegrate into the regular classes. This approach, states Hancock (2011), is at the antipodes of the competitive model, with which the "USA muddled along in the middle for the past decade, when government officials have attempted to introduce marketplace competition into public schools" (2).

The lessons learned from leaders in the field of early foreign language learning over a thirty year period (1980-2010), as analyzed by Rhodes, emphasized the need to dispel common misconceptions about language learning, particularly at the elementary level, such as: children can only learn words or do not have the maturity to grasp complex sentence structures for instance. Instead it was established that language learning is a lifetime process, and education of school administrators is essential (Rhodes 122). In addition, Rhodes identified features of successful programs: (1) support by a team rather than just one language teacher or administrator, (2) sustainability after a start-up grant or initial funding ends, (3) choice of language of instruction that is relevant to the community, (4) sufficient weekly time so that learners can progress, and (5) participation: "The entire school community should feel that the language program is central, rather than peripheral, to the curriculum" (Ibid. 118). The current focus on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) has introduced both questions as to the necessity of FLES programs as well as those about the importance of the benefits of early language learning for STEM success. This study and other more recent ones confirm that there are schools which have successfully implemented early foreign language education in their programs, that these young learners perform better on standardized tests across the disciplines, and that significant problems still face elementary foreign language programs, such as funding and integration in the curriculum (Richards 2015). These studies indicate that there is a groundswell of parents whose appreciation of multilingualism could be harnessed, with the belief that ACTFL advocacy campaigns need to focus on changing the mindset of school decision makers about the importance of having language begin as early as possible and administrators listening to parents' voices. It is about bringing change from the bottom up, as Howard Zinn argues (2008, 2009).

In essence, this literature review outlines the core belief that motivated the creation of the Fun With Languages project, a partnership between Murray State University (Modern Languages Department, Office of Regional Outreach) and The International Language Center (ILC). Many aspects of the FWL method respond to the guidelines proposed by the experts in the field of early language education, summed up, for instance, in the Early Language Research White Paper conducted by Early Advantage, an educational publisher of Foreign Language and English as a Second Language instructional programs (2008).

The Fun With Languages method, which follows the practice of "hear it, repeat it, say it" (HRS), places the emphasis on early oral repetition and follows three major principles:

(1) Acquiring native-like pronunciation.

As mentioned above, research has established that the age of acquisition is of critical importance for native-like grammar and pronunciation in second language (L2) acquisition (Uylings 2006). Although no critical period for semantics has yet been identified, researchers have concluded that L2 child language learners are more likely to obtain native-like pronunciation than adult language learners (Mayberry and Lock 2003; Flege, Mackay, and Piske 2002).

(2) Learning a variety of sounds through play.

Younger learners "are likely to be less language anxious than many older learners and hence may be more able to absorb language rather than block it out"‘ (Johnstone 2002). The FWL/HRS method emphasizes the practice of a variety of sounds through play. As Kuhl, Tsao, and Liu (2003) stated, studies have shown that as early as 9 months old, children are capable of discerning differences among the phonetic units of languages, i.e., native and foreign language sounds. The study further indicated that this audio learning was only effective when taught by a live person. In the FWL/HRS method, the facilitator stresses the foreign language sounds when speaking to the children. Since the ludic element eliminates language anxiety, children are asked to switch gender voices, repeat a word in a burly man's voice, or a tiny mouse's voice, or with the roar of a lion, for instance, which allows the learners to experiment with many sounds.

(3) Making cognitive connections.

In the FWL/HRS method, a child understands quickly that one concept, e.g. bear in English, can be expressed with different sounds such as ours in French, oso in Spanish, (xiong, rising tone) in Chinese, kuma in Japanese, Bär in German. From a semantic point of view, when a child realizes that the relationship between names for the same object in different languages is arbitrary, he or she begins seeing how languages relate to each other and abstract thinking can become easier. Genesee and Cloud (1998) report that, provided children learn in a supportive language-rich environ-

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ment, "multilingualism is a key step in understanding and appreciating differences" because it brings educational, cognitive and socio-cultural benefits (p. 63). It is well established that early language learners are more creative and better problem solvers than students who do not study a second language (Stewart 2005; Landry 1974; Marcos 2001; Weatherford 1986).

Through its ludic, kinetic HRS method that engages all skills, Fun With Languages activates the process that enhances the development of the child as a whole.

Valérie Hendley is Director of the International Language Center (ILC) and project leader of the Fun With Languages Project. She is a French native speaker and lives in Mayfield, Kentucky. While living in England, she owned Le Club Français, a franchise that provided after-school clubs in French and Spanish for younger learners. She earned a French Baccalaureat in Foreign Languages (English, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Hebrew) in 1982. Her areas of expertise are: innovating programs with interactive games, drama, and phonics. In addition to coordinating all Fun With Languages clubs in the region, she also organizes workshops in French for the gifted and talented children through another Murray State program and coaches Calloway High school students in French.

Thérèse Saint Paul, Ph.D is from Belgium and studied English and Dutch at the University of Liège. She received her Ph.D in Comparative Medieval Literature (Arthurian and Celtic Studies) from The University of Edinburgh, Scotland and taught French at the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde (Scotland, UK), the University of Texas-Austin, the University of Pennsylvania (Lauder Institute/Wharton Business School) and is currently Associate Professor of French at Murray State University. Her areas of research and publications are Medieval Arthurian literature, Francophone (Belgian) literature and culture, French for (Green) Business. She developed and co-published an award winning multi-media French for Business Course (Strathclyde University Publications, 1989). In addition to the Fun With Languages initiative, she launched "An evening of French Poetry and Texts," an event in which students of French perform annually on stage.

PART 2

Fun with languages is an initiative that started in 2012 as a collaborative project between Valérie Hendley, director of The International Language Center and Dr. Thérèse Saint Paul, French professor at Murray State University. Hendley, a French native speaker, had moved from England to Mayfield, Kentucky. While living in England, she owned a language franchise called Le Club Français where children could join an after-school club to learn French or Spanish. When Saint Paul and Hendley met, they realized they shared the same beliefs about language learning: the earliest exposure, the better. They were both introduced to another language at a very young age, and that experience had been a determinant factor in their lives. They put their vision on paper and presented a grant proposal to the Office of Regional Outreach at Murray State University.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FUN WITH LANGUAGES INITIATIVE

Given the scholarship on the subject (summarized in Part One of this article), the goal of Fun with Languages is to introduce children to another language as early as preschool age.

The pilot was a success: it was tested in 2013, in seven elementary schools located in a single county for one hour per week, lasting ten weeks. 113 students registered. This very positive response encouraged Hendley and Saint Paul to apply for a full grant with the Office of Regional Outreach for 2014. The grant was secured and the program started in four counties in Western Kentucky. The project established a partnership of mutual benefit between ILC and the Department of Modern Languages at Murray State University. The ILC uses language students as language facilitators, and offers clubs in the five languages taught at the university: French, Spanish, German, Japanese and Chinese.

In 2015 the Fun with Languages Project received yet another full grant. For each viable club with ten hours of instruction, the grant gave the schools ten hours of language to be taught to a grade of their choice. So far, seventeen schools in nine different counties have benefited from Fun with Languages innovative language grants. At this point, Fun With Languages clubs can be found not only in elementary schools, but also in middle schools. We are seeing our vision become a reality. Children who started language learning at the elementary school level are requesting that we launch clubs in their middle schools. Fun with Languages is having the desired impact.

Fun with Languages introduces learners to another language through games, songs, stories, and drama. Engaging the senses, as mentioned in Part One, is an essential component of our method. During the one-hour lesson the learner manipulates vocabulary and learns to use it in a hands-on/active discovery setting. The facilitators are chosen from advanced language students or native speakers with a background in early childhood or elementary education, although this is not a requirement. Students receive materials and training in the method but are primarily selected for their personality, such as their ability to create an engaging learning environment. We usually warn visitors to our clubs: "When you walk into a Fun with Languages club, do not be surprised to find children squealing and running around and shouting words in another language loudly and with a big smile on their faces." Fun with Languages is not a program based on teaching grammar or aiming to make a child fluent in another language. Its mission is to introduce children to different sounds, to different ways of using their tongue in their mouth, and also to different cultures. We believe that learning is based in daily reality; and that children will learn if they are familiar with the content and the approach is user-friendly. Our goal is to take the child, within one hour, from what seems to be a very unfamiliar territory to a fun place where they can feel at home. We make that new territory part of their reality and hope that the experience will last a lifetime by expanding language learning opportunities for all children in elementary and secondary programs to better equip them with the skills needed to communicate effectively in multicultural settings and across the globe.

As indicated in Part One, while methods for the teaching and learning of world languages at an early age are still a focus of continual development, identification of developmental processes in early language learners and successful pedagogical research in this area have led to the establishment of core practices upon which programs like Fun With Languages have grown. Rhodes's study based on interviews of early foreign

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language teachers clearly showed the volition to develop a grassroots movement that would place foreign language learning on the same plane as STEM (Rhodes 2014; Rhodes and Pufahl 2010). Fun With Languages has succeeded in establishing connections between some of the major stakeholders involved in early language learning: parents, teachers, and administrators. We are happily surprised with the positive results that our project has gained so far. It has started a momentum in this area of West Kentucky that we hope will boost the visibility, acceptability, and presence of foreign languages at all levels of education, including post-secondary and university.

[1] AELL "formerly known as the National Association of Child Care Professionals is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to excellence by promoting leadership development and enhancing program quality through the National Accreditation Commission's standards" (<www.earlylearninglearders.org>).

[2] PISA is the only international education survey initiated by the OECD to measure the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds, i.e. when students in most countries end their compulsory schooling.

[3] ILC is now called Pathos (a non-profit company)

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