

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Undergraduate Theses, Professional Papers, and Capstone Artifacts

2024

Foreign Language Instruction: Commonalities from Kindergarten to College

Bethany A. Tafoya

University of Montana, Missoula, bt173495@umconnect.umt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/utpp>



Part of the [First and Second Language Acquisition Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Tafoya, Bethany A., "Foreign Language Instruction: Commonalities from Kindergarten to College" (2024). *Undergraduate Theses, Professional Papers, and Capstone Artifacts*. 494.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/utpp/494>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Theses, Professional Papers, and Capstone Artifacts by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

2024

Foreign Language Instruction: Commonalities from Kindergarten to College

Bethany Tafoya
bt173495@umconnect.umt.edu

Recommended Citation

Tafoya, Bethany A. "Foreign Language Instruction: Commonalities from Kindergarten to College" (2024). *Undergraduate Theses, Professional Papers, and Capstone Artifacts*. ###.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Theses, Professional Papers, and Capstone Artifacts by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact: scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

Foreign Language Instruction: Commonalities from Kindergarten to College

Bethany Tafoya
Davidson Honors College, University of Montana
Advisor: Dora LaCasse

Abstract

Kindergartners learn much differently than high schoolers or college students. Yet, when it comes to foreign language (FL) instruction, adult learners are often back at square one, like kindergarteners. Though learning capacity and maturity differ greatly between kindergarten and college, are there any common threads in the *method* of instruction across all these levels? This project was carried out by observing foreign language classrooms from kindergarten to college, identifying the main means of instruction in each class, and analyzing whether any commonalities exist between all the levels. Identifying such commonalities will reveal the main keys to successful language learning and how success is supported through teaching methodology.

Keywords: foreign language instruction; adult learners; teaching methodology

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
I. Introduction.....	5
II. Background.....	5
III. Hypothesis.....	6
IV. Methods.....	6
V. Data.....	7
VI. Analysis.....	9
VII. Results.....	10
VIII. Implications.....	11
IX. Broader Impacts.....	12
References.....	13

I. Introduction

Kindergartners learn much differently than high schoolers or college students. Yet, when it comes to foreign language (FL) instruction, adult learners are often back at square one, like kindergarteners. Though learning capacity and maturity differ greatly between kindergarten and college, are there any common threads in the *method* of instruction across all these levels? This project was carried out by observing foreign language classrooms from kindergarten to college, identifying the main means of instruction in each class, and analyzing whether any commonalities exist between all the levels. Language is universal, and in an increasingly global world, contact with other languages inevitable. The need to learn foreign languages is great and the need to teach them effectively is greater. Being a foreign language student and linguist myself, I have experienced various approaches to foreign language instruction and am curious whether there are common threads between all foreign language classes. Identifying commonalities across language learning levels will highlight shared characteristics of successful language instruction. I believe analyzing these methods of FL instruction from kindergarten to college will reveal the main keys to successful language learning and how success is supported through teaching methodology.

II. Background

Brain-based research from Sousa (2011) finds several keys for foreign language learning. First, lectures less than or equal to 20 minutes result in greater student interest and retention. This relates directly to the period of grammatical instruction led by the teacher. Lessons that are shorter than twenty minutes are easier for students to grasp and retain in subsequent lesson segments. Second, successful learning is found to

engage the entire person. For learning (and consequently teaching) to be successful, the learning mode must engage as much of the student's person as possible. Merely mental cogitations or passive listening will not engage the whole student. Third, repetition is essential for retention. Items that only get one pass and are quickly transitioned away from are less likely to be retained. Kennedy's (2006) study further found that though necessary, repetition must be naturally built into a larger communicative task. Rote repetition such as drilling grammar tables is not nearly as effective as incorporating multiple communicative modes into an activity. Lastly, the American Council for Teaching Foreign Language (2010) promotes student exposure to the target language in order for it to be used in communicative purposes.

III. Hypothesis

I predict that analyzing methods of FL instruction from kindergarten to college will reveal main keys for successful language learning and how teaching methodology supports success.

IV. Methods

There were three main methods: observe classes, identify instruction methods, and analyze data for commonalties across age-level. Over the course of a semester, I observed five foreign language classes: three in Spanish, one in German, and one in Russian. Grade levels observed were kindergarten (Spanish), first grade (Spanish), a combined second and third grade class (Spanish immersion), ninth grade (German), and a university first-year class (Russian). Each class was observed once with prior consent from the instructors and administration. All the elementary classes were conducted in Spanish since that was the only language available in the city where the

observations took place. The second and third grade class was held at a bilingual Spanish-English immersion school. Being such, the class observed did not necessarily focus on language, but rather was the science segment of the day conducted in Spanish. In each class, I took detailed notes on what the teacher and students did and said, as well as their interactions with one another—were they in Spanish? English? Etc. In some classes, interviews with the teacher concerning their teaching and language background were possible before or after the class, but this was not the case in all the classes. After all the classes had been observed, I went through the data, searching for common patterns in teaching method and themes in student participation. I categorized each phase of the lesson with words denoting what each section primarily targeted. Categories are explained further in section V, data.

V. Data

Below are the notes taken from each class. On the left is a brief description of the lesson section. Bolded on the right is the category which I marked it as. Categories were determined by what the students were required to do to participate in this section.

(1) Categories

COMPR	comprehension; Students are listening and actively understanding what the teacher is saying.
PRON	pronunciation; this segment requires students to produce the TL
CONVO	conversation; students are conversing with each other or the teacher
GRAMMAR	a period of grammar instruction; teacher is doing more of the instruction
P	practice; general practice of the topic at hand. Incorporates CONVO, PRON, COMPR

VOCAB	vocabulary; students are either learning new vocabulary or accessing their mental lexicon to communicate with other students and/or the teacher.
CULTURE	culture; this section of the lesson incorporates culture of the TL as well as the home culture. Part of the 5 C's recommended by ACTFL (2010).
IMM	immersion; here, the students are completely immersed in TL; typically in a song or other media form.

(2) Russian

Lesson Segment	Category
Intro to class – all in Russian, getting class and Ss oriented for the day	COMPR
Conversation practice	PRON/COMPR
Grammar instruction – student teacher very scripted	COMPR/CONVO
Practice same grammar point, semi structured w/other Ss. **mode 1**	CONVO/ P
Grammar 2 – students and teacher teach the lesson	GRAMMAR/CONVO
Immediately practice personal pronouns with role call (Ss may or may not see the connection here) **mode 2**	GRAM/P/PRON/CONVO
Activity describing objects (still using personal pronouns) **Mode 2**	CONVO/GRAMMAR
Wind down = in Russian, review test and go over upcoming essay	COMPR

(3) Kindergarten

Lesson Segment	Category
Intro – all in Spanish, T having Ss wash hands from recess	Intro
Conversation practice – greetings	CONVO
Grammar period – new page of story – T introduces new vocab	COMPR/PRON
Song, sing along	PRON/IMM
Grammar – Listos Curriculum	COMPR
o Listen to animated story, compare home culture	CULTURE / COMPR
o Ss Role play book characters **MODE 1**	PRON/CONVO
o Practice “ my favorite color is ___” - **M1**	PRON /VOCAB
Zapatos! Chaqueta! Song – learning new vocab **M1**	VOCAB
Spider drawing – follow instructions, learn tilde over ‘n’ (G2), learn ‘spider’	COMPR

(4) 2-3rd combined

Lesson Segment	Category
Introduction to the lesson	
Teacher-led discussion/exploration of wound and its qualities	COMPREHENSION
Activity where students create “instruments” and explore sound	CONVO
Class discussion of findings	CONVO / VOCAB / COMPR

(5) 9th grade (HS)

Lesson Segment	Category
silent quiz	
Reading article about supermarkets in US v. DEU	COMP./ PRONUN.
Students create book on grocery stores/menus/food	VOCAB / WRITING / P

(6) 1st grade

Lesson Segment	Category
Intro, priming colors, body parts, etc. (all in Sp)	
Awards for Ss	COMPREHENSION
Greetings, ball toss game	CONVO / PRONUNC. / P
“what is your name?”	CONVO / PRONUNC. / P
Salad song **diff mode**	COMPR. / VOCAB / P
Salad TPR **diff mode**	COMPR. / P
Snack	COMPR/CONVO

VI. Analysis

After notating what happened in the classes and dividing them into lesson phases, I went back through the data looking for similarities between classes. This is when I decided to assign categories to each class phase. Through this analysis, I found that the multi-modal, multi-angle approach was used in the most successful classes. The university Russian and kindergarten Spanish were the best at these four points. The

2nd-3rd combined class was certainly kept in the target language, Spanish, being an immersion school, but due to the different subject matter and style of the period, I did not see consistencies in the multi-angle, multi-modal approach nor immediate practice of grammar point. There was an exploratory period of the lesson after the instructional period, but it was not the same as in the focused language classes. The high school German class also did not meet the same standards as put forth by the kindergarten or Russian classes. This could have been due to the class period in which I visited. Students were at the end of a unit and reviewing final information rather than being introduced to new topics and so their participation was less diverse in modes of communication and more writing and comprehension focused. The first-grade class was more activity based and I did not observe any true grammar segment where the teacher was explicitly instructing. This may be due to unit structure as well, but I was not able to interview this teacher.

VII. Results

After analysis, I found four things across all classrooms that increased success of instruction: classroom atmosphere of the TL, repetition, a multi-angle and multi-modal approach to the same topic, and immediate practice of the instructed grammar point at least twice.

First, all classrooms endeavored to maintain an atmosphere in the target language. This aligned with ACTFL's (2010) statement that in order for students to acquire foreign languages for communicative purposes, they must be exposed to the language. By maintaining a classroom atmosphere predominantly in the TL students are provided with the opportunity to hear and practice sing the TL.

Repetition and a multi-angle, multi-modal approach to the same topic went together. First, repetition was used to give students multiple attempts to grapple with the topic. However, it was not merely repetition. Like Kennedy (2006), teachers incorporated repetition into a range of activities that engaged different language producing faculties in the students, such as orthographic, aural, oral, and cognitive. This naturalistic approach to repetition allowed students to engage with the material easier and enabled their participation even without great familiarity with the language.

Lastly, each only one to two grammar points were introduced in a single class period, and each was immediately practiced in two to three activities right after the instruction period. Such immediate practice allowed the students to cement their understanding, ask the teacher questions, and engage with the material in a variety of modalities and from various angles.

VIII. Implications

After reviewing the analysis and results, it can be concluded that Kindergarten L2 instruction is a good model for adult L2 learners. Short, interrelated activities immediately following grammar instruction may help adult L2 learners grasp the language better. These instructional periods should aim to be short, leaving more time for students to engage with the material. Practice periods should employ different modes (such as speaking, writing, listening, etc.) and not just repeat the same drill over and over. Instructors must also be proficient enough in the target language to maintain 90% use of it in classroom. I believe if all adult FL classrooms adopted these basic principles, adult FL instruction and therefore acquisition could reach higher levels of success, faster.

IX. Broader Impacts

In an increasingly global world, contact between languages and cultures is inevitable. The need to learn foreign languages therefore is great, and the need to teach them effectively greater. I believe four keys have been established to improve foreign language instruction. With the four keys, I believe adult foreign language learning has the potential to increase in effectiveness, resulting in a greater language proficiency for adult FL speakers.

References

- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). 2010. ACTFL Position Statement on Use of the Target Language in the Classroom. Arlington, VA.
- Kennedy, T. J. 2006. Language Learning and its Impact on the Brain: Connecting Language Learning through the Mind through Content-based Instruction. *Foreign Language Annals*. 33 (278-287).
- Sousa, D. A. 2011. *How the Brain Learns*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA. Corwin Press.