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LANGUAGE LEARNING AND EMPATHY

A MASTER'S THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY

ELIZABETH RODRIGUEZ

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LANGUAGE LEARNING AND EMPATHY

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APPROVED

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Abstract

Second language learning and empathy are two concepts frequently explored and employed in schools but are often treated as separate domains. This literature review aims to analyze the connection between learning a second language and the development of empathy in young students, as well as implications for schools in the United States. When looking at this area of study, there are many factors that need to be considered such as the influence of political ideologies, language learning programs, optimal ages for language acquisition, communication skills enhanced by language learning, as well as potential cognitive benefits of learning a second language. Although more specific research is needed, second language learning has the potential to be a powerful tool to grow students' empathic abilities, which is why schools in the United States should consider encouraging more language learning opportunities for all students.

Table of Contents

Signature Page 2

Acknowledgements 3

Abstract 4

Table of Contents.....5

Chapter I: Introduction 7

Introduction 7

Language Learning Context in the United States 7

Language Learning at Younger Ages 8

Empathy in the United States 9

Rationale 9

Definitions of terms 10

Research Focus and Question 12

Chapter II: Literature Review 14

Language Learning Ideologies 14

Case Study: Language Ideologies in Spain 16

Language Learning Educational Policies 19

Second Language Learning in U.S. Schools 21

Dual and Full Language Immersion 22

Foreign Language in Elementary School 23

Foreign Language Exploratory 25

Language Learning at Younger Ages 26

Inclusion in Language Learning 28

Other Benefits of Language Learning 30

Empathy and Students 32

Communication Skills and Empathy 33

Possible Cognitive Benefits of Multilingualism and Empathy 39

Chapter III: Conclusion 43

Summary of Literature 43

Professional Application 46

Limitations of the Research 47

Implications for Future Research 48

Conclusion 50

References 51

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Language is an essential part of the human experience. It is how humans are able to communicate through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, language is more than skills and grammatical structures; it is what allows humans to connect with one another by sharing thoughts, feelings, emotions, and experiences (Shushkevich, 2019). Children begin language development in the first few years of life learning from their families, but the K-12 school experience plays an important role in the language development of students (Tochon, 2009). In the United States, teachers work tirelessly to help students achieve proficiency in all areas of the English language. Standardized tests all around the nation measure student's proficiency to ensure that schools are equipping the next generation with proper communication skills in English.

Aside from English proficiency, teachers in the United States also aim to create experiences that encourage students to share thoughts and feelings that promote healthy social emotional development. Many districts and schools have school culture norms related to kindness, respect, and empathy (Malti et al., 2016). Language learning and social emotional development are often treated as separate domains, but if language is how one connects with other humans, the two areas are forever interconnected. If the focus in U.S. education is primarily English and not the inclusion of other languages, could the educational system possibly be limiting the human experience of connection and empathy for students?

Language Learning Context in the United States

There are approximately 7,000 languages that exist in the world (UNESCO, 2016). In the United States alone there are over 300 other languages spoken throughout the country with

Spanish, Chinese, French, and Japanese being some of the most common languages other than English. Despite the presence of so many languages, according to the United States Census Bureau (2006) around 20 percent of the U.S. population can converse in at least one other language other than English. However, Stein-Smith (2016) explained that if immigrant and heritage language speakers were removed from the 20 percent, the number of native-English speakers who speak other languages would be around only 10 percent. This is a major difference when compared to Europe where 56 percent of the population can hold a conversation in another language and 23 percent in at least two other languages (Stein-Smith, 2016). There is a complex history as to how and why these numbers exist, which include ideological shifts, educational policies and practices, as well as the globalization of English, some of which are explored in this literature review (Larsen-Freeman & Freeman, 2008).

Language Learning at Younger Ages

According to the 2017 National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Report, similar to the percentage of Americans who speak another language, around 20 percent of K-12 students in the U.S. receive instruction in another language before college (American Councils for International Education, 2017). There is little consistency with the language requirements and programs available to students in the public K-12 school system, but that does not mean that programs and research on the impacts of language learning at younger ages are non-existent. There are a number of language learning programs that exist in the United States (Stewart, 2005) and there is a plethora of research that explores the implications when introducing a second language in the younger grades (Boyson et al., 2013; Kissau et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2015). This literature review aims to review these programs as well as discuss the possible benefits and concerns of language learning at younger ages.

Empathy in the United States

Former President Barack Obama once said that he believes that America is facing an empathy deficit (Obama, 2006). There has even been some research suggesting that empathy is decreasing with time. Specifically, Konrath et al. (2010) found a 40% decrease in empathy when comparing American college students between 1979 and 2009. And now in the year 2022 with continued school shootings, racial disparities, border crises, and more, it seems there is evidence that the empathy deficit continues. However, there are many researchers and educational leaders working to learn more about empathy, how to promote it, and how to increase empathy in schools. Brene Brown is hailed as an empathy guru with videos, TedTalks, books, and podcasts all focused on empathy. In her program called Daring Classrooms that empowers educators to practice and promote empathy with students, Brown (2020) explained that the attributes of empathy are complex skill sets. However, the skills can be broken down into simple practices, many of which include listening, connecting, and understanding. In order to execute these simple practices well, language is needed. And as seen above, in the United States, English seems to be the primary language to connect in, but as noted earlier, English is not the only language in this country or its classrooms.

Rationale

There exists a large amount of research about the general benefits of language learning at young ages (Boyson et al., 2013; Kissau et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2015), as well as the need for more empathy in U.S. schools (Malti et al., 2016; Van den Bedem et al., 2019). However, there exists very little research on how second language learning and empathy may be connected. This literature review aims to go beyond general benefits of language learning, and to analyze the possible societal and psychological impacts of language learning, specifically when introduced in

the younger grades. Currently, second language learning in the United States varies greatly by region, state, and community. Different populations have drastically different opportunities when it comes to opportunities for second language learning, whether it be learning English as a second language or studying a foreign language. In many schools, English Language Learners are the only students labeled as "language learners" and this sometimes promotes a negative stereotype amongst students and staff. But why are not all students and teachers alike considered language learners? Everyone uses language to connect with others and as seen above, there are hundreds of languages in the U.S. and even more around the world.

Educational leaders and policymakers in the United States need to understand the potential that language programs have to impact students, transform communities, and promote the development of empathy. In today's globalized world and increasing interconnectedness, it will be important for students to have the ability to communicate in other languages, as well as respect different ways of thinking, cultures, and practice empathy with people they interact with, whether it be virtually or in-person. Language learning is not an isolated subject that is separate from the real world; it is part of truly being an empathic and understanding global citizen.

Definitions of terms

To better understand the terms in this literature review, clear definitions of the following terms are provided: academic language, bilingual, empathy, English Language Learner, FLES, FLEX, language immersion, monolingual, multilingual, and second language learning.

Academic Language

Academic language refers to the formal or standard use of a language. This is typically the language expected and used in schools (Fitzsimmons-Doolan et al., 2015).

Bilingual

An individual can be described as bilingual when they speak two languages.

Empathy

Although there are a variety of definitions for empathy, it is generally accepted that empathy can be summarized as the ability to understand and connect to the emotions another person is experiencing (Brown, 2020). It is important to note that even with this simple definition, empathy is a multidimensional concept that includes different types of empathy as well as various cognitive and communicative components, which are explored in this literature review as well (Brown, 2020; Davis, 1983; Van den Bedem et al., 2019).

English Language Learner (ELL)

An English Language Learner (ELL) is a student who is specifically studying English as their second (or more) language (Lillie et al., 2012).

FLES

Foreign Language in Elementary School is a program, where a second language is treated as a weekly or biweekly class where a language teacher (most often not the classroom teacher) provides instruction in the language. The language class is often treated like a special class, such as gym, art, music, etc.

FLEX

Foreign Language Exploratory is a program where students spend time exploring one or more languages, either with the classroom teacher or a separate language teacher.

Language Immersion

Language learning programs, primarily at the elementary level, where most subjects are taught in the target language and students use the language as the primary means of

communication with teachers and classmates. Dual language immersion programs are intentionally designed to support students who come from bilingual households as well as students who come from English-speaking households.

Monolingual

An individual can be described as monolingual when they only speak one language.

Multilingual

An individual can be described as multilingual when they speak three or more languages. For both bilingual and multilingual it is important to note that the level of language proficiency may vary depending on the research study and participants (Carlson & Metzoff, 2008).

Second Language Learning

For the purpose of this literature review, second language learning is used when someone is studying a language other than their native language. There is much debate whether to call it second language learning, foreign language, modern language, or world language, because it varies greatly depending on the context of the learner, which is why second language learner is used to generalize the act of learning a second language (Larsen-Freeman & Freeman, 2008).

Research Focus and Questions

This literature review begins with a focus on current language learning practices in the United States, how political ideologies influence language programs, the options available to students in the K-12 school system, as well as advantages and disadvantages of different programs. It then explores empathy, connection between language communication skills and empathy, as well as possible cognitive benefits and the development of empathy. All areas ultimately work to answer these questions: How are learning a second language at a young age

and the development of empathy connected? What are the implications for schools in the United States?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Learning Ideologies

This literature review aims to analyze language learning in the United States, and this includes native-English speakers learning languages as well as non-native English speakers learning English. Thus it is important to look at the role English-only ideologies have played in shaping second language learning in the United States. This concept has been present throughout much of U.S. history and has affected different language groups throughout the years: Native Americans and tribal languages in the 1800s, German during World War I, Japanese during World War II, and more recently Spanish-speaking immigrants from Latin America (Brown, 1994; Lillie et al., 2012).

These ideologies have greatly influenced educational policies in the U.S. and there remain a number of states with English-only educational laws, one example being the state of Arizona where the state mandates a program called Structured English Immersion (SEI) as a part of the Flores Consent Order (Lillie et al., 2012). This program is a four-hour period in which students considered English Language Learners (ELL) are required to be in a separate class where they receive instruction at their level of English with little to no support in their native language. To better understand the impact of these laws, Lillie et al. (2012) studied groups of ELL students in the SEI program in various K-12 public schools throughout the state. Overall, Lillie et al. (2012) found that the SEI program was negatively impacting the growth of ELL students in Arizona and that ELL students were not receiving equal educational opportunities. Factors such as insufficient funding, lack of quality curriculum, unqualified teachers, as well physical separation from English-speaking peers were all elements contributing to the negative effects of SEI. Although the program is intended to catch students up in their English language

abilities, ELL students in the program tend to fall behind in other academic areas and are not given the same opportunities as their English-speaking peers.

Although Lillie et al. (2012) found monolingual policies problematic for the success of ELL students, these types of laws and programs may also have an indirect impact on monolingual students learning other languages. Mehmedbegovic and Bak (2017) explained that when monolingual policies are in place, it can often perpetuate a number of false assumptions that have taken root in societal thinking. One of these assumptions being that learning languages is not as important as core subject areas and that knowing multiple languages can negatively impact an individual's ability to learn, sometimes referred to as the limited resources model (Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017). Fitzsimmons-Doolan (2017) also noted that this idea of multiple languages as a problem has a strong presence in the political sphere and has impacted the progress of multilingual educational policies in some states.

Another assumption addressed by Mehmedbegovic and Bak (2017) was that monolingualism is the norm and anyone who is not monolingual is different and does not fully belong. This can have lasting impacts on bilingual students because they do not feel connected or welcome, and for "monolingual students," it creates a fear or hesitancy to learn a new language. The last assumption is the false idea that when learning languages, one must achieve "native-like" proficiency to actually be of any value (Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017). This puts an immense pressure on language learners to have perfect accents, grammar, and vocabulary when that is not the main goal of language learning. With these false assumptions influencing school policies and teachers, it not only stigmatizes ELL students, but it discourages second language teaching initiatives and limits native-English speakers from exploring new languages. It is suggested that education policies around the world should support a "Healthy Linguistic Diet,"

where bilingualism is affirmed and encouraged, and students of all backgrounds are encouraged to to pursue language learning opportunities throughout their educational careers and into adulthood (Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017, p. 162).

The globalization of English is another concept connected to English-only philosophies. There are some who claim that with time, other languages will not be needed, and that Americans should only learn English because in the end it will dominate the global community and job market (Stein-Smith, 2016). It is true that in the past 30 years, more people are learning to speak English around the world (Larsen-Freeman & Freeman, 2008). English is currently the most widely spoken language in the world, however not all of those speakers are native English speakers, which is why Chinese comes before English with the largest population of native speakers. Both Larsen-Freeman and Freeman (2008) and Stein-Smith (2016) explained that even with English being the most spoken language, the need for bilingual speakers in and out of the United States continues to grow each year.

Case Study: Language Ideologies in Spain

The United States is not the only country to struggle with linguistic controversy. Although there are many examples throughout history, such as English versus the Celtic languages in Scotland and Ireland or French versus English in Canada, the country of Spain has a long history of multilingualism and educational policies that shed light on the implications for language learning in schools. Spanish, also referred to as Castilian, is the official language of the country, however, more than 40 percent of the population lives in bilingual regions where local minority languages are spoken, such as Catalan in Catalonia, Galician in Galicia, and Euskadi in the Basque Country (Lasagabaster, 2017). Many of these local languages suffered under the dictatorship of Franco, who made Castilian the official language and implemented monolingual

policies that removed all other languages from public and educational spheres (Garvía & Santana, 2020). Since the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975, most of the local languages have made a comeback and are used in schools, homes, and public places. Furthermore, four of the languages, Catalan, Galician, Euskera, and Valencian are recognized by law as co-official languages in their respective communities.

Despite the increase in use, there has been continued debate on how to best support students in learning and maintaining multiple languages, especially with the globalization of English and the stigmatization of minority languages linked to nationalism, primarily in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Lasagabaster (2017) analyzed student motivation and attitudes toward language learning, specifically focusing on the learning of English, Basque, Galician, and Catalan. Overall, it was found that multilingual policies in schools "exerted a positive impact on students' language attitudes and language learning motivation" (Lasagabaster, 2017, p. 594). Especially important to note is the finding that when schools promote minority languages in a positive way, it has the potential to increase student motivation and improve attitudes towards language learning. Lasagabaster (2017) concluded that the school system should continue to encourage multilingualism so that students are encouraged to embrace all languages, but especially to assist in preserving the regional minority languages that are unique to the country of Spain.

Similarly, Garvía and Santana (2020) found positive attitudes towards multilingualism in the general population, but in Catalonia specifically. The situation in Catalonia is unique in comparison to other regions of Spain because the use of Catalan has increased significantly in recent years due to various laws enacted by the regional government that established Catalan as the primary language of instruction in schools and removed barriers previously imposed by

Franco. However, there is growing concern that the regional Catalonian government is going too far in imposing Catalan language requirements and limiting the use of Castilian and other languages in schools. This is partially due to the extreme Catalan nationalist movement and local government initiatives to separate Catalonia from the country of Spain. Due to these political pressures and language policies, Garvía and Santana (2020) set out to analyze findings from a public survey taken in 2016 to better understand the opinions of the public. The study found that despite the local government's claims that Catalonians prefer full Catalan immersion in their local schools, the population is in favor of multilingual education and policies, especially when it comes to learning Spanish and English, which are believed to be essential in most workplaces in Spain. The study suggested that both local and national governments take into consideration the general population's opinions when it comes to educational language policies. The case of Catalonia shows the power that governments and divisive language ideologies can have when it comes to educational language policies and how they may or may not be responding to the needs or desires of the community.

The language policies in Spain and Catalonia show that shifts in educational language policies are possible, but that it takes time. From 1985 until now, Spain has made complete educational policy reforms and changed the direction of the language use, and different regions continue to debate, reform, and create new policies (Garvía & Santana, 2020). However, when compared to policy changes in the United States it seems like accelerated change.

In the United States, in 1994 Brown advocated for early childhood language programs and the need for a national language learning policy. In 2005, Stewart argued that increasing language learning will help students in all academic areas and that schools should increase language learning. In 2009, Tochon again called for school changes in language learning and an

increase of language instruction in younger grades. More recently in 2021, there are increasing numbers of immersion and heritage language programs, but there continues to be a lack of formal educational language policies in place (U.S. Educational Language Policy, 2021). With so many researchers suggesting policy changes that encourage language learning throughout the past 25 years, the question is why has there not been more change in the United States (Brown, 1994; Lasagabaster, 2017; Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017; Stewart, 2005)? According to the Center for Applied Linguistics, this lack of change is due to the widely held beliefs about immigrants, English as the majority language, and patriotism that continue to dominate the political conversations surrounding educational policies (U.S. Educational Language Policy, 2021). These reasons are similar to the assumptions explored in Mehmedbegovic and Bak (2017) as well as the extreme nationalism displayed in Catalonia and are key factors in the lack of policy change in the United States.

Language Learning Educational Policies

Fitzsimmons-Doolan (2017) and Fitzsimmons-Doolan et al. (2015) explored this influence that language ideologies can have on educational policies. Although on the surface language policies may seem like a simple topic, when analyzed on the political level, the complexity increases due to many interrelated components that include language ideologies, as well as language management, and language practices. With policies being so complicated, it is even more difficult for change to occur, which is why Fitzsimmons-Doolan (2017) sought to analyze the possible changes in language beliefs over time and the influence of these beliefs. This study took place in Arizona, the same state with the English-only policies examined in Lillie et al. (2012) and used the Arizona Beliefs About Language Survey results from 2010 and 2016. Through analyzing the results, it was found that over the six-year time period there was a

slight shift toward “pro-multilingualism and less positive orientations toward pro-monolingualism and multiple languages as a problem” (Fitzsimmons-Doolan, 2017, p.56). However, as the authors pointed out, this change was minimal and not enough to make significant policy reforms. This study suggested that language ideologies can change over time, but not very quickly, which may be a factor in the lack of change in U.S. policy over the last three decades. However, it is noted that change is not impossible and that positive personal experiences for policy-influential individuals could be a way to accelerate change in beliefs and attitudes moving forward.

In contrast to the Arizona English-only policies and political ideologies, Fitzsimmons-Doolan et al. (2015) looked specifically at educator beliefs of administrators and teachers working in a dual language environment. Although the majority of district staff aligned with the view that languages other than English are endowments, Fitzsimmons-Doolan et al. (2015) also found “that competing ideologies coexisted including multiple languages as a problem and academic language as a marker of intelligence” (p. 13). These findings suggested that even when pro-multilingualism policies and practices are in place, individual ideologies can still differ and may impact student experiences at school. Although more research is needed in the area of language beliefs and ideologies, Fitzsimmons-Doolan (2017) and Fitzsimmons-Doolan et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of language ideologies and the need for self-reflection for policy creators and educators alike to assess their own beliefs and practices. When exploring the potential connection between empathy and language learning, one needs to consider all the factors contributing to current language learning practices, which includes language ideologies. It could be argued that this literature review falls within the ideological view that languages other than English are endowments, rather than a problem.

Second Language Learning in U.S. Schools

Aside from policies and ideologies, it is also important to consider the current language learning trends in the United States. According to the 2017 National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Report, similar to the percentage of Americans who speak another language, around 20 percent of K-12 students in the U.S. receive instruction in another language before college (American Councils for International Education, 2017). These numbers do not necessarily account for ELL students, which according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), in 2018 around ten percent of students in U.S. public schools were English Language Learners, with some states such as California reaching almost 20 percent. Looking at college-level language enrollment, only around eight percent of undergraduate or graduate students are enrolled in language courses other than English (Looney & Lusin, 2019). This is about a nine percent drop from 2013 to 2016, which aligns with the trend that overall language learning in the United States continues to decline over time.

When analyzing these trends, an important factor to consider is what language learning requirements exist in U.S. schools. "A total of 11 states have foreign language graduation requirements; 16 states do not have foreign language graduation requirements; and 24 states have graduation requirements that may be fulfilled by a number of subjects—one of which is foreign languages" (American Councils for International Education, 2017, p. 6). There are often less language requirements at the middle school level and requirements are often nonexistent at the elementary school level. Despite the absence of official requirements at the elementary school level, there are still a variety of language learning programs available in some U.S. elementary schools. Stewart (2005), in addition to finding many benefits linked to language learning in elementary school, such as improved cognitive abilities and increased achievement scores, found

that there are three successful language learning models that exist in elementary schools across the country: dual or full language immersion programs, Foreign Language in Elementary School programs (FLES), and Foreign Language Exploratory programs (FLEX).

Dual and Full Language Immersion

In dual language immersion or full immersion programs, most subjects are taught in the target language and students use the language as the primary means of communication with teachers and classmates. Immersion programs, when fully executed, often result in high proficiency, with some students being considered fully bilingual with near native like accents. Presently, immersion is the third most common language learning program found in U.S. schools (American Councils for International Education, 2017; Stewart, 2005). Some of the most common languages for immersion programs include Spanish (especially for dual-language programs), French, German, and Chinese, and more recently some heritage speaking programs such as Hmong and Somali. It is also important to note that some schools also offer partial immersion programs where only half the day is immersion while the other half is in English. While some places like Arizona have limited programs available to ELL students, others have implemented these dual language programs that support ELL students as well as native English-speaking students. One example of a successful dual language program, although an older study, looks at student achievement in a K-8 dual language Spanish immersion program in Chicago, Illinois over the course of ten years (Senesac, 2002). Looking specifically at the scores of native Spanish speaking students, despite half of the school day being in English and half in Spanish, students were able to "attain high levels of achievement in English reading and writing, math, science, and social studies" (Senesac, 2002, p. 99). Senesac (2002) noted that successful dual language programs stem not simply from adding the use of Spanish, but from employing specific

school features such as challenging curriculum for all students, a caring and supportive environment, highly trained staff, student-centered learning, connecting learning the home culture of students, and parent involvement (Senesac, 2002).

Similar to Senesac (2002), Boyson et al. (2013) and Xu et al. (2015) looked at students beginning a second language in kindergarten but instead of dual language programs, the studies specifically focused on full language immersion programs where most students came from English speaking households. Boyson et al. (2103) compared the oral proficiency and listening comprehension of different Spanish immersion cohort groups, one that started in kindergarten and another that started in eighth grade. Overall, they found that more than 75 percent of students who started in kindergarten were able to converse in Spanish versus only 45.5% of students in the later start group. Similarly, Xu et al. (2015) compared students in an elementary Mandarin immersion program with high school students after completing a four-year Mandarin language class. Although the groups were comparable in some areas, the immersion program slightly outperformed the high school group in a number of areas. One limitation in this study was that scores of fourth and fifth graders were compared to high school students, thus impacting the written and verbal achievement levels due to cognitive differences. Despite this limitation, the authors still concluded that the Mandarin immersion program supported students in developing high levels of proficiency that are close to native-speaker levels. Both Boyson et al. (2013) and Xu et al. (2015) concluded that there are benefits for starting bilingual programs in the younger grades.

Foreign Language in Elementary School

Despite the success of immersion programs, it is often not a feasible option in some school districts due to funding and staff availability, so another language learning model for the

elementary school level that can support early language development is called Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) (Stewart, 2005). In this program, a second language is treated as a weekly or biweekly class where a language teacher (most often not the classroom teacher) provides instruction in the language. This program could be considered a "standard" foreign language class where students learn the new language and vocabulary through listening, speaking, reading, and writing practice and is the most common language learning model found in U.S. elementary schools (American Councils for International Education, 2017). Students in FLES programs often go on to further study the language in middle or high school but leave elementary school with a strong foundation and sometimes native-like pronunciation.

There has been some debate whether or not FLES programs are beneficial to student learning, especially with the stronger emphasis put on student achievement scores through the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and other state accountability programs (Taylor & Lafayette, 2010). Both Schuster (2005) and Taylor and Lafayette (2010) researched the performance of students enrolled specifically in FLES, not immersion, on the Iowa Basic Skills Test (ITBS). Schuster (2005) compared FLES students beginning language instruction in second grade with non-FLES peers in the same district. The FLES program was minimal, totaling one hour per week of language instruction from second through fifth grade. Scores from sixth grade ITBS were analyzed, but no significant differences were found between the two groups, suggesting that FLES had no negative impacts on student learning. This is different from Taylor and Lafayette (2010), which also compared FLES students to non-FLES students. In this study, students began second language instruction in third grade, where language instruction is required for at least 30 minutes each day, which is more than double the one hour a week required in Schuster (2005). ITBS scores from grades three, four, and five were analyzed and there were

statistically significant differences in grades four and five, showing that FLES students outperformed non-FLES students. This suggested that sustained enrollment in a FLES program and increased time in the language each week may have a positive impact on student achievement.

Foreign Language Exploratory

Another language learning option for elementary schools is FLEX (Foreign Language Exploratory) (Stewart, 2005), which is the third most common foreign language instructional model found in U.S. elementary and middle schools (American Councils for International Education, 2017). In this learning model, students spend time exploring one or more languages, either with the classroom teacher or a separate language teacher. This program is treated as an introduction to languages and students receive basic vocabulary, pronunciation, and study about different cultures, languages, and countries. Most instruction is given in English and the teacher may or may not be fluent in the second language being explored. Both Javorsky and Moser (2020) and Stewart (2005) explained that fluency in a second language is not an outcome of FLEX programs but may encourage more language learning in future grades as well as increased curiosity about other cultures and viewpoints, which are important components of empathy. Javorsky and Moser (2020) found that FLEX programs can even work in a preschool setting when a strong partnership is formed between teachers, language specialists, and families, especially when students come from English speaking households with no other language exposure.

These findings and different programs suggested that more time for second language programs is beneficial for younger students. Both Stewart (2005) and Tochon (2009) recommended full immersion or dual immersion when possible due to the major increase in

language learning when students are encouraged to learn in a language, not just about language as in FLES, FLEX, or traditional introductory language classes. However, smaller amounts of language exposure as seen in Taylor and Lafayette (2010) and Schuster (2005) can still be of benefit, or at least not detrimental to student growth. Tochon (2009) suggested that at least four 30-minute sessions each week are needed for efficient elementary language instruction.

Language Learning at Younger Ages

Whether it is immersion, FLES, or FLEX, language programs at the elementary level continue to be limited in the United States and although there are many factors such as funding, staffing, and language ideologies (Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017; Stewart, 2005; Tochon, 2009), there is another important factor to consider that is related to the debate of optimal age of language acquisition. Some research supports the idea that younger is always better when it comes to language learning and that a second language comes easier to children before they hit the age of puberty (Boyson et al., 2013; DeKeyser, 2013; Kissau et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2015). In contrast, there is other research that says younger is not better, and that adults, adolescents, and children all have the same ability or aptitude to learn languages and that older may be even better or faster when learning a second language (Huang, 2015; Marinova-Todd et al., 2000; Tuyet, 2020). Huang (2015) analyzed 42 language learning studies from the past 50 years and found that most studies did not provide clear or explicit evidence that younger learners have an advantage when learning a second language, although some highlighted specific areas with very slight advantages. However, Huang (2015) acknowledged that even if the studies did not find advantages of starting language learning younger, it did not seem to have any detrimental effects on students or other learning goals.

Despite these varying perspectives, both DeKeyser (2013) and Marinova-Todd (2000) explained that when studying the optimal age of language acquisition, the learning context surrounding second language learners can vary greatly, with age being only one of the contextual factors. For example, an ELL student who is not literate in their first language is not going to progress in a second language the same way a college graduate studying a second language through immersion would. Thus the optimal age of acquisition is not the only factor to be considered, especially when there is an overwhelming amount of evidence showing that there are still other benefits for students who begin learning languages at younger ages (Boyson et al., 2013; Kissau et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2015) and starting languages earlier is not a waste of time (Tuyet, 2020). But as Tuyet (2020) explained, aside from age, it is crucial that educators take the time to understand the learning context of students and design language instruction based on student needs.

A specific language learning context to consider when looking at age of language learning is FLES or FLEX programs, as explored in Taylor and Lafayette (2010) and Schuster (2005), and whether or not younger is better in minimal input learning situations. Larson-Hall (2008) looked specifically at situations where there was minimal input of the English language at young ages in Japan. Although other research has suggested that full immersion is better for younger ages, this "study found evidence that a younger starting age makes a modest difference to both phonological and basic morphosyntactic abilities, even in a situation of minimal input" (Larson-Hall, 2008, p. 58). Similarly, Kissau et al. (2015) studied the difference between starting a new language in middle school versus high school also in a non-immersion setting where students studied either Spanish, French, German or Mandarin. This study used the assessment and proficiency scale developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

(ACTFL), which places students on a spectrum ranging from novice, intermediate, advanced, and superior. The middle school start group on average was able to score higher, intermediate low-mid range, in comparison to the high school start group, which averaged in the novice low-mid range (Kissau et al., 2015). These results show that even a few years in a minimal input setting can increase second language abilities and are beneficial for younger learners.

Inclusion in Language Learning

Another important contextual factor to consider in second language learning at younger ages is students with specific learning needs, whether it be a learning disability, ELL students, or at-risk students in poverty. In the past, it was common to make exemptions for these groups of students from foreign language classes, programs, or requirements (Peker & Regalla, 2021). In some places, such as California, districts limited language programs available in low-income communities due to the pressure to improve academic performance in English, math, and science (Sung et al., 2006). These patterns of exclusion are in direct opposition to the current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which began in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). However, some have argued that there can be too much pressure put on students with specific learning needs to participate in language learning programs when it may be interfering with their development in English and other academic areas (Tribushinina et al., 2020).

To better understand the impacts of language learning on students with disabilities, both Peker and Regalla (2021) and Tribushinina et al. (2020) studied the effects of second language learning on students with disabilities in limited input situations. Peker and Regalla (2021) specifically looked at pre-kindergarten students in a French FLEX program. Students in the study ranged from no special needs to mild special needs, and significant special needs. After two years in the program, it was found that “students with special needs can experience success

learning a new language without fear of confusion or L2 interference" (Peker & Regalla, 2021, p. 87). Tribushinina et al. (2020) also studied students with special needs, but specifically students with Developmental Language Disorders (DLD) learning English and Russian. These students significantly underperformed compared to students without DLD, however, were still able to progress in their second language acquisition just not at the same rate as students without DLD. Despite these confounding views, both researchers agreed that more research is needed to better understand the impacts of second language learning on students with disabilities and that participation in language programs should depend on the needs of specific individuals, instead of automatically enrolling or excluding based on special needs labels (Peker & Regalla, 2021; Tribushinina et al., 2020). Tribushinina et al. (2020) also noted that careful consideration is needed when deciding what teaching strategies and language programs are used when working with students with special needs.

Aside from learning disabilities, other important contextual factors to consider are immigration status and socioeconomic status. As seen with Lillie et al. (2012), there are various approaches to supporting immigrant students who speak languages other than English at home, but many fall under the umbrella of multiple languages as a problem or pro-monolingualism (Fitzsimmons-Doolan, 2017). Engel de Abreu et al. (2012) studied the cognitive differences between immigrant bilingual students living in poverty and monolingual students in higher socioeconomic status. The study found that the bilingual students outperformed monolingual students in two cognitive domains: representation and control. Although the study was done in Luxembourg and not the United States, the results can still shed light on how bilingualism can be a powerful tool in removing barriers for immigrants and students in poverty. Engel de Abreu et al. (2012) even suggested that encouraging bilingual speakers and immigrants to participate in

foreign language programs may aid in closing the achievement gap between socioeconomic status groups.

Another important consideration for inclusion is the students labeled as ELL who have a native language other than language. There are concerns that students who are working to learn English should not be required to study another language. However, depending on the school and community, students would be able to meet language requirements if their native language was offered as a class or dual language immersion program. Another way to support ELL students could be through the Seal of Biliteracy, which is an official seal placed on high school diplomas stating that students are proficient in a language other than English (Stein-Smith, 2016). Students obtain the seal by passing a basic language skill assessment in another language, with proficiency based on standards from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Currently, 40 states and the District of Columbia have approved the biliteracy program, with the last 10 states considering or beginning the process (Black et al., 2020). If states offered this program in all languages, this would allow ELL students to focus on learning English as well as receive credit for their first language abilities. However, it is important to note that this would also mean providing support when necessary for students to become literate in their native language as well as English.

Other Benefits of Language Learning

Aside from considering the benefits of age of acquisition and different second language programs, Tochon (2009) noted that there are big picture benefits for world language education that cannot be ignored, which includes "how to foster communication, peace, and well-being across the community of nations" (p. 671)). This means that language learning has more benefits than simply learning vocabulary and grammar in various languages. Although the studies above

(Kissau et al., 2014; Larson-Hall, 2008) did not intend to study other benefits in language learning at young ages, there were some surprising findings. Larson-Hall (2008) noted that starting another language at a young age supported the development of a positive attitude towards language learning overall, which can in turn prepare students for the study of other languages as well as multicultural understanding. This is important because whether or not students study the same language introduced early on, being exposed early on can provide students with a solid foundation to support more language learning in future grades. Similarly, Kissau et al. (2015) found that students who started language in middle school showed more confidence and were more intrinsically motivated in learning a second language in comparison with high school students. These findings showed that aside from actually learning a language, there may be some social-emotional benefits as well. Even Huang (2015), the study that did not support learning languages at younger ages, acknowledged that there are non-linguistic benefits when starting younger, such as increased positive attitudes towards other languages and cultures.

Looking at a landmark study in immersion education, similar benefits were also found with language learning at younger ages (Lambert et al., 1973). This study focused on a community-based French language immersion elementary school in Canada and conducted a yearly analysis of student growth. The report concluded that the French immersion experience did not negatively impact student's native language abilities, that student development of the French language was sufficient but not native-like, that other content areas were not negatively affected by learning in French, that there were no negative cognitive impacts found from learning in a second language, and that the overall student perspective of French-Canadian and French people had improved. Lambert et al. (1973) acknowledged the change in social attitudes was not an intended outcome of this type of program, but is an important byproduct and possibly

even just as important as the development of cognitive and language abilities. Compared to the English control group in the study, the students in grades four and five viewed the "other" more favorably, in this case the other being French-Canadians and French people. Despite this not being specifically the development of empathetic skills, the results do show an increase in multicultural awareness and acceptance, which is related to understanding other perspectives and points of view.

Empathy and Students

Before considering the linguistic connections with empathy, it is important to first examine empathy and its role in today's students and schools. In a recent study, Van den Bedem et al. (2019) found that the development of empathic skills helped students obtain more positive relationships and maintain positive interactions with peers. This longitudinal study had students respond to questions about friendships, peer interactions, and empathy and although all information was self-reported, it is important to note that the overall correlation between empathy and friendship was positive. Van den Bedem et al. (2019) concluded that empathy helps students develop stronger relationships and vice-versa; good friendships support the development of empathetic skills. So not only is empathy important, but it is also necessary for students to connect with those around them.

There are different types of empathy and how that impacts relationships with others. There is affective empathy, which is "sharing the emotions of others," cognitive empathy, which is "to understand the thoughts and emotions of others," and there is also something called prosocial motivation, which is "the urge to act on these empathetic feelings" (Van den Bedem et al., 2019, p. 600). All three of these are at work throughout the process of developing positive relationships, but it was found that cognitive empathy and prosocial motivation are especially

important for friendship development. Although previous studies have explored empathy and friendship development, this is one of the first to explore the connection between the two over an extended period of time.

With studies like Van den Bedem et al. (2019), there has been an increase in awareness and desire for growing skills in empathy at school, which has brought about a plethora of options for teachers to use. Malti et al. (2016) found a variety of school-based intervention programs to support students in the development of empathy. The study reviewed the impact of 19 different programs and specifically how they responded to the developmental needs of students in different grades or even within the same grade level. It was found that most programs did not meet the developmental needs of students and Malti et al. (2016) suggested more research is needed in order to better support all students in the development of empathy. Although not a primary focus of the study, Malti et al. (2016) did find starting empathy programs earlier had a larger effect on student development of empathy, which is where the connection between learning languages at a young age and empathy comes into play. This literature review aims to see if there is more that schools can do to promote empathy using something already used on a daily basis: language. Not specifically just speaking, reading, and writing, but whether or not the act of learning multiple languages can lead to the development of empathy in young students. How are learning a second language at a young age and the development of empathy connected? And what are the implications for schools in the United States?

Communication Skills and Empathy

Limited research exists about the specific connection between second language learning and empathy, however, researchers have been able to identify and analyze certain communication skills connected to empathy that may be enhanced when someone speaks two or

more languages, especially at a young age. In a study about early exposure to multiple languages, Fan et al. (2015) found that children who were exposed to other languages were better able to interpret a speaker's intended meaning. To reach this conclusion Fan et al. (2015) studied a group of children ages four to six, with even numbers of children being from monolingual households, households with limited exposure to other languages, and bilingual or multilingual households. Children were asked to participate in a communication task where they had to follow directions from the speaker's point of view. The results showed that children from the monolingual group often failed to interpret the speaker's intent, whereas children in the exposure and bilingual groups were much more successful in completing the task. The authors suggested that early exposure to other languages can indeed promote effective communication skills and support children in developing the ability to understand other points of view.

These findings are important in relation to empathy because a major component of empathy, as noted by Van den Bedem et al. (2019), is understanding other people's thinking or point of view (cognitive empathy). However, it is important to note that Fan et al. (2015) explained that it is very early exposure to different languages that may be necessary in order for these positive communication skills to develop. This is because as children learn, grow, and study they can "become entrenched in an egocentric way of interpreting their social world" (Fan et al., 2015, p. 1095). This has major implications for families and schools because that means that if language exposure comes later, such as middle school or high school, the exposure may not have the same positive effect on enhancing one's ability to understand other perspectives. Fan et al. (2015) explained that further research is needed to better understand the ages of language exposure and overall impact on communication skills.

A similar study was conducted by Liberman et al. (2016) that analyzed the effects of language learning on an even younger test group, infants from fourteen to seventeen months of age. Half of participants were from monolingual (English-only) households and the other half from a multilingual household (English and exposure to at least one other language). In the study, the experimenter made a verbal request in English for a certain toy based on their point of view and the infants had to grab the correct item without additional prompting or assistance. The multilingual group consistently chose the correct toy, whereas monolingual children had a lower rate of success, overall showing that early multilingual exposure to various languages may enhance one's ability to understand a speaker's perspective and intended meaning (Liberman et al., 2016). Again, not specifically demonstrating empathy, but an ability to interpret another point of view.

Although connected to the work of Fan et al. (2015), the findings of Liberman et al. (2016) have different implications for language exposure at young ages aside from the positive correlation between language exposure and understanding other points of view. First, is that due to the young age of participants in Liberman et al. (2016), it was suggested that the degree of bilingualism or language learning is not as important, rather simply exposing a child to various languages can be enough to enhance these types of communication skills. The second implication or question that arose from this research is what specifically causes this enhanced ability to interpret other points of view? Is it the ability of understanding multiple languages and being multilingual? Or is it that the exposure to various languages enhances executive functioning skills that enable children to better attend to and interpret intended meaning? Both authors (Fan et al., 2015; Liberman et al., 2016) suggested further research is needed around the

benefits and implications of bilingualism in the cognitive domain, which is discussed later on in this literature review.

Fan et al. (2015) and Liberman et al. (2016) looked specifically at language learning and the ability to understand other points of view in young age groups, but Dewaele and Wei (2012b) investigated cognitive empathy specifically in adults. Although this study intended to examine cognitive empathy, the results suggested more effects on specific communication skills instead of empathy in general. In this study, individuals from 205 different nationalities, varying from monolingual to multilingual, filled out a socio-biographical questionnaire online. The authors found that having knowledge of multiple languages, growing up bilingual, and living abroad did *not* have a significant impact on cognitive empathy levels. However, they did find a correlation between the degree of multilingualism and age, gender, and level of education with higher levels of empathy (Dewaele & Wei, 2012b). The authors explained that multilingual people "will tend to be more skillful in conversations as they can see the world from their interlocutor's point of view" (Dewaele & Wei, 2012b, p. 363). These findings connect to Cook's (2002) term multicompetence, which is a holistic approach to language learning that attempts to explain how learning languages is not simply the ability to add on skills in one's brain, rather it seeks to see language learning as a process that transforms and enhances the brain. This is important because it suggests that when one obtains multicompetence, they have a set of unique traits that monolinguals are unable to obtain.

Dewaele and Wei (2012b) used the same questionnaire in another study, but instead of analyzing cognitive empathy, they analyzed levels of Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA), which is defined as the "tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as desirable" (Dewaele & Wei, 2012a, p. 232). Although TA is not empathy, it can assist one in developing empathy due to the

flexibility in ambiguous situations. Similar to the 2012b study, Dewaele and Wei (2012a) found that higher levels of proficiency in various languages are also linked to higher levels of TA. This finding led the authors to suggest that being multilingual is correlated with higher levels of TA, which overall makes "more tolerant individuals and therefore better citizens" (Dewaele & Wei, 2012a, p. 237). These higher levels of TA that can occur as a result of being multilingual supports individuals in managing perspectives different than their own, which is an important part of empathy, specifically cognitive empathy as defined by Van den Bedem et al. (2019).

These results from Dewaele and Wei (2012a, 2012b) differed from the first two studies, Fan et al. (2015) and Liberman et al. (2016), because even though multilinguals scored higher on cognitive empathy and had a higher tolerance for ambiguity, it seems that being only bilingual instead of multilingual and growing up in a multilingual household both had little effect on levels of TA and cognitive empathy. It was only people who frequently spoke multiple languages and had exposure to multiple *cultural* contexts that had higher levels of TA. It is also important to note that Dewaele and Wei (2012a) found a strong correlation between time spent abroad and TA, which implies that there are many other factors that impact TA and cognitive empathy besides simply being multilingual, such as cultural awareness or experiences. The authors suggested that more research is needed in the area of growing up in a multilingual or multicultural household and how that may influence TA and other personality traits.

In an attempt to fill this void in research, Dewaele and Botes (2020) conducted a study specifically focused on the connection between being multilingual and specific personality traits. The study used the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), which measures five specific traits: cultural empathy, flexibility, social initiative, emotional stability, and open mindedness. Participants were foreign language learners of many different ages from a number of different

countries (Dewaele & Botes, 2020). Overall, it was found that there was a correlation between being multilingual and three traits: flexibility, social-initiative, and open-mindedness. Dewaele and Botes (2020) concluded that overall "knowing more languages provides positive traits to individuals, and that multilingualism and/or multiculturalism is –by extension- an advantage for the communities in which these multilinguals live" (p.821).

An important question that arises from this study is the possible influence of being *multicultural* versus *multilingual*. Dewaele and Botes (2020) explained that "becoming multilingual may not affect individuals' sense of self, identity and personality to the same extent as becoming multicultural," but when someone is bilingual or multilingual, they are often multicultural to some extent as well (p. 820-821). Therefore, it is difficult to separate the two to see if one influences personality more than another or if they work in conjunction. This study highlighted both the importance and complexity of the connection between language learning and personality traits, which includes empathy. And although this study, similar to Fan et al. (2015), Liberman et al. (2016), and Dewaele and Wei (2012a), did not find a direct relationship between multilingualism and empathy, the specific personality traits in the current study (flexibility, social-initiative, and open-mindedness) are important skills that may contribute to the development of empathy in young language learners. Alqarni and Dewaele (2018) also confirmed that even if there is not a specific connection to empathy skills, bilingualism does have some effect on emotion perception and the trait of emotional intelligence. In this study, the authors analyzed the difference between the emotional responses of Arabic-English bilinguals, Arabic monolinguals, as well as English monolinguals. Although there was a small effect size, the findings suggested that there is a small bilingual advantage when considering both the emotional and psychological domains (Alqarni & Dewaele, 2018).

Possible Cognitive Benefits of Multilingualism and Empathy

In order to discuss the effects of language learning and empathy, as Lambert et al. (2016) suggested, it is also important to understand that there are possible cognitive benefits of language learning that may promote the development of empathic abilities in students. Carlson and Meltzoff (2008) attempted to explore this topic in a study on executive functioning skills development in young bilingual children. The study looked at kindergarten students who were native bilinguals, native English speakers attending a kindergarten immersion program, and English monolinguals. Overall, they found that the native bilingual group did better with conflict tasks, suggesting that bilingual children may have enhanced executive functioning skills. Specifically in the areas of memory and inhibition, which the authors explained was due to the constant language switching they undergo on a daily basis. The monolingual and immersion groups performed around the same level, which suggested that early exposure to other languages may be the key to obtaining these cognitive benefits of bilingualism, which is similar to the findings of Fan et al. (2015) and Liberman et al. (2016). However, Carlson and Meltzoff (2008) did not find any negative effects of immersion on student's cognition and suggested that more research could be done about immersion programs specifically.

Despite this positive correlation between bilingualism and cognition, Carlson and Meltzoff (2008) explained that this topic of bilingualism is something that is difficult to study, especially when it comes to children, and that limitations and other variables that may influence results must be addressed. One of these limitations is that the term bilingual is subjective and is hard to define, and currently there is no system for evaluating levels of bilingualism in children. This means some children may be considered fluent or fully proficient in one language but may be partially proficient in the other language whereas another child might be fully proficient in

both languages, yet they are both considered bilingual, and this could positively or negatively influence data. Another important area to consider is that there are many other cultural and socioeconomic factors that are difficult to account for when working with bilingual children and families. The perfect scenario for testing bilingual effects on children where proficiency, socioeconomic, and cultural factors are similar would be difficult to find in the U.S. today (Carlson & Metzoff, 2008). Thus when looking at cognitive impacts of bilingualism there is much that needs to be considered.

However, there was a study done in Catalonia, Spain that was able to conduct research where some of these other factors were under control. Costa et al. (2008) explored the impacts of bilingualism on attentional networks in the brain. The unique and important part of this study is the different participants. One group was considered simultaneous bilinguals, people who group up learning two languages at the same time: Catalán and Spanish, which are common in this region of Spain. The second group was Spanish monolinguals with very limited exposure to other languages, such as only one or two classes in high school, which would be comparable to a large percentage of the population in the U.S. Thus, what Carlson and Meltzoff (2008) expressed as a concern about varying levels of bilingualism, is somewhat more even in this study. Costa et al. (2008) found that overall, the bilingual group outperformed the monolingual group and showed strengthened executive controls, specifically in the areas of monitoring processes and conflict resolution, which are important in relation to social skills and could support individuals in developing empathy.

Although these findings are positive in terms of having a cognitive advantage by being multilingual and the authors affirmed that having multiple languages can have positive effects throughout the life of someone who is bilingual (Costa et al., 2008), it is important to note that

the participants in the bilingual group are considered early bilinguals, because they learned both languages from infancy and received instruction in both languages throughout elementary and high school. Additionally, most of the individuals in this group reported using both languages on a daily basis at work, home, school, and in the community. Therefore, these positive results may not be able to apply to the broad meaning of what it means to be bilingual; because as Carlson and Meltzoff (2008) explained, there are many different levels of bilingualism that may have different advantages or disadvantages cognitively, emotionally, socially, and linguistically.

Despite these studies that are generally in support of a cognitive bilingual advantage that could support students with the development of empathy, there have been some studies that do *not* support these ideas. One study in particular, Morton and Harper (2007), asked whether or not the bilingual advantage exists. Similar to Carlson and Meltzoff (2008), Morton and Harper (2007) argued that previous studies in this field had ignored important factors, specifically socioeconomic status (SES) and culture. So in order to remove these variables, they tested a population of children from the same ethnicity and similar SES backgrounds to ensure that language was the only differing variable. Overall, they found no significant differences between the monolingual and bilingual groups, which suggested that SES and cultural differences may have influenced the results in other studies. Though these results do not support cognitive development through bilingualism, Morton and Harper (2007) acknowledged that there are still many questions surrounding the social, emotional, and academic impacts of being bilingual. And as many of the other studies have suggested, there are various factors to consider and more research is needed to better understand the cognitive and language development of children and how the two work together in the human brain (Carlson & Meltzoff, 2008; Morton & Harper, 2007).

Bilingual advantage or not, these studies showed that current understanding is limited but that language learning at younger ages does have lasting impacts on child development. Whether these impacts are due to cognitive changes or the other factors mentioned such as SES, culture, and communication skills, the power of language learning cannot be ignored when it comes to empathy. The development of empathy could come through many different experiences and lessons, but as these studies have shown, there are factors involved in language learning that may influence the development of empathy or enhance communication and cognitive skills that support the development of empathy (Carlson & Metzoff, 2008; Costa et al., 2008; Fan et al., 2015; Liberman et al., 2016).

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

There are many factors contributing to the current state of second language learning in the United States, one important factor being ideological beliefs that influence policy makers, educational leaders, as well as the general public, which includes students. Currently there are a number of monolingual ideologies that discourage second language learning, both for native English speakers and non-native English speakers. These beliefs perpetuate myths that learning a second language can negatively impact learning in other subject areas, that monolingualism is the norm and should be the standard in the United States, and that second language speakers need to obtain native-like abilities in order to be considered bilingual (Fitzsimmons-Doolan, 2017; Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017). These ideas influenced monolingual educational policies, as seen in Lillie et al. (2012) and continue to impact the way our schools teach and use second language learning. When compared with other countries, for example Spain, another country with linguistic controversy, the United States is slow to implement changes in educational language policies (Garvía & Santana, 2020). For 25 years, language researchers and educators have called for change, such as a national language learning policy and increasing language learning in elementary schools (Brown, 1994; Lasagabaster, 2017; Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017; Stewart, 2005), but there continues to be a lack of change both in educational policies as well as educational leadership beliefs (Fitzsimmons-Doolan et al., 2015).

This lack of educational language policies, requirements, and change has impacted the number of students participating in second language learning, both at the K-12 and college levels (American Councils for International Education, 2017). Part of this is also due to the

amount, type, and variety of language courses available to students in schools throughout the U.S. It seems that traditional foreign language instruction, where students study a specific language for a few hours each week, continues to be the most common form of language learning in the United States, and most often this occurs at the middle and high school levels (American Councils for International Education, 2017). Limited numbers of schools have language learning programs available at the elementary level including full or dual language immersion, FLES, and FLEX (Stewart, 2005). Full or dual language immersion seems to be the most beneficial in obtaining higher levels of language proficiency, but FLES and FLEX programs also provide students with a strong foundation, aptitude, and an openness for learning more languages in the future (Schuster, 2005; Taylor & Lafayette, 2010; Tochon, 2009).

Another factor influencing the current state of second language learning in the United States may also be the debate of the optimal age of language acquisition. Some researchers throughout the years claim that younger children learn a second language better than adults, while some insist that is not the case and anyone can learn a second language, despite age (DeKeyser, 2013; Marinova-Todd et al., 2000; Tuyet, 2020). Whether or not there is a perfect age to learn a second language, Kissau et al. (2015) and Larson-Hall (2008) shared that there is no harm in starting to learn second languages early on and even when students are in a situation with minimal input, it can increase second language abilities and provide other benefits as well. Researchers also agreed that what is more important for educators to consider is the context of students learning a second language and design lessons to meet the specific language needs of students (DeKeyser, 2013; Marinova-Todd et al., 2000; Tuyet, 2020). This is especially true when considering accommodations and inclusion of students with special needs as well as other

risk factors such as low socioeconomic status (Engle de Abreu et al., 2012; Peker & Regalla, 2021; Tribushinina et al., 2020).

Whether students learn a language early on or later in life, aside from gaining communication skills, a number of language researchers have found other benefits students may gain from learning other languages (Kissau et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 1973; Larson-Hall, 2008; Tochon, 2009). Some of these benefits include increased confidence, willingness to learn more languages, openness to others, multicultural awareness, and possibly increased empathic abilities. All are attributes and strengths that schools seek to instill in students, but most recently there has been an even greater emphasis and increased need for empathy in K-12 schools in the United States (Malti et al., 2016; Van den Bedem et al., 2019). All types of empathy: affective, cognitive, and prosocial motivation, are essential for students to be successful in developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with others in their school communities (Van den Bedem et al., 2019). Malti et al. (2016) suggested that there are a number of programs schools can use to promote empathy, however, this literature review focused on how learning a second language could aid in the development of empathy in young students.

Simply speaking two languages does not automatically make one more empathetic, however, there are a number of communication skills that are developed in the process of second language learning that are linked to empathy. A number of research studies have found an increased ability to interpret other points of view in bilingual or multilingual people (Dewaele & Wei, 2012b; Fan et al., 2015; Liberman et al., 2016). As well as higher levels of Tolerance of Ambiguity (TA), which can support individuals in managing perspectives different than their own (Dewaele & Wei, 2012a). Dewaele and Botes (2020) also found a correlation between being

multilingual and the personality traits of flexibility, social-initiative, and open-mindedness, which may also aid in the development of empathy in younger language learners.

Aside from communication skills, another important aspect of language learning is the cognitive domain and the possible cognitive benefits that could lead to increased empathic abilities. There have been some studies that suggested there is no bilingual advantage, meaning that speaking more than one language does not increase cognitive abilities (Morton & Harper, 2007). However, a number of other studies have found increased cognitive abilities in bilingual learners (Carlson & Metzoff, 2008; Costa et al., 2008). Specifically, advantages were found in executive functioning skills, monitoring processes, and conflict resolution. Despite these advantages, there continue to be questions surrounding the age and degree of bilingualism or multilingualism needed in order for these advantages to develop.

Professional Application

The findings presented in this literature review indicated that there may be benefits, both linguistic as well as empathic, to begin second language learning in younger grades, instead of waiting until high school or college, which is common practice in the United States. In order to improve language abilities and increase the development of empathy, schools in the United States should consider the role that second language learning has and how it could be enhanced or extended into younger grades. Tuyet (2020) explained that deciding the age to begin second language instruction in public schools "often involves political, economic and educational aspects" and that "most teachers cannot participate in that decision making" (p. 32). Although teachers can advocate for increased second language learning in elementary schools or begin incorporating some elements of FLEX programs in their teaching, the reality is that the decisions and policy making do not lie in the hands of teachers.

Thus this literature review has important applications for both educational policy makers and educational leadership in the United States. Policy makers at federal and state levels should examine current graduation requirements, for ELL students studying English, as well as native English-speaking students learning a second language. Funding for second language learning should also be reviewed and increased based on the change of requirements. Educational leadership at the university level would also benefit from reviewing language requirements as well as teacher preparation programs to train new teachers in FLES, FLEX, or other language learning programs. Educational leadership at the K-12 level should also review language requirements for high school and middle school and begin to explore the options available for immersion, FLES, or FLEX at the elementary level. Leaders may consider popular languages spoken in the local community as well as gather input from community members on which languages to incorporate and offer in the schools. Districts and schools that currently have immersion or dual-immersion programs in place should share data, resources, and learning materials to support other schools when implementing new language learning programs. Overall, leaders in these roles are wise to take time to consider why and how policies and requirements could be improved in order to better meet the needs of students and communities.

Limitations of the Research

There are two major limitations in the research presented in this literature review. First, as a number of the studies explained, language learning, bilingualism, and cognition are very complex areas of study (Carlson & Metzoff, 2008; Dewaele & Botes, 2020; Liberman et al., 2016). There are many influencing factors that need to be considered in this type of research, such as ambiguous definitions of bilingualism/language proficiency, reliable assessment tools,

age of language acquisition, form of instruction, students' home culture and language, time spent learning a language, and socioeconomic status. Looking specifically at the studies that compare monolingual and bilingual students Carlson and Meltzoff (2008) explained that:

> the ideal experimental situation in which bilingual and monolingual speakers have equal proficiency in their common language and equivalent social and economic circumstances is not easily attainable in the US today, or, if it could be achieved through extensive screening of participants, the findings would be grossly under-representative of the actual bilingual population found in North America. (p. 285)

This all comes back to the idea that each student's learning context is a crucial part of deciding when and how to implement learning a second language (Tuyet, 2020).

The second major limitation of this literature review is the lack of studies that specifically study the connections between language learning and empathy. As it can be seen in Chapter II, there are many studies that explore communication skills, personality traits, and cognitive abilities that may be enhanced when learning another language (Carlson & Metzoff, 2008; Costa et al., 2008; Dewaele & Wei, 2012b; Fan et al., 2015; Liberman et al., 2016), however, none of them look specifically at the connection between empathy and bilingualism. Thus many of the conclusions and connections made are done by using skills and ideas connected to empathy, but not empathy on its own. This does not discredit the idea that language learning can increase empathic abilities in students, but does mean that readers should take care when interpreting the findings and conclusions presented.

Implications for Future Research

There are a number of implications for future research that would be beneficial to gain a deeper understanding of bilingualism, empathy, and language learning in elementary school.

First, as mentioned in the limitations, more research is needed about the specific connection that exists between learning multiple languages and the development of empathy. This is a challenge because as Van den Bedem et al. (2019) and Carlson and Metzoff (2008) explained, both empathy and bilingualism are difficult areas to study due the psychological nature and the many confounding variables. Future research could build on studies mentioned in this literature review, such as Dewaele and Wei (2012b) and Dewaele & Botes (2020), that have pointed to a strong correlation between social skills and language learning and use them to connect to and study the various components of empathy.

Similarly, as Carlson and Metzoff (2008) pointed out, future research in bilingual education ought to seek how to find adequate testing conditions where more variables such as degree of bilingualism, socioeconomic status, and specific language program type are controlled. This would help obtain more accurate results that would help researchers and educators better understand the benefits and implications of second language learning, both for students who are learning English as a second language and native English speakers learning a second language. Both are unique scenarios that require specific testing conditions, and all influencing factors need to be considered when planning future research.

Another area of future research includes schools and studies that have successfully transitioned to FLES, FLEX, or immersion programs in elementary schools. Although a number of studies in this literature review found benefits to these types of programs (Boyson et al., 2013; Taylor & Lafayette, 2010; Javorsky & Moser, 2020), if schools are to make these changes, more specifics need to be researched so that educational leaders can make informed decisions and plans. As Stewart (2005) explained, many districts already struggle with staffing and funding, so it is critical that future research should look at factors such as funding, finding

enough bilingual staff, adequate training, how to choose a specific language program, and curriculum.

Conclusion

Second language learning and empathy are connected in many ways. Although a direct correlation between being bilingual and having strong empathy skills has not yet been established, knowing two or more languages provides students with a plethora of skills in the areas of communication, social abilities, and the cognitive domain. Enhanced skills in these areas may increase the development of empathy, especially when learned at a younger age (Fan et al., 2015). Empathy is an essential part of social and emotional development and should be taught in all schools (Malti et al., 2016). Because of this connection between language learning and empathy, it is important for schools in the United States to allow for more language learning opportunities, and to reevaluate the policies and requirements that are currently in place. A change in language policies will be difficult and may take time, but is possible. By encouraging more language learning in younger grades, it has the power to increase not only linguistic abilities, but also increase empathy amongst students, creating more well-rounded and globally minded citizens.

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