

Review of “A Tale of Two Schools: Developing Sustainable Early Foreign Language Programs”

Title	A Tale of Two Schools: Developing Sustainable Early Foreign Language Programs
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As foreign language education is being curtailed at various levels of American education in recent years (e.g. Jaschik, 2010; Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011), it is high time that its advocates swing the tide back. This book is a monograph written by two prominent researchers in the fields of foreign language education and applied linguistics who have been involved in implementing and sustaining programs in two foreign languages, namely Japanese and Spanish, in two different elementary schools for the past 16 years. As the title of the book indicates, these two programs took two differing trajectories, like the characters in Charles Dickens’ novel “A Tale of Two Cities”; the Japanese program met its demise, while the Spanish program sustained itself and flourished. In essence, the authors lucidly describe how these two programs were instituted and developed. By comparing and contrasting these programs with different destinies, the authors critically analyze and conclude that both internal and external factors both successfully and unsuccessfully affected the sustainability of foreign language education programs in elementary education.

This book appeals to a wide variety of readers who are advocates of foreign language education as well as stakeholders such as superintendents, board members, principals, teachers, and parents at schools that currently institute foreign language education programs or may possibly do so in the future. The book consists of eight short chapters, an appendix containing a modified ACTFL rubric for the presentational mode of communication, references, and an index by subject.

The first chapter sets the stage for the pivot of the book by briefly discussing the aims of the book as well as the current status of foreign language programs in elementary education both in the U.S. and other nations. The authors emphasize that learning multiple languages from an early age is neither detrimental to the normal progress of academic and first language development nor an uncommon phenomenon in the rest of the world. Rather, in order to produce linguistically and culturally competent students who will be able to thrive in an ever competitive world, learning a foreign language and about other cultures from an early age is imperative.

The second chapter describes the implementation and development of the two programs referred to as the Japanese program and the Spanish program. The Japanese program began in 1992 and ended in 2005, while the Spanish program began in 1995 and is still in existence today. Although both Donato and Tucker were involved from their inception, these two programs differ

markedly in their origin and implementation; thus, they naturally followed different developmental trajectories.

The third chapter focuses on both student and program evaluations. Due to a lack of extant research with reliable and valid instruments to measure young and novice learners' foreign language proficiency, the authors and foreign language classroom teachers used both qualitative data at various points throughout the school year and quantitative data at the end-of-the-year assessment. The linguistic areas covered were oral proficiency and vocabulary development for the Japanese program (K–8). However, reading and writing proficiency were added to the Spanish program (6–8) due to its curricular differences. The program evaluation consisted of a myriad of data: students' linguistic progress as well as questionnaires collected from a number of stakeholders (e.g. students, parents, and teachers).

In the fourth chapter, student language achievement from both the Japanese and Spanish programs is disclosed. Most of the students in the Japanese program progressed gradually from the first, third, and sixth year, yet still remained at the novice level, whereas most of the students in the eighth grade from the Spanish program outscored every category of the writing assessment rubric in comparison with the sixth graders in the same program. When the linguistic assessments of newcomers to the program are compared with that of the cohort of students who started the program from kindergarten, both revealed that there were certain areas where newcomers were able to catch up with the cohorts in a rather short time span, but there were also certain areas in which they showed one or more areas of deficits. Thus, starting a foreign language program from an early age, provided that it is an articulated program, is meaningful and beneficial for the acquisition of higher language proficiency skills.

In chapter five, the authors compare and contrast the two programs in terms of the views held by parents, students, and teachers in each of the respective programs. This chapter clearly shows how the Japanese program gradually lost support and enthusiasm from both internal and external stakeholders, while the Spanish program enjoyed both continued support and enthusiasm from various stakeholders. From the data aggregated via interviews and questionnaires throughout the years, these stakeholders' real voices reflect the eventual termination and flourishing of these respective programs.

In the following chapter, the authors conclude that both internal and external conditions challenge the programs' sustainability. The six internal conditions are (1) decision-making with respect to program implementation, (2) situating the program in the culture of the school, (3) teacher recruitment, retention, and continuing professional development, (4) administrative staff stability, (5) curriculum development and program implementation, and (6) the need to introduce newcomers to the program. The four external conditions are (1) pressures from NCLB (No Child Left Behind) to demonstrate annual yearly progress (in English reading and mathematics), (2) pressures from the parents of children with special needs, (3) parental expectations of early language programs, and (4) pressure from other foreign language teachers.

In the penultimate chapter, the authors propose four emerging themes characteristic of successful foreign language programs. The most important is a clear vision that is shared by all the varied stakeholders; that is, each should feel ownership of the program. Another important factor is support for foreign language teachers at both moral and practical levels. The Japanese program had only one teacher who was responsible for grades K-8, and, anecdotally, she reported that there was a lack of communication with and support from other teachers in the school. On the contrary, the Spanish program had one Spanish teacher for each grade level, and the Spanish teachers often communicated with other classroom teachers in order to integrate their curriculum into each others' classes. Thirdly, concern for the students' progress in linguistic and cultural competences is also important for successful programs. One of the common denominators of early foreign language programs that comes and goes is that “children are faced with repetition of the same content presented in the same way from one year to the next” (p. 142) which, as a result, often demonstrates very little student progress in spite of several years of instruction. Proficiency outcomes are critical to the success and sustainability of all foreign language programs. Lastly, positioning the program as central rather than peripheral to the school curriculum is also crucial. The Japanese

class time was often the first to be cut down when special events such as field trips and musical productions took place, while the Spanish program enjoyed its central role alongside other subject matters such as English language, Arts and Mathematics.

In the concluding chapter, the authors discuss the lessons they have learned from being involved in both successful and unsuccessful programs for the last 16 years and, most importantly, the implications these lessons indicate for other school districts that are currently implementing foreign language programs or are interested in their implementation in the future. Lastly, the authors point out the importance of both replication and longitudinal studies that are especially lacking in the research of foreign language education in elementary school.

There are a few concerns, not necessarily drawbacks, which I came across as I was reading the book. First, there is an inconsistency of data presentation in the first chapter. When showing the current state of foreign language education in U.S. schools, the authors use the 1997 data collected by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) and state on page 9 that new data will be available as CAL was collecting these new data in 2007–2008 at the time that the monograph was being written. However, when the current states of the U.S. and England are compared on page 14 in the same chapter, the authors use the new CAL data published in 2010. This inconsistency of data presentation might have been due to the different time frames for the writing of different portions of the chapter. Second, the Spanish program seems to have been given slightly more weight over the Japanese program in terms of detailed description. For instance, when the implementation and development of the two programs are contrasted, the Japanese program is discussed in approximately four pages, whereas the Spanish program is discussed in eight pages. Third, although the goal of foreign language programs is repeatedly stated as an increase of linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding, the book only discusses the tools and results of linguistic assessment and evaluation. The cultural knowledge resulting from the program implementation is hardly mentioned in the book. Lastly, as an interested and potential stakeholder of foreign language implementation, I would like to see samples of questionnaires, testing instruments, and program evaluation tools used included in the Appendices. Although the authors underscore the importance of the contextual appropriateness of the program with the local environment, sharing the sample documents/tools used in those programs would be a great resource for the people who are going to implement foreign language programs in the future.

Overall, the book is concisely written to appeal to both lay people and academic researchers. As for lay people, they could casually pick up the book and read it for pleasure in a short period of time. The authors walk them through the inception of the programs, their development, and their contrasting destiny as a result, as if one were reading the novel “A Tale of Two Cities.” As for academic researchers, the authors provide plenty of academic references for interested readers for further reading, including publications produced by their own research groups throughout the years. Their research background helps bolster and validate the emerging themes, the lessons they have learned, and the implications they purport for other potential school districts.

I would highly recommend this book to any potential stakeholders and interested advocates of foreign language programs in elementary education.

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