

A CASE STUDY OF RIVER FALLS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ENROLLED IN
SPANISH III AND IV

By

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ABSTRACT

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A Case Study of River Falls High School Students Enrolled in Spanish III and IV.
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The purpose of this study was to determine if individuals who study the Spanish language in the middle school were more likely to continue studying Spanish in secondary and post secondary institutions and whether these students were more likely to choose a career involving use or knowledge of the Spanish language.

The subjects for this study were high school students enrolled in Spanish III and IV at River Falls High School. Each student began their study of the Spanish language at the middle school level. All subjects were provided with an overview of the study which described their involvement in this study. Their participation was voluntary and all subjects remained anonymous. Each subject was required by the School District of River Falls and UW-Stout to obtain permission from a parent or guardian to participate in this study.

The instrumentation for this study consisted of a survey with several items. Subjects were asked to circle the grade level in which they began learning Spanish in

their educational career. Subjects were asked to circle the amount of years they have studied Spanish in their secondary education, meaning high school years. Subjects were then asked to state their future educational and career intentions and how Spanish may be involved. The survey was developed specifically for this study to survey high school students in their Spanish language learning experience.

Data was collected during the Fall semester of the 2001 school year and analyzed to test the null hypothesis: There will no relationship between acquisition of the Spanish language at the middle school level and secondary study and career selection.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The researcher is a middle school Spanish teacher at Meyer Middle School in River Falls, Wisconsin and has been teaching Spanish for the past seven years. At Meyer Middle School foreign language education begins in the sixth grade where students learn what is called "Exploratory Spanish." This seven-week course consists of what is familiar to many as "Survival Spanish." Students learn numbers, colors, greetings, common expressions, and general sentence structure. At Meyer, French, German, Spanish, and Japanese courses are all required in the sixth grade and all follow this same format.

Upon successful completion, a grade of C or better in the exploratory course, students are allowed to elect a foreign language course for study in the seventh grade. This seventh grade course is the first portion of what is considered Spanish I at the high school level. Seventh grade foreign language students meet for class every-other-day all academic year. Students learn more complicated sentence structure, verbs, and an array of vocabulary terms. Again, upon attaining a grade of "C" or better, students may elect to continue with the same language into the eighth grade where foreign language courses meet every day all academic year. As the language instruction intensifies with more verbs, vocabulary, and new verb tenses, students who complete this course and receive a grade of "B" or better are recognized as having completed a level I foreign language course and become eligible to take level II as freshmen in high school.

As students progress through their high school education, they may be offered up to five levels of a foreign language at River Falls High School. Each level is dependent

upon the grade received in the previous level. Generally, students must receive a grade of "B" or better to continue further with the foreign language of their choice.

Levels of a foreign language offered at most high schools depend upon two very important factors: student interest and enrollment. If students do not find the language interesting or usable, they will simply elect not to continue. Many schools find that it is not profitable to offer a level IV foreign language with only a handful of students in a class. These two factors generally determine the amount of years a student may learn a foreign language at the high school level.

The amount of foreign language a student is able to study at the high school level can be extremely valuable for their long and short-term goals. The subjects of this study live in the outer fringe of the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. This area has experienced one of the largest increases in Hispanic population in the nation (St. Paul Pioneer Press, 2001). Students with knowledge of the Spanish language and customs of various Hispanic nations may find this to be a great advantage in prospective employment opportunities.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a relationship between learning Spanish at the middle school level and future educational or occupational opportunities. Data was collected through the use of a survey given to high school students presently enrolled in Spanish III and IV courses during the Fall semester of the 2001 school year at River Falls High School.

Research Questions

The following items were presented to subjects on a survey. Each statement was discussed regarding its relevance to the research project.

Item Number One: Please circle your present school year.

Subjects were given the choices of Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, or Senior to circle.

The option circled allowed the researcher to compile data regarding the grade of subjects.

Item Number Two: Please circle the level of the Spanish course in which you are currently enrolled.

Only Spanish III and IV students participated in this study, therefore either III or IV was circled.

Item Number Three: Please circle all grade levels in which you were enrolled in a Spanish class.

Subjects circled all grade levels which applied to their experience in Spanish classes. K (kindergarten) followed by the numbers one through twelve were listed for subjects to circle. This item provided information regarding the beginning of foreign language instruction for each subject and if a sequence of courses existed. For instance, if a subject were to circle six, seven, and eight, this would indicate that Spanish courses were sequential in curriculum.

Item Number Four: Please circle the level of Spanish you began with in high school.

Subjects had the choice of circling Spanish I, Spanish II, Spanish III, or Spanish IV. Data from this item would indicate prior study of Spanish.

Item Number Five: Please specifically explain your long and short-term intentions, if any, which may involve the use or general knowledge of the Spanish language.

This item helped determine if a subject was enrolled in Spanish for reasons of interest, future educational or career opportunities, or travel to a Spanish speaking nation.

Research Question

Is there a relationship between learning Spanish in the middle school and student long and short-term intentions?

Definition of Terms

For clarity of understanding, the following terms used within this study were defined.

Block Scheduling- a manner of scheduling adopted by many high schools to allow more time devotion to a course. Courses within the block style run for 88 minutes per day for one full semester. Students generally have four courses per day per semester. This allows for more course offerings to students throughout the school year.

Level I foreign Language- a foreign language course whose curriculum centers around actual language learning, sentence structure, cultural awareness, and extensive vocabulary building. This course is an elective at most high schools in the United States and is much more vigorous than an exploratory language course often taught in middle schools. Level I foreign language courses are followed by levels II, III, and possibly higher depending upon enrollment. These levels are dependent upon each other in that one must successfully complete the prior to continue with the next available level.

Assumptions

Block scheduling may have a positive or negative effect on future student endeavors regarding availability of certain Spanish courses offered at the high school level.

Limitations

This study only looked at one small high school in Western Wisconsin, which lies within an area with a fast growing Hispanic population, therefore the results should not be generalized to all high schools in the area.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to present background information on foreign language programs, particularly Spanish programs, offered to students at the middle school level throughout Wisconsin and the United States. This review will also attempt to analyze the effectiveness of a Spanish I program at the middle school level and the continued success of students who move on to higher levels of Spanish at the high school level.

Overview of Middle School Foreign Language Programs

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education reported that achieving proficiency in a foreign language may take from four to six years and that the study should begin in the elementary level (Languages and Children, 1994). Brain research from the early 1970's supported this statement in that a child's brain is more prepared to learn a foreign language than that of an adult brain. With these studies proving the readiness of the brain for language learning many schools embarked upon instituting foreign language instruction at the elementary, middle or junior high level, along with language course offerings at the high school.

Demographics play a large role in the development of a foreign language program and at what age. School districts which support a significantly large ethnic group and having a strong tax base or higher amounts of government funding, may begin language courses far earlier than their rural counterparts. With budget priorities and the lack of

certified foreign language instructors in many rural school districts, they are simply unable to begin language instruction before grade six. Many argue that the middle level is almost too late to begin molding a brain for foreign language learning.

In 1989 the Wisconsin State legislature mandated that all middle schools throughout the state provide foreign language instruction in grades 7 and 8 by the 1996 school year (Foreign Language Annals, 1994). This mandate appeased groups supporting language instruction at early levels and the yearly budgetary constraints regularly befalling school districts. At the time of the mandate most middle schools and junior high schools in Wisconsin already had some type of foreign language program offered to students. These existing programs were usually exploratory and those middle schools that did not have a foreign language program followed the lead of those that did and usually instituted an exploratory language program as well.

Exploratory courses are often required courses lasting the duration of one quarter or 9 weeks of a school year. In an exploratory course students learn cultural practices of the country or countries that speak the language being taught. They also learn what is considered the "survival" version of the language, telling time, expressions of courtesy, ordering food in a restaurant, saying their names, age, and where they are from, etc. Since the exploratory course is a required course for all students, it must not be as in-depth or intensive as a level I foreign language program which would be offered as an elective in the high school.

Offering exploratory foreign language courses allows middle schools to set themselves apart from the elementary schools in that there are more course offerings to students that are very different than any other course they may have had before. But

most importantly, exploratory programs allow school districts to hire or train staff with dual certification. This means that a school district may hire a part-time math teacher who has a Spanish minor and can teach an exploratory class. The district will save time and money paying one person to teach two totally different subjects. Though it may not be the only reason, this is the attraction of the exploratory program and why it is so prevalent in middle schools across the state of Wisconsin.

Spanish I Programs in the Middle School

The researcher has discovered, with the help of UW-Stout and UW-River Falls media professionals, that there are very few middle schools in the state of Wisconsin and in the entire United States, that have level I foreign language programs. Over a period of two years the researcher was unable to discover any information regarding the success rate of middle school students taking Spanish in the high school at higher levels of the language.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will describe the research hypothesis, the subjects under study and how they were selected for this study. In addition, the content, validity, and reliability of the instrument being used to collect data will be discussed. Data collection and analysis procedures will also be presented. This chapter will conclude with a description of methodological limitations of this study.

Description of Subjects

The subjects of this study were all students enrolled in Spanish III and Spanish IV at the River Falls High School in River Falls, Wisconsin. All subjects were in their sophomore, junior, or senior year in high school and either began their Spanish education at the middle school or waited until high school to begin Spanish I. Both male and female subjects were included in this study.

As required by UW-Stout and the River Falls School District, all students received and returned a parental permission form prior to participating in this study. The parent permission form can be found in Appendix A.

Sample Selection

Seventy-three students enrolled in Spanish III and Spanish IV were presented with a written overview of this study describing their participation in detail. Attached to the overview was a parental permission form requiring the written approval of a parent or guardian before participating in this study. The students were given one week to return

the permission form to their Spanish teacher or lose their ability to participate in this study.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation for this study consisted of a survey with five items. Subjects were asked to circle items regarding present grade, present Spanish level, grades in which they were enrolled in a Spanish course, and what level of Spanish they began with in high school. Finally, subjects were asked to write a brief paragraph regarding future endeavors that may involve the use or general knowledge of the Spanish language. The survey was developed specifically for this study and can be found in Appendix B. Items for the survey were developed by the researcher to help identify the present and future use of the Spanish language by the subjects under study. No validity or reliability measures were included on the survey.

Data Collection

Parental permission forms were given to students by their respective Spanish III and IV teachers on November 14, 2001. Subjects were given five days to return the parental permission slip to their teachers. Subjects who returned parental permission forms completed the survey during class on November 27, 2001. Students who were absent were allowed to complete a survey when they returned to class with the form signed.

Data Analysis

All appropriate descriptive statistics were run on the data. In addition, to address correlation of the research question, a correlation statistic, Kendall's tau was run.

Limitations

Surveys are often seen as a hassle and can sometimes be completed rather carelessly. Due to time restraints and the researcher's wish to take very little class time, this might have increased the probability of careless responses. The survey was specifically designed to maximize data collection in a streamlined fashion. Due to the small rural community in which this study took place, there were only seventy-three students who were able to participate, which limits the generalizability of the results.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine if individuals who study the Spanish language in middle school were more likely to continue studying Spanish in secondary and post secondary institutions and whether these students were more likely to choose a career involving use or knowledge of the Spanish language.

Data Analysis

There were 73 high school students who participated in this study. All student enrolled in Spanish III and IV agreed to participate which constitutes a 100% participation rate.

Item Number 1 Please circle your present school year:

Of the seventy-three subjects, 43 or 58.9% were sophomores, 26 or 35.6% were juniors, and only 4 or 5.5% were seniors. There were no freshmen enrolled for Fall 2001 Spanish III or IV classes.

Item Number 2 Please circle the level of the Spanish course in which you are presently enrolled:

Fifty-five subjects (75.3%) were enrolled in Spanish III and 18 subjects (24.7%) were enrolled in Spanish IV at the time of this study.

Item Number 3 Please circle all grade levels in which you were enrolled in a Spanish class:

Fifty-one subjects (69.9%) had a Spanish course in the sixth grade, while 63 subjects (86.3%) and 62 subjects (84.9%) respectively had a Spanish course in grade 7 or 8. The data points to a strong enrollment in a middle level Spanish program.

Item Number 4 Please circle the level of Spanish you began with in high school:

Seventeen subjects (23.3%) began their high school Spanish education with Spanish I. Fifty-five subjects (75.3%) started high school in Spanish II. Only one subject of the 73 studied began with Spanish III and none of the 73 subjects began in Spanish IV. The evidence points to a sequential (Exploratory to Spanish I) Spanish program at the middle school level.

Item Number 5 Please specifically explain your long and short-term intentions, if any, which may involve the use or general knowledge of the Spanish language:

Twenty-six subjects (35.6%) indicated that they are enrolled in a Spanish course to allow them to communicate in a country in which they hope to travel. Fifty subjects (68.5%) indicated that they are planning to continue their Spanish education in high school or in college as a possible major or minor. Finally, 15 subjects (20.5%) wished to use their foreign language skills in a career setting.

Research Question

Is there a relationship between learning Spanish in the middle school and student long and short-term intentions?

Kendall's tau correlation coefficient statistic was run on all pairs of data pertaining to this question. Six of the twelve correlation coefficients were statistically significant.

Seventh grade enrollment was negatively correlated with intentions of travel to a Spanish speaking nation ($\tau = -.203$; $p = .043$). This may indicate that students of this age group do not often travel outside the United States on a regular basis.

Seventh grade enrollment was positively correlated with intention to further their education ($\tau = .244$; $p = .019$). Students are possibly looking toward enrolling in higher level Spanish courses at the high school level.

Seventh grade enrollment was also positively correlated with intentions of using Spanish in a future career ($\tau = .203$; $p = .043$). This finding seems to point to some very long-term commitments to studying Spanish.

Eighth grade enrollments were similar to those of seventh grade enrollments. Eighth graders were negatively correlated with travel intentions ($\tau = -.326$; $p = .003$). Again, students at this age level may not have opportunities to travel outside the United States.

Eighth grade enrollments were positively correlated with furthering their Spanish education ($\tau = .291$; $p = .007$). Students are now closer to high school and are perhaps preparing for enrollment in higher levels of the language.

Eighth grade enrollments were also positively correlated to possible future use of the Spanish language in a career environment ($\tau = .214$; $p = .035$). Students are quite aware of what they want to do with their knowledge of Spanish in both long and short-term settings.

Sixth grade findings were not as significant as those of seventh and eighth grade correlations, possibly due to the fact that sixth grade is commonly the first point of contact for learning a foreign language.

These findings show that seventh and eighth grade students are more in tune to their future than many may give them credit. They seem to understand that learning Spanish early in their educational career will benefit them not only at the middle level, but through high school, into college, and possibly into the workforce as well.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will include a discussion and some conclusions regarding the results of this study. The chapter will conclude with possible recommendations for further study.

Discussion

According to the research findings there is a strong relationship between learning Spanish at the middle school level and future educational opportunities. Almost 70% of the subjects reported enrollment in grade six. Many had courses in grades seven and eight, 86.3% and 84.9% respectively. Over 68% of the subjects reported that they would continue studying the Spanish language in high school and also at the college and university levels. Several subjects stated their willingness to major or minor in the language at the collegiate level.

There was a statistically significant relationship between learning Spanish in the middle school and incorporating their Spanish language skills in a career environment. Over 20% said that they plan to use their Spanish in some capacity in their future-working environment.

Conclusions

Though the sample size was small, the researcher is quite certain that the results of this study would be similar in a larger state or national study. Students who start

studying a foreign language early will likely continue study into high school, college, and very possibly carry their knowledge of the language and culture into a career related environment.

The results of this study have a very significant underlying impact as well. Students participating in this survey were mostly sophomores and juniors in high school, 58.9% and 35.6% respectively. They were at the third and fourth level of high school Spanish and as the findings of this study show, 68.5% of subjects will continue their Spanish education in high school and college, therefore they will exhaust Spanish instruction at the high school level in River Falls before they graduate from high school. If the subjects complete Spanish V before the second semester of their senior year, they will be eligible to enroll in a college level Spanish course. Students must obtain a "B" or better in Spanish V and pass a college level language exam before this is possible. Many students are becoming aware that when levels of certain courses have been exhausted at the high school, the school district must pay the college tuition for a higher level course if a student wishes to continue in the subject area. Taking college level courses at the expense of the school district not only saves money for future college expenses, it can also, depending upon placement level, allow a student to be that much closer to obtaining a major or minor in Spanish upon traditional entrance into college.

This study also found that 20.5% of subjects wish to use their language skills in a future career setting. Though 20.5% appears insignificant, this study only included 73 high school students and therefore is a powerful statement on the part of students. In this high school, 73 students represent approximately 6% of the total student body. The researcher strongly believes that in a larger study, this number would be dramatically

higher. The possibility also exists that some students may change their minds as they enter college or the workforce. Even though 20.5% wish to use their knowledge of Spanish in the workplace, they have been given the opportunity to do this because, for most of them, their Spanish instruction began at the Spanish I level at the middle school.

Finally, as brain research shows and as stated by Curtain and Pesola (1994), young children are the most efficient learners of a foreign language, yet most schools begin language instruction at the middle school level. Some researchers argue that sixth grade is almost too late. Foreign language instruction is ideal in the elementary level, but in so many parts of this country, most children who learn a language at the elementary level are children of privilege or children living in an area heavily populated by an ethnic group. Because of the structure of educational funding and the present state of the economy, most schools will continue with the status quo of exploratory language in the middle school and serious language and culture study at the high school level. This study documents the great long-term advantages of learning Spanish in the middle school. The researcher believes that we owe children the right to go as far as their minds and determination allow them, therefore language should be initiated at the elementary level for all students.

Recommendations for further research

Some suggestions for further study of this topic would be to employ a larger subject sample. A statewide or national study may have a great impact upon how we perceive foreign language study and how we fund our public schools. It might also be interesting to see the results of this type of survey in a smaller rural school as well. Would subjects in a demographically secluded area such as northern Wisconsin or

Minnesota have the same level of awareness regarding the importance of learning Spanish?

The researcher would also have altered the survey allowing subjects to circle their area of future interest rather than having them write a paragraph for item number 5. They would also have the opportunity to write a sentence if their future area of interest was different than goals regarding travel, education, career, or general interest. The researcher would also have preferred to include Spanish V students, but the course was not offered until the Spring of 2002.

References

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Appendix A

PARENTAL PERMISSION REQUEST

Dear parent or Guardian,

11/14/01

Your son/daughter has an opportunity to participate in a case study of River Falls High School students enrolled in Spanish III and IV. The study will analyze your child's past and present classroom experiences while enrolled in Spanish courses and will also attempt to identify your son or daughters long-term intentions involving the use and knowledge of the Spanish language.

Students enrolled in Spanish III and IV in the Fall semester of 2001 at River Falls High School will be asked to complete a five-question survey regarding their previous and present Spanish courses. Students will also be asked to write a short paragraph stating their future educational or career intentions that may involve the use of the Spanish language.

This study is in full cooperation with the School District of River Falls and UW-Stout. Any questions that you may have should be directed to the School District of River Falls, phone 715-425-1800. You may also contact Dr. Amy Gillett, Professor of Education/Research Advisor, at UW-Stout at 715-232-2680; or Dr. Ted Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review board of the Protection of Human subjects in Research, 11 H H, UW-Stout, Menomonie, Wi. 54751, phone 715-232-1126.

Please read the following paragraph and sign on the back and return this form to the high school Spanish III and IV teacher by Monday, November 19, 2001:

I understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and I may elect not to participate at any time during the survey. I understand that this study is investigating my past and present classroom experiences involving Spanish as well as my future educational or career related intentions that may involve the use and knowledge of the Spanish language. I further understand that my name or any personal identifying factors will not be requested in compliance with the River Falls School District's policy regarding classroom research.

Signature of Spanish III or IV student: _____ date: _____

Signature of Parent or Guardian: _____ date: _____

Appendix B
SUBJECT SURVEY

1. Please circle your present school year:

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

2. Please circle the level of the Spanish course in which you are presently enrolled:

Spanish III Spanish IV

3. Please circle all grade levels in which you were enrolled in a Spanish class:

K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

4. Please circle the level of Spanish you began with in high school:

Spanish I Spanish II Spanish III Spanish IV

5. Please specifically explain your long and short-term intentions, if any, which may involve the use or general knowledge of the Spanish language: