On the occasion of NNELL’s 25th anniversary, I looked into a bit of its past and sent interview questions to those early leaders that could be reached.

The Founding

It was November 1986. An ACTFL Conference in Dallas brought them together at a networking session for early language programs. These professionals were lamenting: elementary schools interested in foreign language programs had no network for support. So our Founding Mothers decided to do something about it.

Nancy Rhodes said, “The Center for Applied Linguistics organized and hosted the planning meeting in January, 1987 at CAL’s offices in Washington, D.C. Twenty-five educators from 16 states met, most of whom came from out of town at their own expense. “It was like a pajama party at my house,” Mimi Met said, “and the excitement was palpable.”

At the end of the two-day meeting, the National Network for Early Language Learning was born. The Executive Committee that came out of that meeting included Carolyn Andrade, Diane Ging, Mari Haas, Nancy Hess, Melanie Klutts, Gladys Lipton, Kathleen Riordan, Nancy Rhodes and Marcia Rosenbusch. Marcia said, “I had just finished my Ph.D in 1986 and had focused my dissertation on the topic of second language learning in young children. I presented my findings at the ACTFL Conference in Dallas, Texas, in November 1986 at which we decided that an organization such as NNELL was needed.”

The Early Days

Kathy Riordan looked back on those early days: “I think that the concept of a network encouraged teachers, usually with little administrative support, to be changemakers.”

Carol Ann (Pesola) Dahlberg, co-author of Languages and Children: Making the Match, said, “Visibility for early language programs was relatively low. NNELL gave us a focal point for the passion we shared for early languages in the early years.”

At that time, Nancy Rhodes, Mimi Met, Carol Ann (Pesola) Dahlberg, Helena Curtain and others were instrumental in providing professional development opportunities for districts across North Carolina. “That helped us establish strong programs,” Mary Lynn Redmond recalled. As more and more states were included in the network, NNELL also began to sponsor networking sessions at conferences across the country. Mary Lynn said, “NNELL began as a grassroots organization and I think this is the beauty of the organization.”

Mimi Met recalled that “when ACTFL first scheduled sessions for us to share materials or information, about seven or eight of us showed up. One way we knew NNELL was a success was when the annual Swap Shop breakfast at ACTFL sold out at 250 tickets.”

Publications Emerge

by Janet Glass
In the spring of 1989, NNELL produced the first volume of a publication, FLES News. This newsletter helped to create cohesion among participants. It also served to disseminate information to a growing body of NNELL members. In the fall of 1995, NNELL transitioned from a newsletter to a refereed journal entitled, Learning Languages. One of our Founding Mothers, Marcia Rosenbusch, was the first editor of FLES News. She then became the founding editor of the journal.

Marcia remarked, “I think having a journal was a strong visible reminder of the organization and its work.”

Carol Ann said, “Planning for a journal, and eventually for a refereed portion of the journal, helped to include pre-kindergarten home, I wrote a position paper that expressed the idea that “NNELL is poised to play a very important role in the future of language education in the United States.” Nancy Rhodes suggested, “Because of the economic recession, many schools and districts have cut their language programs. Compounding this, No Child Left Behind has hurt languages as math and reading have dominated the resources. This has also cut into NNELL membership. But NNELL can play a critical role in collaborating with other organizations to ensure that a strong language component is part of a world-class education.”

Marcia Rosenbusch agreed but warned, “For NNELL to be effective, the NNELL leaders need to have regular, quality communication with their members and to work to have a presence at the national level.”

Looking ahead, there is no end to the challenges we still face. Yet, as NNELL looks back at the past 25 years, we find a great deal of progress to be proud of. We insisted that early language learning and long sequences were important. Over the past two and a half decades, more and more research has supported this position, and we were right there to spread the word. Although the future is never certain, we do know one thing for sure: The vision and courage of our Founding Mothers has served us well.

Carol Ann Dahlberg ends on a high note: “It was a privilege to have Gone and to receive the new National Standards. The NNELL workshops we were able to hold at Iowa State University through the National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center were great. They helped teachers from across the country have time to get to know each other and talk about mutual concerns.”

As noted by Carol Ann, “We set up a formal structure that ensured that many voices could contribute to the development of the organization.” NNELL’s structure in more recent years has also benefitted from the fine leadership of some who may not have been previously mentioned. They include presidents Susan Walker, Christine Brown, Myriam Met, Carine Feyton, Martie Semmer, Lori Langer de Ramirez, Janis Jensen, Terry Caccavale, Paula Patrick, Jacque Van Houten and Rita A. Oleksuk.

The Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century

In addition to networking, supporting programs, and advocacy, NNELL has also been a force in national foreign language goals. Marcia Rosenbusch relates an anecdote that changed the face of the ACTFL National Standards. In 1993, I ran into members of the Standards Task Force Committee as we overlapped at a meeting in the East Coast. I learned that they were not thinking of including the elementary level in the standards document since there were few elementary programs at that time. When I got back home, I wrote a position paper that expressed the idea that “establishing standards for eighth and twelfth grade, but not fourth grade, limits the future of the profession” and sent it to the NNELL Executive Board for approval. They backed it, and with this statement from the NNELL Executive Board, Christine Brown, Chair of the Standards Task Force, later said she was able to get the task force to visit K-12 schools in Florida. After that they decided to make the Standards K-12.

The National Standards Task Force attributed NNELL’s strong push for a K-12 framework as the impetus that broadened the scope and long-term impact of the standards.

Other Impacts on the Profession

According to some of our early leaders, the impact NNELL has had on the profession extends not only to teachers, but also to the public and other organizations. Kathy Riordan stated, “I think NNELL has given members a power base from which to learn and with whom to set the Advocates for change.”

Carol Ann Dahlberg said, “It brought visibility to the needs of language education at this level.”

Marcia offered, “I think, through the years, it has made other organizations, such as ACTFL, more aware of the elementary school level of world language teaching.”

Nancy went even further: “One of the most exciting things has been seeing how a small grass-roots, low budget effort—of teachers, administrators, teacher trainers, and researchers—has been able, by working collaboratively, to make a huge impact on the teaching of languages to young children. Over the last 25 years NNELL has moved the field of K-4 language education into the forefront of K-16 language education.”

Advice for Current and Future Early Language Teachers

Our NNELL Founding Mothers have seen the organization grow and the profession change. They are eager to impart their wisdom to those who will follow. One strongly stated, “Stay in the target language in your classroom.” Research confirms that this very simple premise leads to higher student proficiency levels.

Another encourages us to join organizations to keep developing professionally. She advises new and veteran teacher alike to become active in those organizations and share with colleagues. World language teachers, especially in the elementary school, can be in a lonely, isolated position.

One of the Founding Mothers asks teachers to volunteer to be that support that colleagues in other schools may need. Another said, “Follow in the footsteps of those trailblazers who never gave up. Love your work, and work for the best possible programs in every school.”
by Lynn Fulton-Archer

As language educators, we strive to help students learn to communicate in other languages, understand the relationships between cultural perspectives, practices, and products, make comparisons and connections between their own language and the language they are learning, and use their language within and beyond the school community. But what language education really boils down to is helping students figure out their place in the world and the world’s place in their own lives. While certain aspects of the implementation of immersion programs in Delaware are unique given the state’s size, demographics, and role in national education initiatives including Race to the Top, Common Core, and Smarter Balance, the Delaware experience replicates what every state, district, or even school goes through as they try to provide students with more intensive, longer sequences of language learning that lead to high levels of proficiency.

Delaware may be one of the smallest states in the nation, however, it is a clear representation of the saying “It’s a small world.” The state exports products to more than 160 different countries each year, cities across the state participate in 6 Sister City Partnerships, and Delaware regularly sponsors Trade Missions to locations including China, Germany, Italy, and even Pakistan. Residents in the state speak more than 80 languages combined, the Department of Education has Memoranda of Understanding in place with 9 different countries, and schools in 55% of the state’s school districts have established international school partnerships.

With these things in mind, Delaware Governor Jack Markell envisioned the Governor’s World Language Expansion Initiative. Through collaboration with the Delaware Department of Education, an expansive world language education plan was crafted with multiple pathways for students K-12 to achieve advanced levels of proficiency by the time they graduate high school, so they are prepared to compete in an ever-changing global economy at home and around the world. The initiative includes creating proficiency-based assessments for students, providing ongoing proficiency training for teachers, launching middle school language programs, and creating a network of twenty immersion programs across the state over the course of the next five years. Students enrolling in immersion programs in Kindergarten in either Mandarin Chinese or Spanish will spend six years learning half their academic content in English and the other half in the target language. By 9th grade, they should be positioned to obtain Advanced Placement credit in the language they have been learning and continue language study through 12th grade. (See figure 1: DE Articulation)

In order to ensure the success of the Governor’s World Language Expansion Initiative and the Delaware World Language Immersion Programs, the Delaware Department of Education has made a concerted effort to put people and structures in place to support the growth and development of these programs. The World Language Immersion Team works in close collaboration with the Delaware Department of Education for other content areas including math, science, and social studies to gain a deep understanding of the content of the Delaware Recommended Curriculum, the Common Core Standards, and their role in classrooms and instruction across the state. Collaboration with Education Associates for English Language Arts is also key in building a clear understanding of how we can ensure literacy develops in two languages simultaneously. This same collaboration takes place at the district and school-level where immersion language teachers collaborate with district content area specialists and their English partner teachers to ensure that appropriate content is taught and reinforced in both languages. (See figure 2: Instructional split)

THE LEGS OF LITERACY

At its core, literacy is made up of three interconnected elements: sound, meaning, and print (Met, 2012). To illustrate the interconnected nature of these three elements, the World Language Immersion Team created an image of a three-legged stool that illustrates how each of them is integral to the process of building literacy in any language. Take away one of the legs, and the stool falls over. Remove one of the elements, and full literacy fails to develop, which means it also no longer has the ability to fully support academic learning. In order to ensure that every student in our immersion programs has a “stool to sit upon,” we need to make sure that they have constant, consistent, and ever-increasing access to each of the elements – sound, meaning, and print – by supporting teachers as they create learning environments that foster literacy development. (See figure 3: Legs of literacy)

COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT

An environment rich in sound is one in which the immersion teacher is constantly using the target language and giving students access to a wide variety of voices and sounds in the language. Students enrolled in Delaware World Language Immersion Programs receive a tremendous amount of oral language input from a variety of sources: their teacher, instructional video clips from core content...
The three legs of the stool, sound, meaning, and print, are connected to the legs of the target-language version of the cards. Immersion teachers use the English versions of the cards to introduce the written word or character programs. Immersion teachers use the English versions of the cards to introduce the written word or character to students once a concept has been presented and worked with orally. Teachers may have already used the word in context, associated it with a gesture, or read a story or taught a song that included it. After showing students the word wall card, it is added to the word wall in the classroom where both students and teachers can reference it. The word wall cards can be duplicated and cut apart as well for students to use during teacher-led comprehension checks or student-led games. The English partner teachers use the English versions of the cards to support content reinforcement lessons, provide additional access to content during their English Language Arts block, and begin to develop academic vocabulary in English that students will eventually see on state-level tests. (See figure 6: Word wall cards)

**TEXT TYPES AND INTERACTIONS**

The first shift focuses on the types of materials students read and interact with. The Common Core encourages a 50/50 balance between literary texts, e.g. stories, poems, folktales, and informational texts, e.g. non-fiction readers, short articles, and factual texts, throughout the elementary grades, with that balance shifting toward more informational text as students enter middle and high school. (See figure 7: Literacy genes)

**Stories** are a perfect vehicle for providing input for students because they provide an instant context for language learning, can be represented through images and gestures, and contain a beginning, middle, and end which can be used to engage students in higher order thinking skills, including predicting what will happen next. Our immersion teachers include “stories” every day in the classroom. Some of them are in the form of songs, some are authentic stories from the target culture, some are publisher-created to focus on a specific concept, and a few others are translations of known children’s stories in English. Our English partner teachers are a great resource in helping embed stories into the curriculum. During the collaborative planning, the teams of teachers identify English-language literacy strategies, discuss how to implement them in the classroom, access video clips of classroom demonstrations, and schedule observation times for the immersion teachers to see those strategies in action. We strongly encourage our new teachers to watch the video series “Art of Reading a Storybook”
housed on the “Books for Life” YouTube channel to be valuable in starting conversations about using stories as a basis for literacy instruction. Students are taught to start reading with picture walkouts, continuing with multiple shared readings, using the questioning series of the natural approach to help monitor comprehension, and giving targeted strategies to help develop and extend literacy into content. The second shift focuses on interaction with the text—paying close attention to what students do with what they read or how they react to what they read. Reading to a text usually begins with providing text-based answers to questions posed by the teacher or other students. This is all about demonstrating comprehension in various ways. Immersion teachers use Total Physical Response (TPR) for students to be able to show that they have understood elements of the text. They do this using a variety of strategies including asking students to hold up images from the story when asked questions, indicating with red or green cards if a statement about the story is true or false, or ordering events from the story to serve as the basis for a simple retelling. Two helpful resources with information about and strategies for monitoring student understanding are the books Checking for Understanding by Fisher and Frey and Total Participation Techniques by Himmele and Himmele. This shift also focuses on how students react to the text in writing. For novice language learners who don’t yet understand the language they need to fully respond to a text in the target language, teachers employ multiple strategies to have students react to the text. Students use writing journals to draw a response to the story, then they tell something about it in the target language. Teachers have students react to the text as a group by asking students to respond orally to questions, then the teacher compiles their responses on chart paper. Teachers also use a variety of techniques for whiteboards, on sentence strips, or on blank pages in literacy centers to give students a structure to help them show that they understand a new story. Teachers do not assume they understand a text, or extend a story. Teachers are using sentence frames to extend literacy into math instruction as well. Story problems are used as early as kindergarten to begin understanding sentence frames to extend literacy into math instruction as well. Story problems are used as early as kindergarten to begin understanding the complexity of what students read, can be broken into parts as well. The first focuses on students having regular practice with academic vocabulary. In immersion settings, the sheer nature of teaching content through another language ensures that students gain exposure to and interact with academic terms that are found within and beyond that content. However, teachers need to be aware of the language students have learned in previous grade levels and extend use of student language in each successive grade level. One of the important things we will do as we continue to develop and refine curriculum over the course of the next six years will be to create a language framework for each grade level, similar to those of Portland Public Schools, that includes language functions, language forms, and examples of vocabulary for each grade level. However, content-area teachers need to be aware of academic language embedded in the curriculum and grow in a logical way from year to year. The second part of the shift asks that students read and interact with ever-increasingly difficult “levels” of texts. When students interact in English, teachers consider qualitative, quantitative, and reader task dimensions. Two of these can be used to evaluate texts in other languages: qualitative dimensions such as purpose of the text, structure of the text, and language clarity and reader/task dimensions such as student knowledge, motivation, and purpose of the text. Qualitative dimensions such as word length, word frequency, and cohesion can be more difficult to determine in another language. In English, the quantitative level of a text is often identified by the publisher with a lexile level, an accelerated reading level, or a Fountas and Pinell guided reading level. However, target language materials, with the exception of some Spanish language materials, are often not coded in this way, or can acquire a voice in the human conversation. (Rosenberg, 2012) While we don’t have all the answers in Delaware at this point, we do have frameworks, instructional supports, and plans for collaboration in place. We are involving stakeholders in our decision-making process to help ensure that our students develop literacy, cultural awareness, and academic skills in more than one language. We are supporting teachers in making sure the instructional focus for every lesson is three-fold: make input comprehensible; connect content and language; and build print and mental; and build print and mental. We are asking teachers to read and do with what they read. By focusing on these things, and by continually learning, monitoring, and growing as a program, we will ensure that students indeed find their voice. We will provide them with the tools they need to attain high levels of proficiency in at least two languages which will allow them to make a difference, economically, socially, and culturally, in an ever-shrinking global marketplace and diverse society.

Lynn Fulton-Archer is a language educator with 20 years of experience in classrooms from kindergarten through grade 12. She is passionate about giving students early language learning experiences and spent the last nine years of her classroom career in the elementary Spanish classroom. She is thes, the Portland Public Schools Immersion Programs to guide us in setting proficiency anchors for students at each grade level based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. The proficiency anchors serve as goals for students and also as an instructional framework for teachers to give them guidance in creating integrated units, instructional activities, and formative assessments over the course of a year and from one grade level to the next. We monitor student progress throughout the year, both in content and language development, using formative assessments, Can-do statements, and rubrics based on Delaware content area standards, Common Core Standards, and descriptors for each proficiency level. Over time, we will embed language goals and entries into each content-area unit to ensure that students are learning not only academic language, but also social language. (See figure 11: Delaware Proficiency Anchors for Immersion Students’ Place in the World.)

IMMERSION STUDENTS’ PLACE IN THE WORLD

John Rosenberg, Dean of Humanities at Bridgewater Young University, has said “the decisions we make as language teachers determine, in part, if the outcome our students expect is academic or authentic. We can acquire a voice in the human conversation.” (Rosenberg, 2012) While we don’t have all the answers in Delaware at this point, we do have frameworks, instructional supports, and plans for collaboration in place. We are involving stakeholders in our decisions making process to help ensure that our students develop literacy, cultural awareness, and academic skills in more than one language. We are supporting teachers in making sure the instructional focus for every lesson is three-fold: make input comprehensible; connect content and language; and build print and mental. We are asking teachers to read and do with what they read. By focusing on these things, and by continually learning, monitoring, and growing as a program, we will ensure that students indeed find their voice. We will provide them with the tools they need to attain high levels of proficiency in at least two languages which will allow them to make a difference, economically, socially, and culturally, in an ever-shrinking global marketplace and diverse society.

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