



Chapter 1

# RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY OF WORLD LANGUAGES



## BENEFITS OF WORLD LANGUAGE STUDY

Two decades of research on the benefits of second language acquisition gives an impressive rationale for world language instruction in terms of the **cognitive benefits, academic achievement, and development of positive attitudes toward cultural diversity**. In addition, New Jersey's multicultural and multiethnic community and its growing economy demand increased contact and face-to-face interaction with members of other cultures both in New Jersey and around the world. A teacher from Elizabeth comments:

*The mix of languages and cultures in the Elizabeth community creates both a need and a resource for a world language program in our schools. As an international port and with a myriad of local businesses owned by members of many ethnic groups, Elizabeth is a city where the ability to communicate in languages other than English is crucial. Within our student population, there are 35 different native languages, and over 60% of our students speak a language other than English at home. Nurturing and increasing their multilingualism will give our children personal and professional advantages for the future.*

(Anne Gammons, personal communication, March 24, 1998)

This *Framework* affirms the belief that all New Jersey students should be given the opportunity to study at least one world language other than English. The rationale provided below summarizes the necessity and importance of providing this opportunity for New Jersey's children.

Why is it important to provide this opportunity for the children of New Jersey? The study of another language and culture:

- enables students to interact and communicate with others while gaining a greater understanding of and respect for the cultural perspectives, practices, and products of different cultures;
- provides an appreciation of state and national responsibilities in the world community;
- enables students to become multilingual and multicultural resources for American and international businesses based in the state of New Jersey;
- strengthens critical-thinking skills through problem solving, conceptualizing, and reasoning;
- enhances the ability to see connections between the various disciplines by incorporating visual and performing arts, health and physical education, language arts literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and workplace readiness into the language classroom;
- develops the skills and habits essential to the learning process;
- facilitates the acquisition of subsequent languages;
- provides a competitive edge in career choices and in professional development;

- offers language enrichment opportunities for students whose heritage language is not English; and
- provides students with a sense of personal satisfaction and enjoyment in their ability to communicate with people from other cultures.

*The global village is here. . . . Although emerging technologies expand communication and access to information, they do not diminish the need for language competency. To the contrary, proficiency in multiple languages permits people to take full advantage of technological advances. Multilingual people can benefit most from the Information Age.*

(Genesee & Cloud, 1998, p. 62)

## **WORLD LANGUAGES AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL: THE OPTIMUM STARTING POINT**

Recent scientific research has provided many insights into **when** and **how** children best acquire languages. These findings have important implications for educators, policy makers, and parents as they challenge the traditional time framework for beginning language study in schools as well as methodology for teaching languages. Patricia Kuhl, at the University of Washington, reported that by six months, infants' perceptual systems are already configured to acquire their native language. With each year of growth, children are less able to filter out fine distinctions among the sounds of other languages. After early childhood, the language acquisition mechanism becomes highly structured creating an interference effect that may account for the difficulty in learning languages at a later time. This indicates that a window of developmental opportunity exists for acquiring other languages. These findings, along with the ease with which children in bilingual families acquire two languages, support the contention that world language instruction should begin as early as preschool age. (Education Commission of the States, 1996)

Dr. Gladys Lipton (1998, p. 11), highlights the results of research on children who study a foreign language in elementary school. These students:

- achieve expected gains and have even higher scores on standardized tests in reading, language arts, and mathematics than those who have not;
- show greater cognitive development in such areas as mental flexibility, creativity, divergent thinking, and higher-order thinking skills;
- have an improved self-concept and sense of achievement in school; and
- can transfer their language learning skills in subsequent foreign language study in high school and college.

Lipton notes Boyer's 1995 recommendations for the elementary school of the future, which urged that "foreign language instruction begin early, certainly by third grade, that it be offered daily, and be continued through all grades." Lipton, Morgan, and Reed (1996) report that on the 1995 Advanced Placement French Language Examination, students who began their study of French in Grades 1-3 and 4-6 outperformed those who began in Grade 7 or later.

Curtain and Pesola (1994, pp. 3-4) identify three powerful arguments for including world languages in the core curriculum of elementary schools in the United States. They are excerpted below.

- One of the most important factors influencing the development of language proficiency is the amount of time spent working with the language. When language learning begins earlier, it can go on longer and provide more practice and experience, leading ultimately to greater fluency and effectiveness.
- Every skill and outcome that is important to society is introduced through the elementary school curriculum. The lists of curriculum requirements in almost every state attest to the importance of reading, math, social studies, science, music, art, and physical education. . . . Only when languages become a secure part of the elementary school curriculum will language learning begin to meet the needs so vividly described in the national reports of the 1980s.
- The age of 10 is a crucial time in the development of attitudes toward nations and groups perceived as "other," according to the research of Piaget, Lambert, and others (Lambert & Klineberg, 1967). Children are in the process of moving from egocentricity to reciprocity, and information introduced before age 10 is eagerly received. . . . The awareness of a global community can be enhanced when children have the opportunity to experience involvement with another culture through a foreign language.