# Effective Strategies
# For Teaching Young Language Learners
# in Foreign Language Classrooms

by
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## Abstract

While there is an increase in support for foreign language programs for young language learners in the U.S. and worldwide, educators are faced with a lack of training in research-based strategies for developing effective and motivating instruction that meets the needs of younger language learners in the primary grades. This project examines what the research literature has shown to be effective practice for young learner language teaching in the areas of fostering community in the classroom, facilitating interactions, the use of gesture, teaching listening, and using stories, songs and games effectively. Using the framework of sociocultural theory and the second language acquisition theories of Krashen, the project focuses on socially constructed learning in the zone of proximal development, providing comprehensible input and lowering the affective filter as the basis of effective practice in young learner language classrooms. The strategies were compiled into a handbook for teacher training. It is hoped that this project will contribute to teacher confidence and effectiveness in teaching languages to young learners.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## Problem Statement

Many schools recognize the value of providing foreign language instruction at the elementary grade level, but (Rivers, Robinson, Harwood, & Brecht, 2013), there has historically been more emphasis on secondary level learners in research and publication of materials, and empirical studies determining the effectiveness of pedagogy in young foreign language learners continue to be rare (Copland and Garton, 2014). Teachers of elementary levels often need to adapt strategies for older learners without the benefit of knowing that research has shown them effective with younger learners. Additionally, many foreign language teacher preparation programs do not offer specific courses in K-6 methodology (Rhodes, 2014), further contributing to the lack of training for teaching younger learners effectively. There is a clear need for the development of teacher training in specific strategies shown to be effective for this level of students, in order to take advantage of young learner characteristics and effectively contribute to proficiency goals articulated in K-12 language.

**Importance and Rationale of the Project**

In a changing global society, the education of U.S. children must include equipping them with skills to communicate and work collaboratively with people from other cultures, both within their own diverse society and internationally. Recognizing the importance of educating students to become competent global citizens, the U.S. Department of Education (2012) has recently published an international strategy which includes support for high quality foreign language instruction from the elementary through post-secondary levels as a means to meet this goal.

According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (2002), teachers in foreign language programs are required to demonstrate a thorough understanding of language acquisition, and to maximize their use of the target language in the classroom. The actual instructional practice of foreign language teachers, however, often varies from this goal. Duff and Polio (1990) report a wide range of target language use by teachers in foreign language classrooms, from 10%-100%, with the mean reported as 67.9%. Bateman (2008) notes that a salient characteristic of new teachers is a lack of confidence in their ability to use high levels of the target language to effectively engage their students, and he cited the need for focused training in this area. Indeed, Swanson (2012) connects low levels of perceived teacher efficacy with the slightly higher teacher attrition rate of foreign

language teachers, which is detrimental to the establishment of strong foreign language programs.

The problem extends to educational context of Europe and Asia, where primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs are on the rise, but are experiencing similar challenges providing appropriate instruction for young learners. A European report by Edelenbos, Johnstone and Kubaneck-German (2006) synthesizing research on early language education acknowledges that differing characteristics of young language learners and the primary school setting require distinct instructional techniques. This report also notes that primary teachers expressed that their greatest professional need was for techniques to increase student motivation in instruction. Analyzing a recent study of primary FL teachers' classroom practices in Europe, Enever (2014) noted evidence of lack of expertise in structuring classroom interactions to maximize target language production and an over use of L1 in teaching.

Additionally, much research into effective foreign language teaching practice has been in the context of secondary levels or higher, and teacher preparation programs are more often focused on teaching older learners. Copland and Garton (2014) note that research into effective young language learner pedagogy is beginning to increase, but they also acknowledge that this area remains under-researched. This underscores the importance of reviewing and learning from the studies currently available in order to increase teacher effectiveness in all contexts of language learning.

In my own experience I have found that the position of elementary language teacher carries a "lesser" connotation in comparison to secondary teachers, and the role is sometimes perceived as "just fun and games," which devalues the importance of a student's foundational experiences in learning a foreign language. Additionally, elementary foreign language teachers sometimes work in isolation from other language teachers, so even simple collaboration with colleagues on a daily basis is not a resource available to them. This indicates the need for an accessible resource bank to use in lesson preparation containing research based teaching strategies and techniques for making high target language use comprehensible and engaging for young learners.

If students are to be prepared for the challenges of living and working in a global community, it requires that all levels of language education be effective. This effectiveness cannot be reached without providing elementary level teachers with adequate teaching strategies to ensure a strong start in K-12 language programs.

**Background of the Project**

Foreign language instruction at the elementary school level is hardly a new phenomenon. In the United States, interest has risen and fallen over the past decades due to historical and political events (Rosenbusch, Kemis & Muran, 2000). The popularity of foreign language programs in elementary schools reached a peak in the 1950's and 60's in the competitive political climate of the Russian launch of Sputnik and the resulting pressure on the U.S. to not "fall behind" in education, but programs

declined significantly by the 70's due to inadequate teacher preparation and inappropriate or unrealistic objectives (Heining-Boynton, 1990). The publication of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies in 1979 once again drew attention to the lack of foreign language competence in the U.S. education system and resulted in another surge in interest and development of elementary foreign language programs, this time with the determination to not repeat the mistakes of the 1960's (Rhodes, 2014).

Additionally, the findings in the area of brain research which were published widely to the general public during the late 1990's contributed to the strength of the early language learning movement during this period by promoting the idea that the optimal time to learn a foreign language is as a young child (Curtain and Dahlberg (2010).

Professional organizations responded to the groundswell of support by developing training opportunities, resources and advocacy for K-12 foreign language programs. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages first published proficiency guidelines in 1986, and then in 1996 they added Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners. These guidelines provided standard measures of student performance in communication tasks, which provided the tool needed to articulate K-12 programs goals in a meaningful way (Curtain & Dahlberg 2010). While these organizations continue to work to produce resources to inform best practice in K-12 programs, the distinction between beginning language strategies for

older learners and strategies appropriate for young language learners is not always clearly defined.

The worldwide educational climate is currently favorable and promising to the development of strongly articulated K-12 foreign language programs, but the lack of teacher preparation for the challenging task, especially at the elementary school levels, still threatens to cause history to repeat itself as a subsequent decline. Primary language teachers are in need of training in research-based strategies which will increase their effectiveness in language instruction with their students in their unique contexts. My own experiences in K-12 programs indicate that the need to develop effective teaching practices from the earliest levels is crucial to developing a strong and successful program, and for making the most of this nationwide movement dedicated to preparing our students with language skills so essential to their success in the global community.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to create a handbook of research based strategies for primary level foreign language instruction to be presented in a training workshop session for new and current primary foreign language teachers in my present school district. The handbook will be designed to increase participants' confidence related to target language use in their instruction of primary level students and their knowledge of research based strategies to increase student learning and achievement.

## Objective

The objective of this project is to develop a handbook of strategies to be presented to new and current elementary level foreign language teachers in the Reeths-Puffer School district during a professional development meeting, with the intention of increasing the knowledge of and confidence in research-based strategies for making instruction and target language use comprehensible and motivating for young language learners. Success in reaching the objective will be perceived if at least 60% of the teachers who are presented with the handbook self-report an increase in confidence and knowledge of effective practices on a pre- and post-test questionnaire.

## Definition of Terms

**Target language –** the language being taught, in this case, the foreign language to be learned

**Young language learner –** a language learner under the age of 11 or 12 who is distinct from older learners and adults in physical, cognitive, social and emotional development (Ellis, 2014).

**Foreign language–** a language which is not the majority language of the instructional context (Curtain & Dahlberg 2010)

**Teaching strategy –** a technique for teaching a concept or skill successfully to learners

**Scope of the Project**

This project will consist of a handbook of research-based strategies for use in early elementary foreign language classrooms. The target language represented in the strategies and examples will be Spanish, but strategies could be adapted for use with other language instruction in other contexts, including English to speakers of other languages, French, German, and any foreign language. The handbook will be focused on techniques for large group classes, rather than individual instruction, since that is the format of foreign language classes in the district in which I will be presenting. The presentation of the handbook is contingent on the support of the school administration and the time available for professional development staff.

The actual implementation of the strategies will be at the desire and discretion of the educators in attendance. Not all strategies will work for every teacher in every situation, but the handbook will contribute to an overall greater understanding of learner needs at this level and to the ultimate goal of a strong K-12 foreign language program to meet the needs of our students and our future society.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

## Introduction

Teaching foreign languages to young learners requires and approach that recognizes and accommodates their level of beginning language skills as well as their developmental needs as young children. Strategies that are effective for older learners are often not applicable or feasible for younger learners. This chapter examines the theoretical framework in which this project is based, followed by a section reviewing the evidence from relevant research for the effectiveness of specific strategies demonstrated to be effective with young learners learning a foreign language. The review is followed by a summary and a conclusion.

## Theory/Rationale

The theoretical framework for this project is based on the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky and the second language acquisition theories of Krashen. Vygotsky contends that people learn and develop through social interactions. In this view, language is not merely a skill to be learned cognitively, but language is also a tool that constructs thinking and helps the child to develop. As Gibbons (2006) points out, this theory puts particular emphasis on the role of the teacher in a school setting as involved in a process of co-construction of students' thinking through language and carefully regulated social interaction. According to Vygotsky's theory, learning takes place in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which he defines as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-

solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more able peers" (Vygotsky 1978, p.86). This idea carries the implication that teachers in second language contexts will carefully and intentionally arrange the environments to provide learning support, or scaffolding, in classroom interactions, facilitating comprehension in contexts just beyond a child's current achievement level in order to bring about learning within the ZPD (Gibbons, 2006). Teachers will also provide opportunities for students to gradually internalize this learning by interacting meaningfully in pairs and groups, with the goal of achieving independence and self-regulation (Takahashi, 1998).

Although Vygotsky developed socio-cultural theory to explain how learning occurs, his theory remains general and must be complemented with one that addresses the specific field of second language learning. The Language Acquisition theory of Stephen Krashen (1982) includes five main hypotheses of second language learning: the Acquisition-Learning Distinction, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, but the two which are most relevant to the framework of this project are the concept of Comprehensible Input and the concept of the Affective Filter. Krashen proposes that language acquisition occurs naturally when sufficient comprehensible input of language is provided to activate the innate capacity of all humans to learn languages. He analyzed caretaker speech, which is the speech that humans use with very young children learning their first language, and found that it was modified to a child's level,

that it focused on objects and events in the immediate environment and was centered on communication as its primary goal; he proposes that these same characteristics of speech modifications promote second language acquisition. He emphasizes the comprehensibility of the language input as essential for the acquisition to take place, which means that teachers of beginning second language learners must not simply talk to the learners in the target language, but must design interactions with comprehensibility in mind. Krashen's Input Hypothesis connects with the Vygotskian concept of the ZPD in the sense that Krashen contends that once the learner has acquired a concept, extension with new learning must follow, and his term for this is $i + 1$.

The second hypothesis of Krashen's (1982) theory relevant to this project involves the potential negative impact of anxiety, disinterest or other negative emotional states to impede acquisition of the input. This is what Krashen terms the Affective Filter. He notes that a low-anxiety environment, self-confidence and motivation strongly contribute to lowering the affective filter, which facilitates acquisition, so it can be concluded that students learn best when they are feeling successful, interested, and unthreatened.

While the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's sociocultural emphasis on learning as occurring through social guidance and interaction within the ZPD and Krashen's Comprehensible Input and Affective Filter concepts combine to form the foundation for the strategies outlined in this project, there have been more recent findings in the field of second language acquisition which add important additions to

this framework. A follow up to a longitudinal study of young learners by Lightbown, Halter, White & Horst (2002) reveals that while comprehension based instruction is effective for helping beginning level students gain proficiency, it can result in students failing to notice features of the target language which would increase their accuracy in areas other than listening, suggesting that some instruction which focuses on language form should be included. Cameron (2001) and Lightbown & Spada (2006) support the conclusion that students will benefit by being taught to notice forms and salient cues in the target language. Although very young language learners have not sufficiently developed their cognitive maturity and linguistic awareness to engage in formal grammar study (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), the concept of comprehensible input combined with guidance to learn to notice language features when appropriate describes how young learners can successfully begin to gain proficiency in the target language in instructed language settings.

In conclusion, the instructional practices outlined in this project will provide teachers with practical ideas to create a learning community where language learning will be co-constructed through social interaction with appropriate scaffolding to ensure comprehensibility within a positive emotional climate so that acquisition can take place. The strategies will provide for learning within the ZPD to ensure that learners are challenged and motivated to become increasingly self-regulating in language learning.

**Research/Evaluation**

The following review of important literature related to this project will be organized into sections beginning with a section examining foundational effective practices for cultivating a language learning community in the elementary foreign language classroom. This is followed by sections examining the effectiveness of strategies in the specific areas of interaction, listening, gestures, songs, stories and games.

**Cultivating a Community of Learners.** Teachers of young language learners must understand effective practices to create an environment in which learning can take place. The following two studies provide evidence for strategies to facilitate this goal. In a qualitative study involving Chinese Kindergarteners within an EFL classroom context, Wu (2003) measured the effect of instructional practice on motivation, which is an essential element in the cultivation of a successful learning community. The instructional practices in the study included a predictable learning environment, giving support when needed, providing moderate challenge in activities, and providing evaluative feedback which emphasized self-improvement. These practices clearly relate to the Krashen's concepts of affective filter, comprehensible input and the goal of self-regulation in language learning and also Vygotsky's concepts of scaffolding and ZPD. Cameron (2001) adds that the repeated language activities set up in classroom routines set a predictable environment with space for growth in the ZPD. In Wu's study, student interviews revealed that these practices were found to raise students' sense of competence, which increased their motivation

in the language learning environment. Additionally, the study noted that when elements of freedom in student choice and strategy instruction were included in instruction, the student's reported increases in their perceived autonomy, contributing to their growth in independence as learners. This study gives empirical evidence for the effectiveness of several foundational concepts for creating a motivational and engaging language learning environment which will be incorporated and developed in this project.

Along with maintaining a lowered affective filter, Krashen emphasizes that teachers also need to maximize the amount of target language input the students receive in order for acquisition to occur. This implies that the teacher must also understand how to make the target language input comprehensible to their students. Crichton (2009) undertook a qualitative study examining how five Scottish foreign language teachers used high amounts of the target language effectively in their classrooms, making it comprehensible and eliciting meaningful interaction, and then examining how students responded to it. Through analysis of audio recordings and the subsequent student interviews, Crichton observed that teachers established a warm atmosphere in which students felt cared about and in which they felt safe to take risks and make mistakes in interaction attempts, indicating a lowered affective filter. Teachers in the study also established routines which included a time of authentic interaction among students using learned formulaic phrases of greetings and opinion sharing which students were given regular opportunities to practice and internalize these structures. Teachers utilized comprehension checks with a focus on

meaning, intentionally communicating an expectation of participation and engagement through these practices. The study by Crichton showed the students responding positively to the target language use when the teacher intentionally supported learners in these ways, indicating that these strategies are effective for creating a community of learning and language acquisition with high amounts of comprehensible input in a low anxiety, high-interest environment. The goal of the language teacher is to create this kind of learning community, and strategies for language teaching need to contribute to this goal.

**Interaction.** A key characteristic of learning environments in the Social-construct framework is social interaction, and this element has been evident in the previous two studies. This section examines characteristics of classroom interaction which contribute to language growth. Although context of the following two studies differ from the primary foreign language classroom, the analysis of effective teacher prompts to promote learner centered negotiation and processing can be applied to the young learner context with appropriate expectation modifications, as the final studies in this section show.

Terrell (1982) observes that the affective filter is lowered by involving students personally in class activities, producing an environment of genuine interest in the interactions that take place there. To explore this concept, Anton (1999) analyzed the interaction devices employed in two beginning foreign language university classes between both teacher and students and between students themselves, qualitatively comparing the effectiveness of a teacher centered approach

and a student centered approach. In the teacher centered class, the interactions were initiated by the teacher with a focus on correct grammar and there was no pair or group work. This resulted in far fewer episodes of interaction and scaffolding within the ZPD. In the student centered class, the teacher also focused on the grammar objectives, but the classroom interactions were more collaborative, with teacher prompts that promoted continued interaction, such as "How might you answer that?" or, "Is that right?" This strategy was shown to promote increased student involvement in the lesson and scaffolding within the ZPD. In a similar study of interactions in two beginning university foreign language classes, Toth (2011) compared descriptive qualitative and quantitative data measuring student involvement in a class in which the teacher asked questions to individual students and providing corrective feedback with student involvement a class in which the teacher tried to elicit multiple responses to question prompts and promoted collaborative problem solving for corrections. The results indicated that the teacher who opened the interaction to collaboration achieved more interaction and more engagement in the process of learning. Toth also noted the importance of clear learning objectives as a contributing factor to student confidence in interaction. These two studies give a clear picture of the importance of a student-centered approach to constructing learning and the power of collaborative scaffolding.

In an effort to examine this concept of collaborative scaffolding in the context of primary foreign language classrooms, Ellis & Heimback (1997) collected pre- and post- test quantitative data to determine the extent of children's participation in

meaning negotiation, its effect on both comprehension and production of vocabulary words, and to discern the relationship between these factors. Ten kindergarten age children in an EFL program in Japan participated in the study in which they were given two listening tasks. The first was given individually with opportunity to request support from the teacher, and the second was given in a group of five students with opportunity to request support from teacher or other students. The results showed that young students choose to participate in negotiation somewhat infrequently, but are more likely to do so in a group setting rather than individually with a teacher. It was also shown that students benefited from the negotiations of the other students, even when they did not directly participate in the interaction. Comprehension was increased in the group task, but production was not achieved in either group. This underlines the importance of including group work even at young levels, but also demonstrates that very young students are still learning to learn and have limited metacognitive awareness, and also that students need to be exposed to a sufficient quantity of input before they can demonstrate acquisition by producing language. Therefore the interaction must be carefully scaffolded to a young child's ZPD.

A final study in this section gives a perspective of student growth over time when meaningful interaction in a collaborative community is established in the classroom. In a qualitative observation study of a Japanese foreign language elementary program in Pennsylvania, Takahashi (1998) explored how K-4$^{th}$ grade students' interaction changes over time and how it contributes to their language

development. Two classes were observed at one year intervals for three years. The analysis of observation transcripts showed that students clearly benefited from scaffolding provided by both teachers and peers in the ZPD, enabling them to achieve more language interaction than they could individually. It also indicated that the students' ability to provide support and scaffolding to one another also increased over time, and that they eventually were able to scaffold each other without the teacher's involvement. Interestingly, the students used phrases they had heard the teacher use in their scaffolding of each other. This gives compelling evidence of the co-construction of learning in a language classroom and underlines the importance of the teacher's vigilant efforts to facilitate collaboration in the learning community.

**Listening.** Recognizing the importance of engaging students with comprehensible input in the learning community of the classroom, it is important to also examine the strategies which help students actively listen to that input. In a meta-analysis of second language listening comprehension research, Vandergrift (2007) notes that beginning level language learners are limited in their ability to process the input they hear, and they need to consciously focus on listening in order to benefit from the exposure. Given that young language learners are only beginning to develop listening skills in their first language, it follows that they would also require scaffolding in listening in the foreign language classroom, where listening can be an overwhelming experience. A mixed method study by Goh & Taib (2006) involving ten older primary school students learning English in Singapore sought to identify students' metacognitive knowledge of listening and to determine the

perceived usefulness of the strategies for listening they were taught as well as its impact on listening test scores. The results showed that all students perceived an improvement in their listening skills after the strategy lessons and also improved their actual scores. They reported a wider range of listening strategies than before the instruction. In a similar qualitative study of 4th-6th grade beginning level French students in Canada, Vandergrift (2002) used reflection questionnaires to gather evidence of student understanding of the process of listening and effective strategies for comprehension. He concludes that self-reflection raised awareness of what is required to listen successfully and helped them to identify goals for future listening. Although the two studies involved slightly older learners than those in early primary settings, the value of helping students become aware of their listening and to learn to focus on what they are hearing can be adapted to even the very young language learners. The teaching of listening strategies can increase the impact of comprehensible input and classroom interactions, and can also serve to build self-regulation in students' language learning, and raise the affective filter by giving students a sense of control over their learning success.

**Gestures.** As McCafferty (2002) notes, Vygotsky recognized the value of gesture in facilitating learning, as illustrated in even very young children learning the power of gesture to communicate needs to their caregivers. Gesture is an important element scaffolding comprehension in the beginning stages of language learning as well. This section first examines two studies in an adult context which speak to the

effectiveness of gesture in facilitating both social interactions as well as in language learning.

McCafferty investigated the role of gesture in social interactions to facilitate communication and creating ZPD's for language learning and teaching. He videotaped and analyzed two university student English language learners' use of gesture in interaction over 15 sessions. He found that language learners rely on gestures to help convey meaning, but also that the use of gestures in the interactions served to transform the interaction by giving the speakers problem solving tools to facilitate their communication. Although not directly informing instructional practice in primary language classrooms, this study provides valuable general evidence of gestures' facilitation of ZPDs in language learning within the socio-cultural framework.

Taking the examination of gestures into the classroom setting, a qualitative microanalysis by Lazaraton (2004) explored the role of teacher gestures in vocabulary explanations in the context of a university ESL classroom. The teacher was videotaped for 3 classes and the video was analyzed to determine the impact of gesture as part of the input. The teacher used gesture to facilitate comprehension in teaching and interaction and led the researcher to pose the question of why the use of gesture is not more widely studied as an obvious component of teacher input. The results relate to the current project by confirming the role of gesture as facilitator of meaning in language learning contexts, demonstrating their effectiveness in scaffolding comprehensibility in the input.

The previous studies examined the role of gestures in interaction, but gestures have also been shown to facilitate memorization of vocabulary. Two related studies shed light on the usefulness of iconic or representational gestures in foreign language vocabulary learning. The first examined the impact of enacted gestures on the vocabulary word learning in 20 Kindergarten aged French English language learners. Building upon earlier research on gestures in word memorization tasks, Tellier (2008) investigated the impact of performing gestures versus using pictures in the foreign language word memorization of 20 five year olds in France who had no knowledge of English. Children were divided into two groups and given equal exposure to the words, with one given vocabulary instruction using pictures and the other using enacted gestures. Assessments were given and qualitative data gathered to determine whether students were able to identify the word, produce the word, and retain it after a week. The results showed that while groups performed equally in the passive vocabulary learning (identifying the word), the gesture group was significantly more successful in producing the word and also in remembering it after a week, demonstrating the effectiveness of engaging both visual and motor modalities as a strategy for language learning.

The second study, undertaken by Macedonia, Müller and Friederici (2011), lends further evidence to this claim, but attempts to determine whether movement apart from meaning association could produce the same effect as movement which signifies meaning. In a qualitative study, 35 adult subjects were taught 92 nouns in an artificial language using either representational gestures or meaningless gestures.

Results of tests demonstrated a positive impact of representational gestures over meaningless gestures on memory. These findings were also confirmed by brain imaging data analysis in this study. The importance of these findings for foreign language classrooms is the strong evidence that vocabulary learning can be facilitated by the use of iconic gestures in instruction.

These studies indicate that the incorporation of gestures can not only facilitate interaction and scaffold comprehension in instruction, but can also be used as a "tool" to increase vocabulary retention, as well as increasing engagement and motivation if the gestures are perceived as fun to the students. However, while the importance of making input comprehensible has been established, Igarashi, Wudthayagorn, Donato & Tucker (2002) caution that the language teacher needs to guard against the overuse of gestures and other visual representations to convey meaning over too long a period, because ultimately this will impede language acquisition and growth in the ZPD if learners are focusing more on the non-linguistic cue than on the language itself. The effective use of scaffolding in second language learning leads to the gradual lessening of learning support as students gain proficiency, with the goal of helping them become increasingly independent and self-regulating in their learning, and language teachers must keep this progression in mind as they work to make the input comprehensible and facilitate growth in the ZPD, continually asking themselves what the child can learn next.

**Stories.** A powerful medium of natural and engaging input is the story. This section examines relevant studies of the use of stories in foreign language learning.

In Vygosky's framework, children are viewed as active meaning constructors, but Cameron (2001) notes that they can also mask true comprehension in their natural desire to please the teacher, so the teacher needs to be aware and consciously check for understanding.

In an experimental study of primary language learners in Spain, Cabrera (2001) sought to examine the effect of three common interactional modifications used by teachers on student comprehension in two linguistically simplified story presentations. Sixty students were randomly divided into two groups, with the control group listening to the stories with only oral input and the experimental group listening to the stories presented with the inclusion of planned repetitions, gestures, and comprehension checks. Analysis of quantitative test data revealed that students in performed significantly better on comprehension tests when they could benefit from these interactional modification to make the input from the story comprehensible. While this study shows the effectiveness of these scaffolding tools, Cameron (2001) adds an important caution: that young learners may be able to "follow" the meaning of a target language story through mental processing in their first language without benefiting from the target language input, because their attention is not focused on the language, but on the meaning. She suggests always extending a story activity with further language activities and repetitions that can focus on the language in the input.

Examining the use of story in language teaching further, a multiple case study by Li & Seedhouse (2010) explores the impact of a story-based approach which

incorporates Cameron's three stage task framework of Preparation, Core Activity and Follow Up (2001, p.32) on classroom interactions. The study analyzed transcripts from two classes of 10 year old language students in Taiwan, comparing interactions during a standard language lesson and a story based lesson. The results showed that during a standard lesson, there is more teacher-controlled interaction, but in the story based lesson there was a higher level of student participation, a higher incidence of student initiated interaction, and students received more exposure to unplanned discourse driven by the motivating purpose of the story format. This study supports the use of story in the context of sequenced language learning activities within a social-construct framework. Additionally, this study gives evidence to support the idea that strict teacher-led turn taking in language class interactions can impede the development of natural interactional skills, suggesting that the language classroom needs to include times of more spontaneous interaction in the target language.

In addition to providing opportunities for motivating student interactions, the use of stories can provide a positive and engaging environment with a low affective filter for increased language acquisition. The study of a story based project designed by Georgopoulou and Griva (2011) involving a class of Greek first graders learning English was designed to determine the effectiveness of the use of story on students' oral language development. The project used original stories developed using criteria from relevant research with student language level and interest in mind. The stories incorporated elements of a child's daily life and interests as well as humor to increase motivation and interest. The stories were kept short and were put in comic book form

with speech bubble dialogs to enable dramatization activities, and also contained common greetings and classroom language throughout the story along with repetitions of important vocabulary. Having prepared this story and accompanying lesson plans, the project was implemented over the course of a school year, beginning with a vocabulary learning stage before the story presentation lessons began. The students were given many varied opportunities to interact with the story including groups of students dramatizing the story for other classmates. Pre and post test data showed that the story project implementation had a positive effect on students' receptive and productive oral skills. Analysis of student interviews indicated a high level of positive attitudes and motivation from this kind of playful, interactive learning environment. This study further confirms the effectiveness of using story in the language classroom, and additionally serves as a valuable resource for the teacher who desires to create effective story lessons for young language learners by teachers.

The previous studies focused on the use of stories as language input and its impact on measures of comprehension, interaction and oral language development. This is developmentally appropriate, according to Cameron (2001), who observes that young language learners who are still developing literacy skills in their first language will find it easier to learn the target language through listening and speaking. However, a case study by Dlugosz (2000) questions this methodology of focusing exclusively on listening and speaking, by examining the potential value of exposing children to printed text along with stories, even before literacy skills are developed in their first language. The multimodal study involved pre-reading Polish Kindergarten

English language learners who were divided into control and experimental groups. The control group was given traditional instruction of listening and speaking using games, songs and drawing activities around the theme of a story. The experimental group received the same instruction, but during the activities was given exposure to the written text of the story and activities that involved various repetitions of reading the story together. The students were tested for long term retention after 10 months and it was shown that the group with the written text exposure showed higher increases in both understanding (receptive language) and speaking (productive language), and additionally demonstrated the ability to read words from the studied text. He suggests that the increases may be due to engaging two channels of perception when text is used, thus increasing the power of the input and facilitating long term memory storage. He also proposes that the presence of text helps students isolate individual words in oral language input, thus facilitating comprehension and production skills. Repetition was also noted to be an effective component of the lesson format. The study provides evidence that foreign language instruction can benefit from the inclusion of written text and reading activities because they contribute to the goal of making the input comprehensible and scaffolding language acquisition in the ZPD.

A final study in the area of using story in effective language teaching examines the effect of using nursery rhymes, a unique form of brief story, on students' phonemic awareness and reading development in the foreign language. Building on research in first language literacy development on the effectiveness of

nursery rhymes in increasing phonemic awareness and reading readiness, Baleghizadeh and Dargahi (2010) implemented an experimental study of 20 young Iranian English language learners, aged 7 to 9, dividing them into control and experimental groups to examine the impact of using nursery rhymes on the learning of letter sounds and reading ability in the foreign language. The control group was taught the letter sounds using traditional explicit instruction of letter sounds with reading practice using pictures. The experimental group used nursery rhymes as a context for the words and target sounds of the lesson. Post test scores revealed that students in the nursery rhyme group scored higher than the control group on reading ability and appropriate sound pattern production. The students were also observed to display high motivation and positive participation in the nursery rhyme group. The results suggest that nursery rhymes, in addition to conventional stories, can be an effective strategy for language learning and literacy development as well as a motivating source of comprehensible input.

**Songs.** Another way to provide a source of engaging input for young language learners is the use of songs in the target language. Paquette and Reig (2008) observe that children's earliest exposure to patterned text in their first language occurs in songs, rhymes and chants, and that exposure to this kind of language in the target language can also prepare learners for more complex second language exposure. They also note that social bonds are formed through music, implying its usefulness in creating an interactive language learning community. But it is important to review the research to examine how and if the use of songs facilitates

language learning beyond the enjoyment factor, to establish its effectiveness for instruction.

In an effort to provide empirical evidence for the facilitation effect of music in foreign language phrase learning, Ludke, Ferreira and Overy (2013) conducted an experimental study in England with 60 recruited adult subjects who listened to 15 minutes of Hungarian phrases paired with English translations in audio tape format under three variable conditions. One group heard the phrases spoken normally, one group heard the phrases spoken rhythmically, and the third group heard the phrases sung. All groups were given prompts to repeat the Hungarian phrases. Five tests measured receptive and productive phrase recall, and the results showed that the singing group performed better in four of the five tests and equal with the speaking group on the other test. These results indicate that songs can be an effective medium for facilitating recall and production of the language, but this study measured this impact in a laboratory setting, and these conclusions need to be further explored by studies conducted in the setting of classroom language learning.

The next study brings the examination of impact of songs in language learning into the classroom context. Jarvis (2013) studied 12 young beginning French learners in a qualitative study to determine the impact of the use of songs and rhymes in vocabulary learning as compared to the use of flash cards. Post test results indicated improved vocabulary learning when songs and rhymes were used as compared to flash cards. Questionnaire data indicated a higher degree of enjoyment and motivation when songs were used, indicating that songs are an effective source of input for

acquisition and contribute to a low affective filter and a motivational environment for learning.

Adding to the evidence that songs facilitate vocabulary acquisition in classroom settings, Legg (2009) sought to determine whether vocabulary phrases are learned more quickly using songs as opposed to conventional word games or reading review. His experimental study in England involved 62 French language learners, aged 12-13 divided into two groups. The control group studied phrases from a French poem text, receiving traditional teaching practices of re-reads and word games while the experimental group learned and practices the phrases in a song version of the poem over the same number of lessons. Analyzing the pre and post test data, he concluded that the music group learned the phrases more quickly and securely indicating a facilitative effect of using music to learn vocabulary phrases.

Although making language gains more quickly is a worthy goal, the final study of this section provides a perspective on the reality of the factor of time in the process of language learning and acquisition, especially in young children. In a qualitative study of a group of 25 Spanish students, aged 5-6, who were learning English, Coyle and Gracia (2014) examined the effects of using song based activities on vocabulary learning in 50 minute lessons over three days. The students heard the song seven times over the course of the three days and participated in additional review activities which focused on the five target vocabulary words in the song. The results of pre and post vocabulary tests showed that students made gains in receptive vocabulary acquisition, but less pronounced gains in productive vocabulary

acquisition. It was suggested in the discussion that this may be due to what Krashen refers to as the "silent period" in language acquisition, in which learners need time to absorb the input before being ready to produce language. It also demonstrated that in the span of three days and three lessons, a teacher cannot realistically expect that young students will be producing much language. An interesting finding from this study is that the results of a second posttest five weeks later showed significant additional improvement in receptive language vocabulary acquisition even though the song and vocabulary were not reviewed again in that time. The authors suggest that this is related to research indicating that children need time for input to "sink in" and become integrated into their existing knowledge. Along with adding to the evidence from the first two studies of the effectiveness of using music to facilitate language learning by providing comprehensible input along with creating a positive emotional environment for the social construction of language learning within Vygotsky's theoretical framework, this study suggests that expecting too much acquisition too soon ignores the realities of the time required for the process of language acquisition in children.

**Games.** This final section of the review of literature relevant to the project goal of identifying research based strategies for providing comprehensible input in an interactive learning context examines the role of games and playing in the learning process of children. Drawing on her teaching experiences in pre-primary classrooms in Portugal and data collected from ongoing research projects, Mourão (2014) examines the power of play in early language learning contexts. She begins by

making a strong case for play as learning in Vygotsky's framework of social construct of learning as a source of development in the ZPD, as children practice and explore interactions in meaningful contexts. She discusses preliminary observations of a research project involving eight Portuguese pre-primary language teachers who set up carefully planned English learning centers in their classrooms to promote opportunities for language development in the context of child "free play." These centers were designed to promote language use during a portion of the language lesson time, using materials such as puppets for role plays, flashcards for interactive games, and story areas for literacy development. In surveys, teachers reported that as students played in these centers, they re-enacted English lessons using phrases the teachers used in lessons, sang songs learned in lessons, played familiar classroom games together, provided scaffolding for each other with corrections and reminders of words, and actively used language they had acquired from classroom activities, showing a high level of engagement and motivation as they attempted to play together in the target language. She emphasizes the careful planning, preparation and conscious teaching of interactive phrases required to ensure comprehensibility and maximum language growth in the child's ZPD in these learning centers. This suggests that part of the co-construction of learning within the zone of proximal development in early language classrooms involves the planned inclusion of opportunities for child-initiated interaction in play-based games and activities.

Offering further empirical evidence to the effectiveness of play with slightly older learners, a mixed methods study by Griva and Semoglou (2012) involving 44

second grade language learners in Greece sought to examine the effect of multisensory game based language activities on oral skill development. The control group received traditional classroom instruction methods involving presentation, practice and production of target words and phrases several times a week over 16 weeks. But the experimental group was instructed during that period using interactive and role play games along with physical activities to create a playful context for learning. Pre- and post- test measurements of comprehension and production showed greater gains for the game based instruction group in every measure. Evidence from collected journal data showed high interest and enthusiasm in the game group, as well as increased student interaction and participation, even by more shy and less confident students. These findings give evidence that the inclusion of games is effective in supporting children's interactive language growth and supports the inclusion of this strategy in effective practice for language teachers.

Additionally, the importance of providing children with necessary opportunities to practice vocabulary in a variety of contexts was the expressed motivation for a quasi- experimental study by Tuan (2012) to examine the effect of games on vocabulary recollection. Seven year old English language learners in Vietnam were divided into an experimental group of 32 students who received vocabulary instruction that included review using games and a control group of 31 students who received instruction that included review in the form of traditional exercises. Results of pre- and post-tests and a delayed post-test showed that the experimental group scored higher in vocabulary recall in both immediate and delayed

post-test assessments, indicating that games are an effective strategy for vocabulary review and internalization in language teaching practices.

Using games and play in the early language classroom is a developmentally appropriate and engaging way to provide comprehensible input with a lowered affective filter while providing genuine opportunities to construct meaning in social interaction within the ZPD. This section provides research evidence for the inclusion of play and games as an important strategy in this project.

**Summary**

Approaching the challenge of teaching young language learners from a social-construct framework with a focus on increasing comprehensible input requires that teachers provide a low anxiety, highly motivating environment as a context to engage students in meaningful interactions to achieve growth in their ZPD leading them to increasing independence and self-regulation in language learning and interaction. The review of the relevant research provided evidence of effective strategies to reach this goal.

Studies by Wu (2003) and Crichton (2009) demonstrate that several key strategies contribute to successful use of high levels of target language use in instruction along with high motivation and perceived competence in young learners, providing comprehensible input and a low affective filter to maximize learning. The key factors include a predictable learning environment with established routines involving the regular use of learned phrases, and moderately challenging tasks with

comprehension checks in a supportive interactional setting. The research focusing on interaction demonstrated that even young children benefit from a carefully created learning environment in which interaction and negotiation of meaning are collaborative and socially constructed (Antón, 1999; Takahashi, 1998; Toth, 2011).

Listening is a key component in language acquisition and research demonstrates that the explicit teaching of listening strategies to children increases student's sense of autonomy and competence to become successful language learners (Goh & Taib, 2006; Vandergrift, 2007).

One important way to make language input comprehensible is the use of gestures, which research shows to be an effective strategy to convey meaning and facilitate comprehension in the social construction of meaning (Lazaraton, 2004; MeCafferty, 2001) as well as to improve vocabulary learning and recall (Macedonia, Müller & Friederici, 2011; Tellier, 2008).

Another effective way to provide comprehensible target language input is through the medium of stories. Research indicates that the careful use of interactional modification such as repetitions, gestures and comprehension checks scaffolds comprehension in the use of stories (Cabrera, 2001). The use of stories was also shown to increase motivation and participation by students in meaningful classroom interactions (Georgopoulou & Griva, 2011; Li & Seedhouse, 2010). Additionally, the inclusion of written text in story based activities is shown to not only increase comprehension and language production, but also to increase reading skills in the target language (Dlugosz, 2000).

The use of the medium of songs in the language classroom promotes social bonds (Paquett & Reig, 2008) as it aids vocabulary learning and provides a positive atmosphere for learning (Coyle & Gracia, 2014). Additionally, research shows that using songs as a means for language learning improves performance in vocabulary testing more than instruction using only speaking or reading and the use of flash cards (Jarvis, 2013; Legg, 2009).

Finally, the use of games has been shown to increase gains in vocabulary learning (Tuan, 2012) and oral skill development (Griva & Semoglou, 2012) over more traditional teaching and practice activities. Additionally, games provide important opportunities for engagement in student-initiated interactions in a meaningful and motivating context (Murão, 2014).

**Conclusion**

Effective strategies for teaching young foreign language learners must contribute to the goal of providing high levels of comprehensible input, scaffolding comprehension, providing a positive, low stress atmosphere, with teacher and students co-constructing learning through meaningful social interactions. The research reviewed has provided evidence of the effectiveness several important strategy areas which are shown to contribute to this goal.

In creating a community of learning for very young learners with little knowledge of the target language, it is important to provide an environment of predictability and routine. Through the repetitions of language in these contexts,

students become comfortable with the predictable language of the routine, but have ample opportunities to construct learning in the ZPD through daily variations in lessons and activities. Comprehensibility is achieved through the strategic use of gestures, visuals and physical objects. It is important to teach functional phrases which will give students a target language "voice" in classroom interactions and use these regularly in meaningful exchanges to establish a learning environment with high target language use which is comprehensible.

Teachers can also help students become active and self-regulating learners in the classroom environment by conveying clear learning objectives in language activities, by providing students with specific listening strategies and by helping them notice important linguistic features of the target language when appropriate. Frequent and carefully planned student to student interaction opportunities will help students realize that they are active participants in their learning.

Throughout the literature the importance of establishing a playful and motivating environment was shown to increase achievement and meet the developmental needs of these young language learners. But it was also evident that there is more to the effective use of songs, stories and games than simply to "fill class time" and entertain children. These elements must be carefully placed in the context of well-designed activity sequences in order to achieve clear learning goals and truly contribute to language acquisition goals. When games, stories and songs are incorporated with scaffolding of comprehension, guided interaction and plenty of opportunities for repetition in meaningful contexts, they are effective for learning.

# Chapter Three: Project Description

## Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is increasing support in the U.S. and worldwide for foreign language instruction because it is recognized that if students are to be prepared for the challenges of living and working in a global community successfully, knowledge of other languages and cultures is essential, and this preparation is more effectively achieved in articulated programs that begin in the elementary grades (Rivers, Robinson, Harwood & Brecht, 2013). However, empirical studies determining the effectiveness of pedagogy in young language learners continue to be rare (Copland and Garton, 2014), with the greater emphasis placed on secondary level learners. Additionally, teacher preparation programs focus more often on secondary learning contexts (Rhodes, 2014), but younger learners require distinct instructional strategies based on their developmental needs. There is a clear need to equip teachers with knowledge of instructional practices shown to be effective for young learners, in order to achieve goals of higher proficiency in K-12 language programs.

This chapter describes a project which will provide elementary level language teachers with a handbook of research based strategies to contribute to their confidence and effectiveness in teaching young learners. First the project components will be examined, including the local context, objectives, project conception and project

elements. This section will be followed by sections discussing project evaluation, then project conclusions, and finally plans for implementation.

## Project Components

**Local Context.** In 2010, the Reeths-Puffer School District launched a K-12 World Language program which included Spanish instruction every other day for 36 minutes for all students in Kindergarten through 4th grade, with longer instructional periods in the older grades. Three full time elementary teachers were hired to develop curriculum and design and deliver instruction for this level, but due to the large numbers of elementary students, two additional teachers from older grade levels must be assigned each year to teach some sections of elementary along with their older students. This has meant that teachers who normally teach older learners are assigned, sometimes with only a few weeks or days until school starts, to teach very young learners without the preparation to do so effectively. The experiences of working with these teachers as well as the experiences which I and the other full time elementary level teachers have had in trying to determine best practice for our early elementary students clearly demonstrates to me the need for a concise resource of research based practices to assist teachers in delivering effective instruction to young learners.

**Objectives.** The objective of this project is to develop a handbook of research based strategies to be presented to new and current elementary level foreign language teachers in the Reeths-Puffer School District during a professional development

meeting at the beginning of the school year. The intention of the presentation of the strategies in the handbook is to increase teachers' knowledge and confidence in effective language instruction for young learners. More specifically, teachers will understand strategies to make common language learning activities such as using songs, games and stories in ways that research has shown to be effective. Teachers will understand how to create a learning environment in which target language is comprehensible and used in meaningful interactions and in which classroom activities maximize learning and student engagement. A broader objective is to support the creation of a strong K-12 language program by increasing the effectiveness of instruction at the foundational early elementary levels.

**Project Conception.** In many U.S. schools with elementary level foreign language programs, teachers are tasked with creating their own activities and lessons, and this has been my own experience. I have also seen it confirmed both by many of my language teacher colleagues and by the postings of elementary language teachers on professional online forums of which I am a part. A common question posed is how to use stories, games and songs more effectively in instruction and how to use higher levels of the target language with very beginning language learners. This led me to recognize the problem that elementary level teachers needed access to strategies specific to their needs.

There are many great sources for language teaching strategies available both in print and online, but my experience has been that most of these are focused on

traditional “Spanish 1” students, who are in Middle or High School, and a great deal of searching and sifting is required before finding strategies that are applicable to very young learners. There are also many resources for ESL and Immersion contexts of language learning and much can be learned from them, but the foreign language setting is distinct from each of these setting as well, involving less of a focus on content mastery and a more limited exposure to the target language.

My experiences with these challenges led me to conceptualize this project, as I saw the need for a concise compilation of strategies appropriate for young learner contexts that have been shown effective by research, to be used in the daily lesson planning of elementary foreign language classes.

As I began reviewing the research for this project, I observed that the problem extended into Europe and Asia as well, with early foreign language programs becoming mandatory in an increasing number of countries, and teachers finding themselves in need of specific strategies for teaching young learners. I also found that studies on early foreign language learning are relatively scarce, and that they are mostly emerging from the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in Europe and Asia. It was enlightening to learn of the challenged faced by my counterparts around the world and it made me realize the importance of this project both in my local context and also in the wider global context.

The strategy areas were chosen with my local context in mind, but also because they are common elements in early language learning which are too often

used ineffectively. Specific songs, stories and games are not included in the handbook because they are provided to teachers in their curriculum documents. The focus in the handbook is on strategies to implement these elements effectively instead of being a materials resource. I sought not only inform best practice, but also to place the practices within the theoretical framework of sociocultural theory, emphasizing the importance of interaction in constructing learning. As I reviewed the literature, I tried to keep the social construct and the learning community concepts at the forefront.

**Project Elements.** The handbook, included in Appendix A, is designed to be concise, because elementary teachers often have little time to prepare several lesson levels each day, and need a resource which is easy to use and accessible. The handbook is divided into seven sections so teachers can easily find the strategy area they need. Section 1 is a summary of the theoretical framework of the strategy presentation. This is followed by a section on foundational strategies to cultivate a community of learners. This important section gives strategies for setting up routines and procedures and for making target language use comprehensible in order to give students a safe and motivating environment to engage in language learning experiences. Section 3 presents strategies for creating opportunities for meaningful interaction in the classroom community. Section 4 presents strategies for using stories effectively for young language learners. Section 5 presents strategies for using songs in instruction and Section 6 presents strategies for using games. The final section includes the references for the strategies.

The handbook is designed to be used in the format of a professional development workshop, in which the strategies will be reviewed, explained, modeled and practiced to ensure understanding. The participants will then take and use their handbook in their daily lesson preparation as a guide for effective practice.

**Project Evaluation**

At the beginning of the session in which the handbook is presented, the pre-workshop questionnaire (Appendix B) will be administered and collected from the participants. The subjects will then be presented with the handbook and strategies will be taught and demonstrated. At the end of the session, the post-workshop questionnaire (Appendix C) will be administered and collected. Scores of pre and post workshop questionnaires will be calculated, inserted into an Excel document and then graphed to show changes in strategy knowledge and teacher confidence as a result of participants' experience with the handbook and workshop. The success of the project will be based on whether 60% of participants indicated an increase in confidence or strategy knowledge on the post workshop questionnaire.

**Project Conclusions**

The importance of students benefiting from extended language programs as a means to prepare them to participate more successfully in a global community was presented in Chapter 1 of this project. The success of K-12 language programs begins at the earliest levels. Teaching foreign languages to young learners can be powerful and effective when teachers are equipped with the strategies they need to make the

target language a meaningful means of communication in authentic interactions. The foreign language teaching context has a limited opportunity to provide exposure to the target language and it is important that teachers know how to maximize this opportunity in every class period.

The review of the research literature provided evidence of the effectiveness of several important strategies for teaching young language learners which were shown to provide high levels of comprehensible input, scaffolding of comprehension, a positive, low-stress atmosphere, and opportunities to construct learning through meaningful social interactions using the target language. Implementing the strategies will increase the effectiveness of instruction at the beginning levels of learning and contribute to the strength of the entire K-12 program. Although it is not an in-depth learning resource for teacher training, it is hoped that this project will contribute to these goals by providing teachers with an accessible toolbox for effective lesson planning.

In the creation of this project, it became evident that more research is needed to fully explore strategies which constitute best practice in the unique context of young learner foreign language classrooms. Studies from the Asian and European contexts have begun to increase, but studies particular to the U.S. young learner foreign language contexts are rare, and would contribute to the effectiveness of U.S. language programs. This project does not address the challenge of articulating the instructional transition from elementary programs to secondary programs, but

research into effective practice in that area would be of great value, ensuring that gains made at the elementary level are continued adequately.

**Plans for Implementation**

The project will be implemented in a half day workshop of new and current primary World Language teachers in the school district. This will involve approximately five teachers who will teach Kindergarten through fourth grade Spanish classes, and will be conducted in an informal and interactive way, encouraging active participation by the teachers in attendance. This workshop could be repeated in future years as necessary when new teachers are hired or placed in elementary positions.

During July, as plans are beginning to be worked out by district administrators for August professional development dates, I will propose and secure permission to present the strategy handbook as part of the World Language professional development on a date when all elementary teachers will be present. Then I will secure permission to use the pre and post workshop questionnaires from the Human Resources Department, and arrange for the room and equipment needed to hold the workshop as well as make all necessary copies of the handbook and questionnaires.

On the proposed date I will administer and collect the pre-workshop questionnaires, then distribute and present the handbook in the workshop. I will read and have discussion on the theoretical framework, introduce each Strategy area section and read through the strategies. I will also model some of the strategies, show any props or teaching materials that would illustrate the strategies, check for

understanding, answer questions and have participants create and practice examples of the strategies using components from our curriculum. Finally, I will administer the post workshop questionnaires and encourage participants to write comments at the end. In the following days I will score and analyze the results of the questionnaires to determine the success of the project.

Additionally, it is my hope that the strategies in the handbook will be part of ongoing professional development discussions, with additional opportunities throughout the school year to troubleshoot any difficulties experienced, brainstorm solutions, and generally support mutual success in teaching and learning in our elementary language program.

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# Appendix A

## Effective Strategies for Teaching Young Learners in Foreign Language Classrooms

# Effective Strategies for Teaching Young Learners in Foreign Language Classrooms

## Section 1 - The Theoretical Framework of the Strategies

The theoretical framework for this project is based on the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky and the second language acquisition theories developed by Krashen. Vygotsky contends that people learn and develop through social interaction. In this view, language is not merely a skill to be learned cognitively, but is also a tool that constructs thinking and helps the child develop. As Gibbons (2006) points out, this framework puts particular emphasis on the role of the teacher in a school setting as involved in a process of co-construction of students' thinking through language and carefully regulated social interaction. According to Vygotsky's theory, learning takes place in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Teachers in second language contexts carefully and intentionally arrange the environments to provide learning support, or scaffolding, in classroom interactions, facilitating comprehension in contexts just beyond a child's current achievement level in order to bring about learning within the ZPD (Gibbons, 2006).

The Language Acquisition theory developed by Stephen Krashen (1982) includes two hypotheses which additionally inform the framework of this project. They are the concept of Comprehensible Input and the concept of the Affective Filter. Krashen proposes that language acquisition occurs naturally when sufficient comprehensible input of language is provided to activate the innate capacity of all humans to learn languages. He emphasizes the comprehensibility of the language input as essential for the acquisition to take place, which means that teachers of beginning second language learners must not simply talk to the learners in the target language, but must design interactions with comprehensibility in mind. Krashen also asserts that states of anxiety, emotional threat and disinterest impede acquisition of the input through what he terms the Affective Filter. From this idea it can be concluded that students learn languages best when they are feeling successful, interested and unthreatened. The goal of the language teacher is to create such an environment, and the strategies which follow will contribute to this goal.

But there have also been more recent findings in the field of second language acquisition which add important additions to this framework. A follow up to a longitudinal study of young learners by Lightbown, Halter, White & Horst (2002) reveals that while comprehension based instruction is effective for helping beginning level students gain proficiency, it can result in students failing to notice features of the target language which would increase their accuracy in areas other than listening, suggesting that some instruction which focuses on language form should be included. Cameron (2001) and Lightbown & Spada (2006) support the conclusion that students will benefit by being taught to notice forms and salient cues in the target language. Although very young language learners have not sufficiently developed their cognitive maturity and linguistic awareness to engage in formal grammar study (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), the concept of comprehensible input combined with guidance to learn to notice language features when appropriate describes how young learners can successfully begin to gain proficiency in the target language in instructed language settings.

In conclusion, the instructional practices outlined in this project will provide teachers with practical ideas to create a learning community with high target language use, where language learning will be co-constructed through social interaction and with appropriate scaffolding to ensure comprehensibility within a positive emotional climate so that acquisition can take place. The strategies will provide for learning within the ZPD to ensure that learners are challenged and motivated to become increasingly self-regulating in language learning.

## Section 2 – Foundational Strategies for Cultivating a Community of Language Learners

Young language learners respond positively to a warm atmosphere where they feel like a valuable member of the learning community. In the foreign language classroom, creating this kind of environment is challenging because of students' beginning language skills, so teachers need to use strategies to scaffold comprehension of the target language and help students engage in the learning. This requires perseverance and commitment, but the results are worth it as teacher and students begin to interact meaningfully in the target language and the classroom becomes a true community of language learning. This section outlines some foundational strategies supported by research to establish the learning environment with these goals in mind, beginning with strategies for facilitating comprehension, followed by strategies for routines and classroom practices.

**Facilitating Comprehension** (Cameron, 2001; Crichton, 2009; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010; Vandergrift, 2002; Wu, 2003)

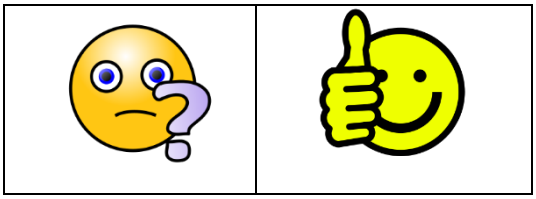
- Create an **expectation** that students will listen and engage from the first day. Talk about what to expect and how to understand even when they don't know all the words you are saying.

- Speak simply and directly; use **gestures** and **visuals** to help students understand. **Repetition** gives students further processing time. Model each step of directions. These concepts will be addressed in multiple ways in the sections ahead.

- Avoid cognitive **overload** by focusing on only a few phrases at a time. Provide for many repetitions and opportunities to use the phrases before expecting that students know the phrases.

- **Check for comprehension** frequently. Teach students a signal to let you know they understand what you mean and also give them a safe way to express that they are not clear about what you mean. They can give a thumbs up, thumbs to the middle or thumbs down to signal their level of comprehension. Be aware that children want to please and will sometime say they understand when they do not. Having students "turn and talk" to **process**

with a partner (discussed in the next section) then report their understanding can be a more sure way for complicated things like instructions. Or you can also create **visuals** for students to respond to when they do not understand or when they do. The examples below have images from www.openclipart.org, which is a good source of free images authorized for reuse.



- Teach students **active listening** practices. Prepare students for listening by reviewing key vocabulary and give them something to listen for. Help them process strategies for using context clues, watching gestures, listen for repeated words, and making predictions. Ask questions like "What helped you understand?" and "How did you figure out what that word meant?" (Vandergrift, 2002).

- Assign **gestures** which connect to the meaning of key words and phrases, or, when possible, have students assign a gesture. These gestures not only add an element of fun and physical movement, but have been shown to increase active vocabulary learning (Tellier, 2008).

**Routines and Classroom Practices** (Cameron, 2001; Crichton, 2009; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010; Wu, 2003)

- Always **greet** students in the target language and teach them ways they can answer you appropriately. This helps to create the warm environment essential for learning and sets the expectation for target language use in the classroom. Begin each class with a special song or **signal** that instruction will begin and then follow a predictable routine, which is especially important for very young learners (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

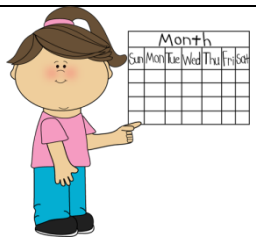
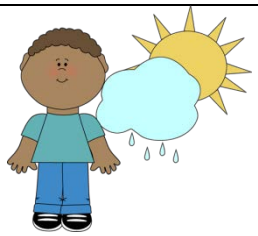
- Post and present clear and simple **learning goals** at the beginning of every class. At the end of class, check the learning goal again and ask students if they met that goal. This self-evaluation helps students understand that they

are expected to learn and improve toward a goal during their time in Spanish, promoting self-regulation in learning (Cameron, 2001).

- Teach, model and practice clear **procedures** and expectations for entering, sitting, moving to tables or rug, lining up, and leaving. If these are established firmly, there will be more opportunity to stay in the target language because students will be familiar with what to do and they will more readily understand the language used to manage these transitions.

- Put your **behavior management** phrases into the target language, and use visuals to make it comprehensible. These need to be practiced and kept consistent. Include a way to regain attention during interaction activities which can get noisy, such as shaking a maraca. Practice this until students respond with complete attention and quiet.

- Practice classroom language by using **student helpers** for routine activities. This creates a sense of community and makes students feel valued and important, and internalizes language used through repetition (Cameron, 2001). Keep track of turns on a class list. Create **visuals or a chart** for displaying the students' name by each job. I created the following example with images from [www.mycutegraphics.com](http://www.mycutegraphics.com), which is a great source of free images authorized for reuse.

<table>
<tr>
<td>  <br>Lapices y crayones</td>
<td>  <br>Calendario</td>
<td>  <br>Reporte del Tiempo</td>
</tr>
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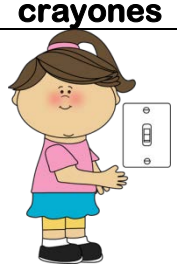
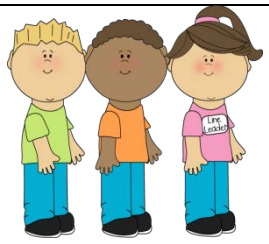
<td>  <br>La luz</td>
<td>  <br>La puerta</td>
<td>  <br>Lider de la fila</td>
</tr>
</table>

## Section 2 – Strategies for Facilitating Interaction

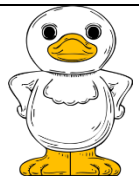
Interaction is at the heart of a language learning classroom. The strategies below address effective ways to help beginning level young learners engage in meaningful exchanges of information, both with the teacher and with each other (Antón, 1999; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010; Ellis & Heimback, 1997; Takahashi, 1998).

- At very beginning levels, formulate interactions which allow students to respond with simply **pointing,** indicating **yes/no** or giving them **either/or** choices. Students need time to absorb input before being able to produce target language answers.

- The teacher's use of **puppets** can be a very motivating strategy for young learners, provided the puppets talk to the students and "only understand Spanish." Puppets can also be used to model target language interactions with the teacher (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

- Teach **functional phrases** that students can use to participate in class activities and interactions (Crichton, 2009). Practice them with gestures or visuals, display them for frequent review, and communicate that you expect students to use them. These phrases will gradually become part of the natural language use in the classroom. Examples are:
    - Greetings and responses to "how are you'?
    - Simple contrasting word pairs for responding, like *yes/no, good/bad, happy/sad, big/small, please/thank you*
    - Requests for routine things like going to the bathroom, sharpening a pencil, getting a tissue, getting a drink
    - Question words
    - Commands which are regularly used: *stand up, sit down, walk, take, put, write, say, stop, etc.*
    - Teaching words like: *repeat please, just a minute, quiet please, listen, look*, etc.
    - Clarification phrases for use with you and each other, such as *I don't know, repeat please, Can you help me? What is this? How do you say__?*

Making **visuals** for these phrases and posting them in the classroom helps students recall and use them. The following examples were created using graphics from www.openclipart.com which is an excellent source of free graphics which are authorized for reuse.

| | |
|---|---|
|   ¡PAREN! |  Siéntate |
|  ¿Repita, por favor? |  Levántate |
| ¿Me puede ayudar?   |  ¿Puedo tomar agua? |

- Have **students create** classroom object and phrase visuals for display to give them ownership of the phrases (Vale, 1995). They can be posted in the Spanish classroom or be used to bring the target language into their regular classroom.

- As part of each lesson, create an opportunity for **personalized** "spontaneous" conversation (Crichton, 2009). Engage students in talking about themselves, the weather, or the things going on in the school using the target language. For very young students this may simply be pointing out the color of someone's shoes or shirt or whether they are happy or sad today or who has lost a tooth. This will build community and provide valuable experiences in meaningful interaction in the target language.

- Encourage participation in interactions by **graphing** responses to questions about preferences (Do you like bananas or grapes?) or clothing (Are you wearing shoes or boots?) or age. This motivates students to say their phrase to add to the graph and reinforces math concepts.

- Provide the **scaffolding** necessary to help students communicate successfully by first using yes/no or either/or choices. Include the group in the processing of responses, asking whether it is correct or not, which helps all students realize their involvement in the learning (Ellis & Heimback, 1997).

- **Focus on meaning** and don't focus on correcting pronunciation and form unless the meaning is obscured. Use a correct rephrasing of the answer when it flows in the natural communication (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

- Be generous with **praise** in their attempts to use the target language. Teach complimentary phrases for students to use to encourage communication attempts, such as *¡Bravo!* or *¡Muy bien!*

- Create and insist on an **emotionally safe** environment in which to make mistakes. Ridicule or teasing must be absolutely forbidden in order for students to take risks in language production.

- Provide opportunities for students to negotiate and process meaning in **groups** and **pairs**. This has been shown to benefit even the students who only listen to the interactions as it provides powerful **peer collaboration** in scaffolding comprehension (Ellis & Heimback, 1997).

- In addition to the natural groupings at tables or when seated on the rug, establish **language partners** and **groups** at the beginning of the year in order to add variety to interactional contexts. These can have the names of Spanish speaking countries, or numbers on a clock or colors. Teach expectations and phrases to facilitate collaborative scaffolding.

- Distribute small student **puppets** to encourage participation in simple interactions such as greeting and asking what someone's name is (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010). Student puppets can be made inexpensively from socks with eyes drawn on them.

- Have **students create** simple **paper puppets or stick puppets** related to a theme, song, or story, and have them use the puppets for interaction to practice target phrases. Use the target language to create the puppet also (Vale, 1995).

- When students are interacting as a group, less rigid **turn-taking practices** on the part of the teacher lead to more participation in interactions and greater spontaneous peer collaboration (Li & Seedhouse, 2010).

- Use shared **school events** and **birthdays** as opportunities to engage in meaningful class interaction (Cameron, 2001). With modeling and scaffolding, students could be led to ask questions such as what another student will do or receive on his birthday, or whether they are going to the carnival and with whom, etc.

## Section 4 – Strategies for Using Stories

Stories are an engaging and powerful form of target language input. Planned and careful inclusion of stories with young language learner can contribute not only to language growth, but to literacy skill development. Stories are useful for bringing new language contexts into the foreign language classroom (Cameron, 2001).

- Scaffold comprehension in story reading and telling by the use of **gestures**, **repetitions,** and **comprehension checks** as well as by using visual illustrations when possible (Cabrera, 2001).

- Use stories in the form of short **nursery rhymes** to develop phonemic awareness and to develop beginning reading skills (Baleghizadeh & Dargahi, 2010).

- Include the **printed words** when reading and telling a story to facilitate word recognition and reading skills development (Dlugosz, 2000).

- Provide opportunities for students to **dramatize** the stories, either by simple acting or by creating dialogues for speaking (Georgopoulou & Griva, 2011).

- Choose stories that are **highly predictable** and have **recurring phrases**, such as folk tales and traditional stories (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

Using a story in foreign language instruction is most effective when it is part of a **sequence of activities** which help build students' comprehension and provide them with sufficient practice to learn the language in the story. Cameron (2001, p 32) suggests this sequence in designing instruction using not only stories, but also songs:


- Suggested strategies for the **Preparation** (Li & Seedhouse, 2010)
    - Teach important vocabulary
    - Activate background knowledge to connect with the story

  - Use puppets or props to arouse interest

- Suggested strategies for the **Core Activity,** reading the book or telling the story (Cabrera, 2001)
  - Scaffold comprehension using gestures
  - Include repetition of important phrases
  - Build in frequent comprehension checks
  - Involve students in the story whenever possible
  - Read short stories a second time to give another chance to process the language

- Suggested strategies for **Follow Up**, which can be continued over several classes (Cameron, 2001, Li & Seedhouse, 2010)
  - Allow students to respond to the story verbally
  - Use questioning to clarify comprehension of the story
  - Draw a picture of the story
  - Label vocabulary
  - Use the vocabulary in a game
  - Act out the story
  - Draw story sequence cards and label them with words or phrases.
  - Use student collaboration to create an alternative ending or version of the story

- Create **original custom stories** based on your students' interests and learned phrases, and use them as the basis of teaching through activities that follow this sequence of Preparation, Core Activity and Follow Up. Students respond positively to connections to their lives and humor (Georgopoulou & Griva, 2011).

- Create **lift the flap** books and other classroom created books from story variations using learned vocabulary and repeated target phrases for prepositions such as "Is the elephant under the table?" "No, the pencil is under the table." The final page finally reveals the answer. Each student makes one page and they can then be bound together to put in their classroom library for further review (Vale, 1995).

## Section 5 – Strategies for Using Songs

Songs are an important element in young learner classrooms because they encourage social bonding ((Paquette & Rieg, 2008) and provide opportunities for extended production of the target language, even before the meaning is completely grasped. Songs have been shown to facilitate vocabulary learning and increase motivation.

- If the song has no accompanying video, provide **visuals** to scaffold meaning (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

- Add **gestures and movement** to the song to encourage participation even before the words are learned (Coyle & Gracia, 2014).

- Effective use of a song involves a **sequence** of guided activities to facilitate comprehension. Teach key vocabulary and have students listen for those words. Teach a repeating chorus first, and then have students participate that while listening to the rest of the song (Paquette & Reig, 2008).

- **Repetition** of songs over several class periods is essential for students to internalize the language (Coyle & Gracia, 2014).

- Sing traditional songs and **finger plays** from the target language to engage young learners and expose them to the target culture (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

- Translate/adapt **familiar children's songs** from English into the target language (Vale, 1995).

- Use **questions** to help students process the meaning of the language in the song, using simple yes/no, either/or questions, or questions which respond to the words in the song. Have students complete unfinished lines as you say or sing them (Coyle & Gracia, 2014).

- For reading students, print out words to the song to use for **choral reading** practice. Doing this several times helps students distinguish words and learn them (Paquette & Rieg, 2008).

- Have students invent **alternate versions** of songs, replacing key words with other words they know. This gives students ownership of the language in the song and increases motivation, especially when it becomes funny (Coyle & Gracia, 2014).

- Have students draw a **picture** or visual representation of the song (Paquette & Rieg, 2008).

- Put target language **phrases into simple or familiar melodies** for use in transitions, such as cleaning up, lining up, and sitting down. These phrases will be memorized and internalized more quickly (Legg, 2009).

- **Chants** are a form of song, and can be effectively used for learning functional phrases, procedures, expectations, and even stories. They can be practiced with rhythmic clapping and in echo format for further variation (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

## Section 6 – Strategies for Using Games

Games are useful for creating a motivating and interactive learning environment with a low affective filter. Additionally they have been shown to be an effective way to practice and learn essential vocabulary by giving opportunity for additional processing and production. Properly designed, games can also be a valuable motivation for collaborative scaffolding and use of the target language (Tuan, 2012), but careful preparation of the activities is required to ensure that the target language is necessary for completion of the game (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

- **Total Physical Response** (TPR) is a technique first developed by James Asher which feels like a game to most students. The teacher gives commands involving familiar vocabulary such as body parts, classroom objects or props, and students respond with an action, similar to Simon Says. Examples are "touch your nose. Turn around two times. Pick up your pencil, etc. (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010). This is also an appropriate activity for times when students have been sitting and listening for a while and need to move.

- **Listen and draw** or **listen and make** games involve students drawing or sculpting with play dough the vocabulary word you say (Vale 1995).

- **Guessing games** with vocabulary can be created easily with the Smart board. Hide a picture of an object behind pictures of target vocabulary and students guess by naming a picture to look behind.

- Show students a quantity of objects and practice numbers by eliciting **estimates** from students of how many there are (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2010).

- When students have learned descriptive phrases, play an "**I Spy**" game by describing something in the room or in a picture and have students guess what it is. Or have students ask the questions and play a game like "**20 Questions**."

- Students can play a **matching game** by matching words with pictures, either on the Smart board by dragging the word to the picture or with student game cards at tables.

- Students can play a drawing game by rolling a **dice** and assigning focus vocabulary such as a part of the body, part of the house, etc. to each of the six numbers. When students roll that number, they draw the word (Vale, 1995).

- Teacher or older students can prepare **riddles** by creating a few comprehensible sentences describing an object. Reveal sentences one at a time and have students guess what is being described.

- Games that involve **role playing** can be a motivating context for target language use. Have students act out buying and selling, the events in a story, packing for a vacation, or ordering food in a restaurant (Griva & Simoglou, 2012).

- Allowing young learners time to play independently with puppets or familiar classroom games gives them the opportunity to **imitate** target language use they have learned in the classroom (Murão, 2014)

- Teach students to practice games like **rock-paper-scissors** in the target language to decide who goes first.

The following games require the creation of **student sets of picture or word card**s with target vocabulary on them. These card sets can be laminated and stored in zip bags for reuse.

- A game very young students can play to practice target vocabulary is one I call "**Show Me**." Students have sets of cards and I ask them to show me one, and they find it, pick it up, and show me. A helpful variation of this is "Show Your Friend" in which student work in pairs to benefit from peer collaboration as their cards must match each other's card.

- Using picture cards, ask students to **listen and put** the correct vocabulary card in the correct place on the game board or grid (Cameron, 2001). Examples are put a clothing item on a board showing places in the house, or put school objects on a board showing places in the school.

- Student card sets can be combined to play a "**Go Fish**" game for older learners. Teach phrases for turn taking and asking for each item to ensure target language use (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

- Sets of vocabulary cards such as animals or clothing can also be **sorted** according to certain characteristics, which either the teacher gives, or students invent in groups or pairs. Examples could be winter or summer clothing or animals that live in the water or on land.

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# Appendix B

Pre-Test Questionnaire

For the Professional Development Workshop

Created by Brenda Bryson

# Pre Workshop Questionnaire

Please respond to the statements below using the following scale:

1 - Strongly disagree

2 - Disagree

3 – Unsure

4 - Agree

5 - Strongly agree

**Please circle only one answer.**

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I feel prepared to teach young language learners using the target language most of the time. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 2. I know how to clarify meaning to my young foreign language learners without using English. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 3. I know how to use songs to increase motivation and learning for my students. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 4. I know how to use the target language for classroom management and routines. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 5. I know how to use games to motivate learning in the target language with young learners. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 6. I know how to use stories effectively to engage students in meaningful target language use. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 7. I know how to use target language questioning and support to facilitate meaningful interactions between myself and students. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 8. I know how to use physical movement and gestures to increase motivation and comprehension. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 9. I know how to create activities in which students are able to interact with each other in meaningful exchanges of information. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 10. I know how to sequence activities to use stories or songs to teach language skills to my young students. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |

# Appendix C

Post-Test Questionnaire

For the Professional Development Workshop

Created by Brenda Bryson

# POST Workshop Questionnaire

Please respond to the statements below using the following scale:

1 - Strongly disagree

2 - Disagree

3 – Unsure

4 - Agree

5 - Strongly agree

**Please circle only one answer.**

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I feel prepared to teach young language learners using the target language most of the time. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 2. I know how to clarify meaning to my young foreign language learners without using English. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 3. I know how to use songs to increase motivation and learning for my students. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 4. I know how to use the target language for classroom management and routines. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 5. I know how to use games to motivate learning in the target language with young learners. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 6. I know how to use stories effectively to engage students in meaningful target language use. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 7. I know how to use target language questioning and support to facilitate meaningful interactions between teacher and students. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 8. I know how to use physical movement and gestures to increase motivation and comprehension. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 9. I know how to create activities in which students are able to interact with each other in meaningful exchanges of information. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 10. I know how to sequence activities to use stories or songs to teach language skills to my young students. | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |

**Please write any additional comments about the handbook or presentation below:**

**GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY**

**ED 693 Data Form**

**NAME:** Brenda Bryson

**MAJOR:** (Choose only 1)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| _____ Adult & Higher Ed | _____ Ed Differentiation | _____ Library Media |
| _____Advanced Content Spec | _____ Ed Leadership | _____Middle Level Ed |
| _____ Cognitive Impairment | _____ Ed Technology | _____Reading |
| _____CSAL | _____Elementary Ed | _____School Counseling |
| _____Early Childhood | _____ Emotional Impairment | _____Secondary Level Ed |
| _____ ECDD | _____ Learning Disabilities | _____ Special Ed Admin |
| | | __X__ TESOL |

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**PAPER TYPE:** Project **SEM/YR COMPLETED:** Spring/Summer 2014

**SUPERVISOR'S SIGNATURE OF APPROVAL**_____

Using key words or phrases, choose several ERIC descriptors (5 - 7 minimum) to describe the contents of your project. ERIC descriptors can be found online at http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=Thesaurus&_nfls=false

| | |
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| 1. Foreign Language Teaching | 6. Elementary Education |
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| 3. Second Language Acquisition | 8. |
| 4. Teaching Strategies | 9. |
| 5. Professional Development | 10. |