EARLY IS BETTER: THE CASE FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY IN THE ADVENTIST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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A superficial reading of Holy Scripture would lead one to believe that Christians acquire modern foreign languages only through a gratuitous pentecostal act of the Holy Spirit! Indeed, academy and college students who struggle with Spanish verb conjugations or building French vocabulary might wish for divine intervention to help them grapple with their task.

Considering that their church has an admirably active and international K-16 educational system, American Adventists have been curiously uncommitted to the study of foreign languages.

How much emphasis have Seventh-day Adventists put on teaching foreign languages, particularly in the United States, where the denomination was founded? It is an interesting question, particularly given the church's historic passion for global outreach. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with its global mission program, has certainly taken foreign language study seriously. Its state-of-the-art language learning centers and teaching programs at Provo, Utah, offer a national model in foreign language training on a par with the Peace Corps and the U.S. Army.

In contrast, considering that their church has an admirably active and international K-16 educational system, American Adventists have been curiously uncommitted to the study of foreign languages. These subjects are rarely and sporadically taught at the elementary level. At the secondary level, they are often an expendable item on the curricular menu. With one exception, we still do not mandate foreign language study for all students in our U.S. colleges and universities even though many American institutions of higher learning have that requirement. Adventist Colleges Abroad is an oasis in this proverbial desert. It is a program that serves college students who choose to study a year, a semester, or a summer abroad.

To what may we attribute this general indifference? If we turn to Ellen White, we might come away wondering how high a priority language study was for her. Ever fixed on her urgent calling to prepare a people for the imminent coming of the Lord, Mrs. White had little patience with curricula that forced students to go through dry recitations of Latin and Greek. For her, being proficient in English was where the emphasis should lie[1] so that the message might reach the people persuasively.

But it would be a serious misreading of her writings to conclude that because she encouraged English proficiency, she downplayed the importance of foreign languages. Ellen White strongly urged that Adventist publications be made available in all languages[2] and encouraged native speakers of other languages to take the message to their countries of origin.[3] She acknowledged that familiarity with different languages was a help in missionary work[4] and that many believers would need to study foreign languages.[5]

Mrs. White felt others would learn best in the foreign country while doing the work of evangelism and education, having interpreters work with them while they became proficient in the local language.[6]

This article begins by tracing some historical explanations for the sporadic attention paid to foreign languages in the Adventist curriculum.

This will serve as a backdrop for a discussion of foreign language programs at the elementary level. Finally, the article proposes a larger role for the study of foreign languages as we enter a new century. The changing needs of society, our church, and the world demand that foreign language study be incorporated into the curriculm—beginning at the elementary level.

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A Little History

Foreign language study in the American elementary school dates back more than a century in some American cities.[7] Even prior to the Civil War, some Cincinnati schools taught English and German, and by the 1880s, a number of other cities with large German populations provided instruction in that language for part of the school day. There were early French-English programs in Louisiana, Spanish-English programs in New Mexico, and various programs spread over the country in Norwegian, Czech, Italian, Polish, and Dutch. The Cherokee of Oklahoma set up bilingual programs in 21 elementary schools and two academies that helped their people gain a higher English literacy than the contemporary white populations of either Texas or Arkansas.[8]

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the wave of anti-Catholicism and xenophobia, most U.S. bilingual schools closed their programs, and the melting pot theory gained the ascendancy. This assimilationist view suggested that English and Anglo-Teutonic socioeconomic concepts defined American culture and, therefore, no other language or culture should be cultivated. Eight years after leaving the White House, Theodore Roosevelt wrote: "There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism. [A]ny man who comes here. . .must adopt the language which is now the native tongue of our people. . . .It would not be merely a misfortune, but a crime to perpetuate differences of language in this country."[9]

These isolationist tendencies characterized American politics and education until the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the nation came to grips with the possibility that another country and language might achieve world domination. With the wake-up call of the Russian launching of the satellite *Sputnik* in 1957, Americans began some serious soul-searching that produced revolutionary changes in the teaching of foreign languages, growing out of these concerns: Could Americans afford to ignore their role in the world family? Could they continue to expect the world to learn their language while ignoring their responsibility to learn other languages? Could their position in the world be maintained by a citizenry incapable of communicating in more than one language?

During the 1960s, the ALM (Audiolingual Method) textbooks, which emphasized speaking and listening, quickly flooded the nation's schools, pushing out the tedious grammar-translation approach. This was followed by a number of new approaches to foreign language teaching:[10]

- *Community Language Learning,* based on psychological counseling techniques;
- *The Dartmouth Intensive Language* model, developed by John A. Rassias to help Peace Corps volunteers learn a foreign language quickly;
- *The Direct Method,* employed largely by Berlitz, which stresses communication in the foreign language right from the start;
- *The Natural Approach,* developed by Prof. Tracy D. Terrell to provide immediate minimal proficiency in the language;
- *The Silent Way,* by which the professor introduces words and concepts by using colored rods that students use as props to speak in the foreign language;
- *Suggestopedia,* the method developed by Dr. Georgi Lozanov, who believed people could learn faster if they could overcome their anxieties through dialog and play-acting; and
- *Total Physical Response,* a method developed by James J. Asher that combines thought and physical action to imitate how a child acquires its first language.

These methods all focused on adults learning a second language. But what about children? If we learn our *first* language in childhood, why not another language? And wasn't there ample evidence of bilingual and trilingual people who acquired their languages at home as children? Weren't we depriving our students of a complete education by waiting until high school to introduce them to another language? And didn't research indicate that high school was already too late to succeed at learning a second language?

Out of this debate came FLES (called alternately Foreign Language in the Elementary School or FLES* [FLESstar], in its most current form) which swept U.S. elementary schools in the 1960s and early 1970s. Some FLES programs grew out of parental and community interest and were funded by student fees; others were introduced by administrators or teachers. In the 1960s and early 1970s, some federal funding became available.

In a desperate attempt to re-educate language teachers and train new ones, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 sponsored a number of teacher training seminars in the new methodology. Pilot programs in elementary foreign languages sprang up all over the country. Some of these—like the Glastonbury, Connecticut; and Hinsdale, Illinois, school systems—still continue today.[11]

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Public opinion about foreign language study continued to change. A 1979 survey of American attitudes conducted by Hawley and Gates at the Michigan Research Center found that 75 percent of those surveyed felt that languages should be offered at the elementary level, and 40 percent thought they should be required.[12] In a more recent study conducted by the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT), 52 percent of students surveyed rated beginning the study of a for-

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eign language in the elementary school as extremely important, and 94 percent opposed eliminating foreign language teaching from American schools.[13]

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New Research

Over the next several decades, a flood of research produced sometimes conflicting though mostly illuminating information on the benefits of early foreign language instruction. In general, the evidence inspired by neurologist Wilder Penfield's theories on early language learning[14] defended language learning in the earliest grades. But some studies cast doubt on "the earlier the better" theories. In 1978, for example, Genesee reported on a study suggesting that given the same amount of time, adolescents will learn as much or more than younger children.[15] The disadvantage of starting late, however, is the reduced amount of time available to study a language. Like the study of any subject, the longer the contact with the content, the more lasting the learning. Genesee further concluded that for mastery, early language courses must be reinforced by study of the same language at the secondary level.[16]

In England, Burstall and her associates found that 8-year-olds and 11-year-olds learned a foreign language with equal efficiency. However, younger students had superior listening comprehension, and their attitude toward foreign language was appreciably more positive than that of their older counterparts.[17] The next year, Seliger, Krashen, and Ladefoged[18] found that there were limits to the ability of teenagers to speak a foreign language proficiently. Students 16 or older tended to speak with an accent and did not achieve the expertise of younger students. In a later study, Krashen[19] found that, where time and exposure are held constant, adults and older children go through syntactic and morphological development faster than young children, but that children exposed to a second language during childhood tend to achieve higher language proficiency than those who began as adults.[20]

Remarkably, researchers found that intelligence is not a strong indicator for foreign language acquisition. Contradicting an old notion that only the gifted can satisfactorily acquire another language, Genesee found that a positive attitude toward other languages and cultures and an openness in learning styles, along with high motivation, were more important factors in language acquisition.[21]

What is the ideal age to begin language study? There are no conclusive studies that point to one specific age. Currently, researchers seem generally agreed that the earlier a child has access to another language, the better the language will be learned and the longer its staying power. Children are naturally curious and skillful at mimicry. They are not self-conscious and are linguistically flexible. In a recent study dealing with areas of the brain involved with learning of native and second languages, for example, it was found that children who learn more than one language can use the same part of their brains to understand those languages, while people who learn a language later in life must use another portion of the brain than where the native language is stored.[22] Because of this uncanny ability, children will not confuse the languages as long as they are speaking them over a long period of time. Confusion occurs when the same person (mother, father, or other family member) speaks more than one language to the child[23] or when the child is removed from the language before it has taken hold (such as in the case of migratory populations).

Skeptics have alleged that foreign language study will reduce children's English skills or detract from their progress in other subjects. A study by the Bureau of Accountability Office of Research and Development of the Louisiana Department of Education found that third, fourth, and fifth graders who participated in 30-minute foreign language programs in the public schools showed significantly higher scores on the 1985 Basic Skills Language Arts test than those who did not study a foreign language. By the fifth grade, math scores of language students were higher than those who didn't study a language.[24] What many researchers had suspected continued to be confirmed: The study of a foreign language enhances learning of the first language and other subject areas. Landry[25] further discovered that creativity and flexibility in thinking characterized children who began foreign language study in the elementary school. And Hamayan, summarizing the research on bilingual children, concluded that children exposed to two languages from birth have "cognitive gains." They are more flexible and creative and reach higher levels of cognitive development at an earlier age.[26]

Types of Programs

Once it was established that there were distinct advantages to introducing foreign language study at the elementary level, government funding encouraged the widespread growth of FLES programs. When that funding was largely withdrawn by the early 1970s, parents and local school boards took up the standard to retain or begin foreign language study at their elementary schools.

FLES* is the term currently being used to encompass all forms of elementary foreign language programs K-8.[27] Currently, there are three types: (1) revitalized sequential FLES, (2) FLEX or Exploratory, and (3) immersion.[28]

FLES

The early FLES programs in the 1960s held foreign language classes one to five days a week. Much of their failure can be attributed to unduly high expectations and insufficient time for students to develop the expected competencies. While the refurbished FLES programs continue to meet one to five days a week, they stress communication, and expectations have been adapted to the time frame available for language learning. Typical of this format are the before- and after-school programs in Fairfax County, Virginia, public schools and the FLES programs of Lexington, Massachusetts. The latter provide language instruction by a full-time language specialist during the regular school day.

FLEX

Quite unlike FLES, the FLEX programs underscore the "experience" of the foreign language and culture. The program in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, for example, does not attempt to provide fluency, but rather an "experience" of the language. The advantage of this type of program is that teachers with no previous foreign language background can use it with minimal training. In fact, teachers learn the foreign language with their students by using an audiotape program. Students may be exposed to more than one language.

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Immersion (Partial and Total)

American immersion programs are organized more or less along the lines of the Canadian model developed by W. E. Lambert and G. R. Tucker in 1972. All regular elementary school courses are taught in the foreign language throughout grades K-2, and English is gradually increased in grades 3-6. By the end of the K-6 sequence, the students are functioning at the sixth-grade level in all content areas in both languages. Thirteen areas of the U.S. have adopted this model.[29]

More recently, this "total immersion" program has been modified to a "partial immersion" model, in which less than 50 percent of the courses are taught in a foreign language. Founded in collaboration with the University of California at Los Angeles, the Culver City, California, partial immersion program gives 60 percent of its courses in Spanish and 40 percent in English at the sixth-grade level. Other programs, such as those in Montgomery County, Maryland; and San Diego, California, all have one aspect in common: They start out in the early years doing instruction in the foreign language.[30]

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FLES and Other Subjects

One concern about elementary-level foreign language programs has been students' performance in English. It has been found that immersion students do as well as non-immersion students on English language achievement tests. As for the merits of early language study on high school language courses, Brega and Newell[31] found that FLES French students performed "significantly better" on all four skills in the Modern Language Association tests than non-FLES students who began French in high school.[32]

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Why Study Foreign Languages?

In response to the "Nation at Risk" report, the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement published a report outlining the need for Americans to be competent in other languages.[33] The document cites Senator Paul Simon's characterization of Americans as "linguistically malnourished" compared with other modern nations. Too little, too late, and a focus on structure rather than on communication continue to slow down progress in this area. Indeed, the report states, there have been improvements in methods and approaches, but it will be a long time before a generation of Americans can be said to be proficient in foreign languages.

The ultimate impact of this weakness in the educational system is described as follows:

> *The consequence of generalized language incompetence include an international trade gap that threatens both short-and long-term economic stability, inadequate intelligence, and international communication that threatens national security, and cultural isolation. Foreign language instruction should begin as early as possible in children's education to be maximally effective.*[34]

The report further suggests that the institutionalization of language and culture study will improve language and cultural attitudes. This and other reports continue to underscore the learning of languages/cultures other than one's own as a means to prevent attitudes of intolerance and prejudice at the earliest stages of a child's education.

The Adventist Imperative

Even if Adventist educators and parents were to ignore the compelling changes in the American elementary school curriculum with respect to foreign language study, they can look "within" to find ample justification for the permanent inclusion of foreign language study in the curriculum.

The call to preach the gospel to all the world assumes a call to foreign language proficiency. Whereas in the early stages of our work, monolingual missionaries could be forgiven for their lack of linguistic preparation, the modern American missionary must at least match the educational level of an increasingly sophisticated mission field. That Americans are met in foreign countries by English-speaking local leadership is an indication that the world field has taken the foreign language imperative more seriously than the Adventist Church in North America. Our ability to communicate effectively our faith is compromised when our linguistic and cultural IQ does not match our theological expertise.

The mission field is not the only arena where language study can contribute to our effectiveness as ambassadors of Christ. In the U.S., rife as it is with the revival of racial and ethnic intolerance, the introduction of other languages and cultures at an early age will help ensure that the next generation of American Adventists will be comfortable with racial and cultural diversity. Respect for these kinds of differences is easier to instill in a child than in an adult. Validation for this kind of respect must not only come from the home, but also the Adventist school. The institutionalization of foreign language study at the early stages of Adventist education suggests that this subject is important. When introduced later, it is easy to perceive it as an unnecessary burden.

Many contemporary Adventist students, like their counterparts in other public and parochial schools, do recognize the importance of foreign language study. They understand the realities of surviving in a multicultural, multilingual world, and desire the skills for dealing with these new realities. Adventist conferences, school boards, and administrators—as well as parents—are being called on by these young people to rise to the new challenge.

Conclusion

The goal of elementary foreign language programs is to provide children with a positive first experience in learning a foreign language while creating an awareness and appreciation of cultural differences. Giving children the skills to break through barriers of language and culture is not a luxury: It provides them with a fundamental survival skill for the 21st century. The call for "Back to Basics" is tenable only if it includes the "basics" for the global village in which our children are being called to live and work.

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