

Engagement within Culture-Based Second Language 2012-2013

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Introduction:

CAPE believes that the acquisition of a second language enhances students' global awareness, appreciation of another culture, respect of themselves and others, interpersonal skills, and communication skills, to mention only a few of the possible benefits. The making of linguistic connections between English and a second language also increases competency in English. Furthermore, the learning of a second language also supports cognitive development. The purpose of learning a second language is, ideally, to develop skills to communicate within a certain cultural setting. The language one learns is a tool used to interact within a group; a group with its own set of customs, its own history, its own celebrations, and much more. For these reasons, CAPE has offered French and Spanish as a second language from its very inception. Both programs have had a strong focus on grammar and vocabulary. About 60% of the students chose French with the rest opting for Spanish. This practice continues. Observations have indicated strong academic achievement, some comprehension skills but little to no fluency (knowledge of vocabulary with some comprehension of the spoken language but no contextual usage and no fluency). It is to be noted that this program is not an immersion program and so the students are not immersed in the language to the same degree. Lack of interest among some of our students was also noted. These students, especially in the higher grades, have often engaged staff in discussions about the reason for the mandatory second language, the value of a 'forced' second language, and have argued for exemption. Students have been certainly unaware of the culture within which the language evolved. In September 2006, CAPE embarked on a 3-year study to infuse the second language program with cultural aspects to support students' efforts in the acquisition of functional second language skills, and to support comprehension skills in French and/or Spanish while increasing knowledge and appreciation of French and/or Spanish culture. The result was a significant increase in comprehension and appreciation of culture, especially among the older students.

CAPE's focus on student engagement through mentorship brought about a review of the second language program, its practice and outcomes. Students seem to be reluctant or struggling with the spoken language, especially the grades 4 and 5. Students surveys indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of the Spanish and French cultures and therefore the importance of the value of acquiring a second language.

Purpose:

This project aims to increase student engagement within the second language classes via mentorship and, as a result, increase student comprehension and appreciation of the beauty of other cultures and languages.

Strategies: Engage students in projects that involve students in cultural experiences and the spoken language through the use of film, video, art, dance, music, and and native speakers and guests.

Data Collection Tools:

Student Engagement Checklists

Teacher-generated start and end of year tests

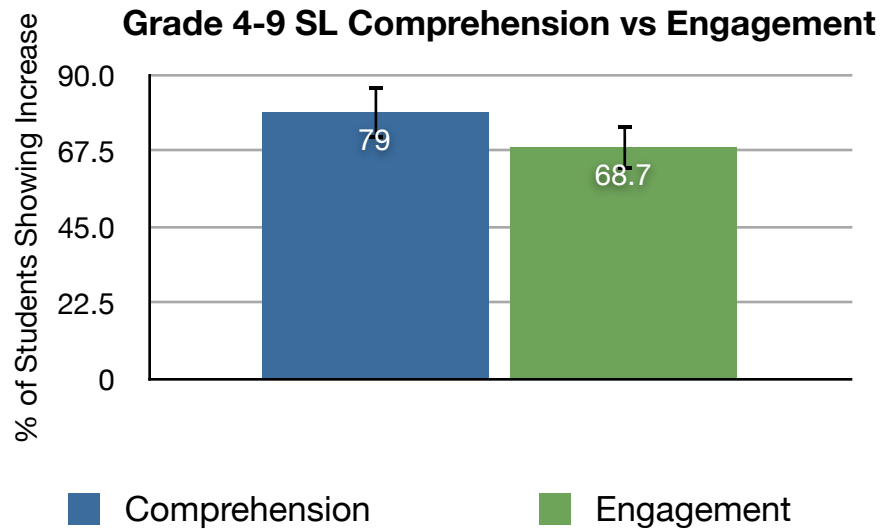


Figure 1 This graph indicates that integrating culture within the second language program seems to have been a factor in increasing engagement within and comprehension of the second language of study. It also suggests a possible direct relationship between student comprehension of the second language and student engagement.

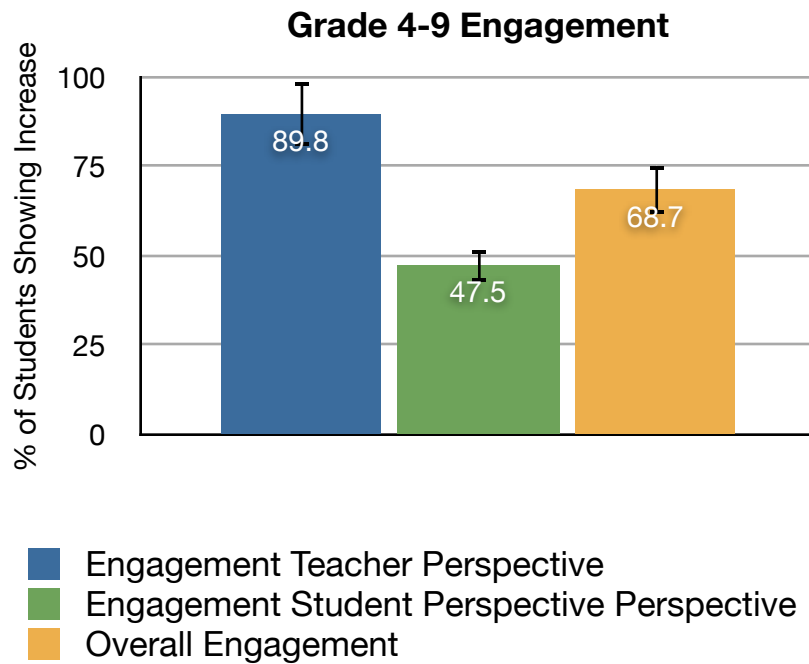


Figure 2 This figure indicates a fairly significant increase in student engagement and, interestingly, a greater increase from the teacher perspective than from the student perspective, opening the door for much more in-depth research.

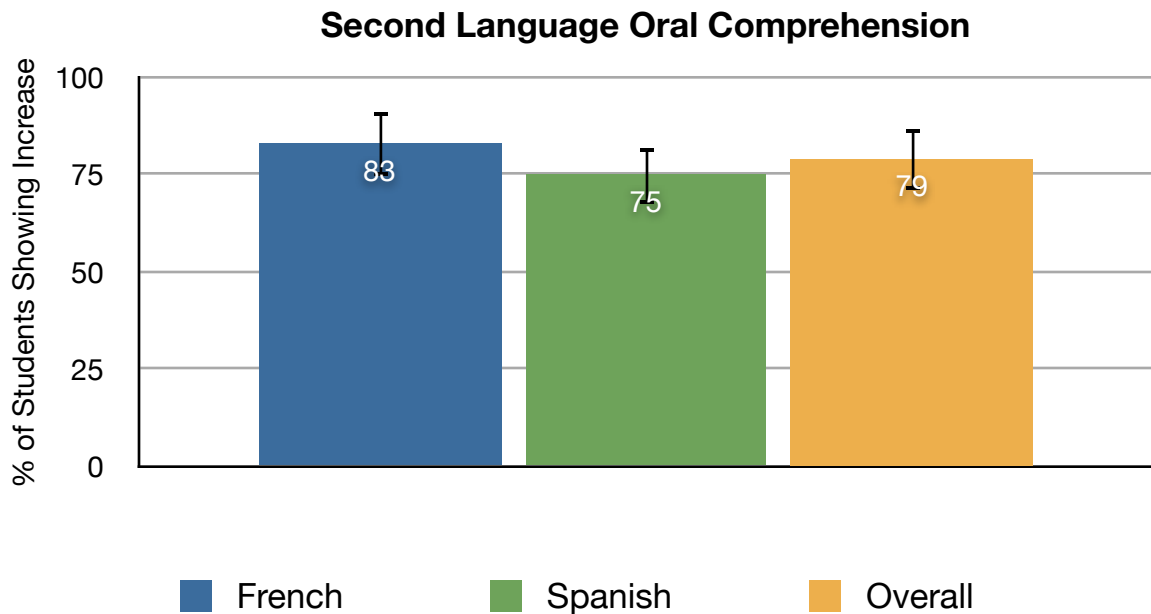


Figure 3 This figure shows a comparable significant increase in oral comprehension within each of the second languages.

Further analyses indicate an increase in overall engagement in both the French and Spanish classes with a high percentage of students showing an increase in cognitive/intellectual/academic engagement and a small percentage of students showing an increase in emotional engagement. There seems to be no significant difference between the level of engagement within the French and Spanish classes. The youngest students show the highest increase in all engagement areas within both second languages.

Future Direction

This study then begs the question: does more focused and purposeful integration of culture within this second language program increase student fluency in the language and, thus, if not more significant, at least more sustained student engagement? This is perhaps a question that will be answered by the 213-2014 Action Research.

Acknowledgement

A Arnott for her support in the classroom and with data collection.

Bibliography

Collier, V. P. (1995). Acquiring a second language for school. *Directions in Language and Education*, 1(4), 1–10.

Synopsis: While this article speaks primarily about American ESL students, the model for teaching language pinpoints four areas of study which must be addressed for the student to gain functional use of the language and fluency.

Kohonen, V., Jaatinen, R., Kaikkonen, P., & Lehtovaara, J. (2001). *Experiential learning in foreign language education: Applied linguistics and language study*. London: Routledge.

Synopsis: This resource identifies the goal of foreign language education needs to shift from communicative competence towards "an intercultural action competence". It stresses the need envelop experiential learning in order for students to apply the language within the correct context of understanding.

Kerper Mora, J. (2002). *Second-language teaching methods: Principles and procedures*. Retrieved from <http://moramodules.com/ALMMMethods.htm>

Synopsis: This article identifies the widely accepted approaches to teaching a second language. Our program however, is attempting to go further than the accepted standards and try to teach students about culture as well as the language, thereby providing them with a context in which to use the skills acquired.

Primary National Strategy (2006). EAL principles, pedagogy and practice: First language as a tool for learning. Retrieved from http://www.naldic.org.uk/Resources/NALDIC/Teaching%20and%20Learning/pri_pubs_bichd_213706_06.pdf

Synopsis: This journal and online resources identifies a number of key considerations in the development of bilingual students. It differentiates between basic interpersonal communicative skills, which our students currently have, and cognitive and academic language proficiency, which is the goal for our students. Strategies for teaching and evaluating students are included.

University of South Florida (2006). International Experiential Learning.

Synopsis: While this resource is not a research article or book, it provides proof outside of the primary school example that there is a need to experience the cultural contexts and interactions to be successful in a language. This university is offering courses abroad and stress that a student's language proficiency is an issue. We are trying to recognize this and address fluency issues with our program.

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