Quick Reference Guide:

Elementary World Language Programs

To best support elementary world language learners, educators are encouraged to implement standards- and proficiency-based approaches to instruction that reflect young learners’ grade, developmental, and proficiency levels. World language content standards may need to be adapted or modified based on student and classroom needs, and it is important to consider differences in instructional time, program structure, and learning objectives when determining how different standards will be addressed throughout instruction and assessment.[[1]](#endnote-1)

*Positive associations with language learning at an early age may contribute to students’ overall levels of achievement and continued dedication to language learning in the future, making it important to maintain a fun, positive learning environment throughout instruction and assessment.1*

Effective Instructional Approaches

Educators are encouraged to organize elementary world language courses around themes, as this approach contributes to a clearly articulated series of units, lessons, and activities that support different standards and provides opportunities to share themes with other core classes in the school community. To support this process, it may be helpful to use a spiraling curriculum in which the same topics or themes are covered each year with increasing complexity and difficulty. This type of programming is particularly well suited for world language classrooms, as it builds on students’ background knowledge while simultaneously promoting a deeper understanding of and interest in the language over time. As in all programs, language should be taught with a purpose, and tasks that require real-world, authentic language use across a variety of communicative modes can keep students excited about and invested in world language learning. Engagement should go beyond piquing students’ interests in the classroom by encouraging them to explore with the language in various ways through hands-on, interactive, and collaborative learning activities. Differentiation is essential in early language learning, and props, manipulatives, and total physical response (TPR) activities that physically engage young learners may be particularly helpful for supporting all types of learners in the elementary context. All learners benefit from comprehensible input throughout instruction, and it is important to provide multiple opportunities for information to be repeated in the target language. To further support effective instruction, assessment should take place on a continual and ongoing basis, and students at lower proficiency levels benefit from targeted feedback that recognizes their progress, even if this is limited.

Teaching Reading and Writing

When teaching reading and writing to young learners, it may be helpful to include (1) storytelling; (2) labelling around the classroom; (3) guided reading of a written morning message; (4) read alouds of repetitive stories; (5) opportunities to build meaning through physical movement; and (6) collaborative group activities, such as creating a story based on shared classroom experiences. Educators are encouraged to use authentic texts that speak to students’ interests and experiences, and pre-literate students may need to use gestures or drawings to better understand stories and subsequently demonstrate their comprehension. It is important to help students develop language-specific literacy skills, and students may benefit from books written in both English and the target language that provide opportunities for identifying and understanding differences between the two languages and cultures. The following graphic shows pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading activities that can be applied when working with various sources and text types in elementary world language classrooms.

*Before-During-After Reading Strategies for Teaching Literacy*

Expected Language Outcomes

Two common proficiency-based program models for teaching world languages in the elementary context are dual language immersion, in which students learn content in both the world language and English with the goal of developing bilingualism and biliteracy, and foreign language in the elementary school (FLES), in which students receive a minimum of 90 minutes of language instruction per week with a focus on developing oral language skills and cultural awareness and understanding. Expected language outcomes vary greatly in these different elementary programs, and it is important for educators to consider their specific classroom context (e.g., program model, differences between native and target languages, etc.) when developing learning objectives and proficiency targets that are realistic and attainable for their students. By defining expectations for learning, educators will be better prepared to (1) support students based on their individual needs and abilities; (2) provide stakeholders with a shared understanding of program goals; and (3) advocate for program development, maintenance, and expansion. See program outcomes resources for more information about proficiency targets in elementary programs.

Characteristics of Successful Programs

Characteristics proven to increase elementary program effectiveness and longevity include: (1) high-quality instructional methods and learning objectives that reflect best practices in world language education; (2) extended, connected K-12 learning sequences; (3) advocacy for educator, administrator, and parent support; (4) continuous assessment and program evaluation; and (5) sustainable practices that allow programs to move forward with or without additional funding.[[2]](#endnote-2) Educators are encouraged to develop a strong, shared vision for the program and the role of world languages in the greater school curriculum and culture, and it may be helpful for world language teachers to build collaborative partnerships with content area teachers from various disciplines. For continued success, systematic procedures for assessment, reporting, and program evaluation are recommended, as this will allow for program recognition, growth, and improvement over time.

Recommendations for Elementary World Language Programs

* Create meaningful student goals to guide the development of curricula, activities, and assessments
* Select engaging and grade- and proficiency- level appropriate themes to guide instruction
* Focus on active engagement to support language development and improve the learning experience
* Use performances, skits, puppetry, podcasts, games, songs, chants, rhymes, and role-plays in class
* Consider partnering with schools in other countries to connect with native-speaking communities
* Incorporate opportunities for pair or group work that allow students to deeply engage in the language
* Provide structured activities before introducing more complex, performance-based activities
* Think about ways to improve students’ attitudes toward the language and culture being taught
* Ask students what they like and dislike in their learning experience when planning for instruction
* Use visual supports, gestures, and modeling when providing instructions in the target language
* Routinely assess student progress/performance to improve instructional planning, delivery, and supports
* Help pre-literate students develop the foundational skills needed to develop literacy in the language
* Teach literacy specific to the target language rather than a translated version of what is taught in English
* Incorporate matching, sorting, and copying activities to support students’ word recognition skills
* Adapt content standards and proficiency expectations to the classroom context and individual needs
* Explain the benefits of a spiraling curriculum to students, parents, and various stakeholders
* Proactively connect and collaborate with classroom teachers and members of the school community
* Take opportunities to participate in ongoing professional development

For more research and a full bibliography for this and other QRG topics, see

[World Language Standards Literature Review Report](https://www.doe.mass.edu/worldlanguages/leader-network/literature-review.docx).

1. Heining-Boynton, A., & Haitema, T. (2007). A ten-year chronicle of student attitudes toward foreign language in the elementary school. *The Modern Language Journal, 91* (2), 149-168. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rhodes, N. C. (2014). Elementary school foreign language teaching: Lessons learned over three decades (1980-2010). *Foreign Language Annals, 47* (1), 115-133. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)