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**Observation Report – Site Visit – John Stanford International School
January 18-19, 2001 – Partial-Immersion Foreign Language Program**

The following are impressions garnered during two days of observation, January 18 and 19, 2001, at the John Stanford International School in Seattle, Washington. Observations focus on the kindergarten and first grade Spanish partial-immersion classes.

Background

The Spanish immersion program is in its first semester of implementation, thus it is facing the wide array of challenges common to complex programs: curriculum development, teacher training, program implementation, and parent education.

Staffing and Program Design

Both Spanish immersion classroom teachers, Maria Buceta Miller (kindergarten) and Dolly Morales (first grade) are first year teachers in this particular placement, although both of them have had teaching experience in other areas. They are native speakers of Spanish. The kindergarten classes have a full-time instructional assistant, Ernestina Casas Carvajal, who is a native speaker of Spanish and a certificated teacher in Mexico. The first grade classes do not currently have a full-time instructional assistant. There are approximately 28 students in each kindergarten class and 28 students in each first grade class.

The program model is a “flip-flop model” in which an English-speaking teacher is responsible for instruction in English Language Arts and Social Studies and the Spanish immersion teacher is responsible for mathematics and science instruction. Students switch teachers at mid-day. Therefore, each teacher instructs approximately 56 students per day (two groups of 28). Currently, all specials, such as music and physical education, are taught in English.

The instructional focus in the immersion program is content-based language instruction; therefore, language is a by-product of the instructional activity. The teacher does not focus particularly on language as the object of instruction. However, staff members have received extensive training in melding both content and language objectives within a lesson.

The following comments apply to both kindergarten and first grade classes, unless specifically noted.

Language Acquisition

The majority of the students have spent five months in the program and are progressing well along the continuum of second language acquisition. The majority of the students whose first language is English are in the preproduction stage of language acquisition. They demonstrated comprehension by following directions, answering questions either in English or in short utterances in the target language, completing tasks according to the teacher's directions, and participating in a positive manner.

In the natural process of second-language acquisition, comprehension precedes production. Although a few students began to demonstrate evidence of self-generated production of language, the majority demonstrated the forms of early production that are typical of the first few months of language acquisition: counting numbers, responding in one word answers, singing memorized songs, and repeating pre-fabricated chunks of language.

Instructional Strategies

The following instructional strategies were employed in both classrooms:

- well-established classroom routines provided cues to meaning;
- songs and rhymes created an engaging atmosphere;
- intonation, voice inflection, and gesture conveyed meaning;
- extensive use of colorful visuals provided additional cues to meaning.

Suggestions for increasing comprehensible input:

1. Reduce the rate of speech of the teachers.

In some instances the rate of speech was too fast for the first stage of language acquisition. Also, reduce the amount of words used to convey meaning. For example:

Instead of, "*Now I want you to look for the same kind of fabric.*"
Say, "*Look for this one.*"

Continue to say exactly the same words with each example. This will improve comprehensible input. During the planning process, identify content-obligatory language structures and focus solely on what is absolutely necessary for comprehension. Remember, comprehensible input is $i+1$, not $i+20$. In other words, take the minimal input necessary for comprehension, then add to it incrementally.

2. Target language structures, especially when using visuals.

During the opening students were asked to respond to: *What day is today? What day was yesterday? and What day is tomorrow?* The teacher pointed to the calendar and used

gestures to help students respond to the questions. To further aid students, create pockets with the response written as a starter phrase. Use cards that will fit into the pocket that the students can manipulate. Also, bring the calendar closer to the group because it was too far away for some to see.

3.Increase the number of clues to meaning when introducing a new word/concept.

Example:

This is fabric. (Point to a piece of fabric.)

Repeat this phrase with several pieces of fabric in different shapes and textures.

This is not fabric. (Point to several objects that are not made of fabric.)

Check for comprehension by showing two objects and having the child point to the one made of fabric. Repeat this with several students.

After the meaning of the word fabric has been understood, THEN ask the students to walk around the room and touch things that are made of fabric.

4.Encourage language production from students.

After asking a question, model the response to the question in the first person. This allows the learner to hear the correct form before attempting to respond.

Instead of:

Teacher: *Who's wearing velvet?*

Mary is wearing velvet.

Try this:

Teacher: *Who's wearing velvet?*

Puppet: *I'm wearing velvet.*

* Using a hand puppet to represent a student is a good way to model the answer, especially in the kindergarten class. Encourage students to respond using the target phrase.

When asking questions to the whole group alternate between having one student respond to having students whisper the answer to the person next to them. This increases the number of students producing language.

Instead of:

Teacher: *What day is today?*

One student responds: *Today is Tuesday.*

Try this:

Teacher: *What day is today?*

Tell your friend.

Allow students to takeover some of the tasks of the teacher.

For example: During the morning message allow a student to come to the board and fill in the missing word.

5. Use creative grouping arrangements.

The large class size and the developmental level of the students necessitates a variety of instructional grouping arrangements. When possible, the class should be broken into smaller groups for instructional purposes. These smaller groupings will provide students with additional comprehensible input and more opportunities for communicative interaction. For example, the instructional assistant can take half of the group outside to the large area shared by several classes. This space lends itself well to creative movement and Total Physical Response (TPR) activities. With a small group of 14, the instructor can become more creative and the students will be able to move freely as they acquire language. The use of learning centers within the classroom is also encouraged because they also allow for more individualized instruction. Although this type of classroom arrangement requires more planning at the outset, it pays higher dividends in student participation and language acquisition.

6. Increase the use of hands-on activities.

With smaller groupings it will be easier to engage the students in more hands-on activities. Plan activities that use language in a communicative manner.

For example:

Instead of:

The teacher holding up a piece of fruit and asking students to state its name.

Try this:

Hand out the pieces of fruit to the students. Ask: Who has the banana? Student responds with the key phrase I have the ...

7. Target key phrases and write them on sentence strips for future reference. (1st Grade)

During a lesson on problem solving, target the key phrases needed to negotiate meaning and understand the content.

Teacher: *How did you solve the problem?*

Student responds in English: I counted backwards.

Teacher models the phrase in Spanish: *Yo conte al reves.*

Teacher writes the key phrase on a sentence strip and places where it is readily accessible to students for future use. Key phrases are added as the lesson progresses. Therefore, the next time that the teacher asks the same question students will have several anchors from which to base their answer.

8. When modeling a lesson limit the amount of time that students are required to sit and listen.

Remember that the students are working very hard to negotiate meaning and they can become restless if they are asked to attend for long periods of time.

Teacher Collaboration

The kindergarten and first grade English-speaking teachers, Margretta Murnane and Lucy Atkinson, spent a day observing the Spanish immersion teachers and providing feedback and instructional ideas. Some of the topics discussed during our group sharing were:

- creation of thematic units that would unite the English and Spanish portions along a single theme (one unit had been implemented in the kindergarten and both teachers clearly saw the benefits of thematic instruction)
- flexible scheduling to allow both teachers to plan and coordinate instruction
- curriculum development, perhaps in the summer, that would further enrich the program

It was clearly evident that the English teachers valued the goals of the program and had invested considerable time and effort in its implementation.

Parental Concerns

Two small-group conversations were held with parents of students in the partial-immersion program. Their concerns centered around:

- individualized instruction in mathematics to stimulate those students who find the current instructional level in first grade too easy
- large class size and whole group instruction
- lack of an instructional assistant in first grade
- the appropriateness of the introduction of a Japanese language program next year
- the appropriateness of children beginning to learn a third language

These concerns were shared with administrators and teachers. Several of the suggestions enumerated above will address these concerns. In addition, several of the parents shared anecdotes of how their children are beginning to “play with” the language at home. They seemed genuinely proud of their progress.

Summary

All of the individuals involved with John Stanford International School’s Partial-Immersion Foreign Language Program should be commended for its successful implementation. The staff and community have demonstrated a willingness to go “above and beyond” in meeting the considerable challenges of this program and have succeeded in establishing a model program. Utmost is the willingness of all key stakeholders to meet the challenges of a complex program with exceptional determination, collaboration and creativity. The major structures of the programs are strongly in place and, as in all endeavors, will be perfected as time and experience allows.