PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Playing allows children to discover and comprehend the world around them and the educational potential of play has been widely documented in research. This thesis argues for the integration of play-based learning into communicative foreign language teaching in elementary schools. It explores various didactic approaches to play-based learning, and it also analyzes its connection to both Communicative Language Teaching and research in Second Language Acquisition. Additionally, this thesis evaluates two practical examples from elementary school settings that show how play-based learning can be integrated into foreign language instruction. It also provides programmatic guidelines and negotiates ideas that seek to enhance elementary school foreign language curricula through play-based learning.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the European Union made language learning a significant priority on its agenda. A key objective of the EU's language policy is for EU citizens to master two additional languages besides their mother tongue. In their action plan for 2004-2006, they note: “It is a priority for Member States to ensure that language learning in kindergarten and primary school is effective, for it is here that key attitudes towards other languages and cultures are formed, and the foundations for later language learning are laid” (Renard and Milt 7). According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016, 92% of European elementary and secondary school students learn at least one foreign language as part of their education. Depending on the country, European students normally begin to learn their first foreign language as a required school subject between the ages of 6 and 9 (Devlin n.p.). In Germany, for example, most federal states introduce foreign language classes in the third grade, and some elementary schools start it in the first grade (Borgwardt n.p.).

In contrast to this, foreign language instruction in elementary education is not the norm in the USA. In 2017, according to the American Council for International Education, only 20% of K-12 students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia take foreign language classes. New Jersey has the highest percentage of students studying a foreign language, with 51%, while only about 9% of students study a foreign language in New Mexico, Arizona, and Arkansas (American Council for International Education 7).

For most schools in the USA, foreign language instruction does not take a common place in K-8 instruction (American Council for International Education 28-30).

Attitudes towards foreign language learning differ widely, especially regarding the instruction of foreign languages in elementary schools. The population is commonly divided between those who believe that starting early is generally better and those who question the benefits of learning a foreign language altogether. People might argue that English is spoken *by everyone around the world*. Additionally, some want their children to prioritize mastering their native language first, or they want them to focus on subjects like math before considering foreign languages. This is interesting, as it seems to be, at the same time, a common belief that children soak languages up like sponges while adults struggle with it.[1]

In this thesis, my goal is to analyze how elementary school aged children can benefit from foreign language classes and how they can be catering to those children's needs. Foreign language classes should leverage immersive contexts to enhance language acquisition. I argue that a combination of Communicative Language Teaching[2] and play-based learning[3] is a helpful approach to achieving successful foreign language instruction in elementary schools. Extensive research has shown that play-based learning is fruitful in both early education as well as in elementary schools.[4] The potential of play in the

[1] See for example Maynard 2012, page 1-3.
[2] An approach to foreign language teaching that emphasizes communication in interaction.
[3] An approach in which specific skills are acquired through a form of playing.
[4] For example, Bubikova et al., Gronlund, Nilsson et al., Dahl, Weisberg Hirsh-Pasek et al.

context of elementary school foreign language classes has also been recognized by Ewa Guz in the article “Learning A Foreign Language Through Play”. She states: “In order to initiate and maintain meaningful interaction and create developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, foreign language (FL) teachers of young learners’ need to acknowledge play as a central element of early foreign language pedagogy” (Guz 41). The *Nürnberger Recommendations* that were issued by the Goethe Institut provide guidelines for teaching foreign languages to children and also highlight: “The learning process of young learners of foreign languages should be play-and action-oriented” (33). In this thesis, I will analyze how play can be used in elementary school foreign language classes.

While chapter one of this thesis aims to define play and play-based learning by analyzing different viewpoints on the matter in research, the second chapter uses this definition to analyze the connection of play-based learning to Communicative Language Teaching. In chapter three, a study conducted by Lily Wong Fillmore in the 1970s focuses on how children learn languages in immersive environments. The study’s findings point out that Communicative Language Teaching and play-based Learning take advantage of strengths in children's Second language Acquisition in immersive environments. In chapter four, this thesis provides two examples of how play-based learning can practically be implemented in a Foreign Language classroom. Chapter five of the thesis gives further guidelines and ideas on how play-based learning can be developed in the elementary school foreign language classroom.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF PLAY

Definition of Play

Before analyzing why play-based learning can benefit the elementary school foreign language classroom, it is necessary for the purpose of this thesis to give a definition of what play means. At first sight, it seems obvious what play is; it can be associated with children playing different games, playing with toys, perhaps being creative, or engaging in pretend play. However, there is no clear-cut definition of play in research, and some researchers even argue that it is a futile exercise to try to define play due to the broad variety of activities that it encompasses (Wallerstedt, Pramling 6). In agreement with the article “Learning Through Play at School: A Framework for Policy and Practice" from 2022 by Thomsen et al., I argue that it is crucial to define play when implementing and evaluating it in educational contexts (Thomsen Parker 2). Since there is no consensus on a definition of play in research, it is essential to present and analyze diverse viewpoints on play. This will lead to a working definition of play in this thesis.

Attempts to define play often entail lists of supposedly typical characteristics. For example, Jennifer Sturgess (104) highlights qualities of play. According to her, play is:

1. essentially non-literal
2. opportunistic and episodic
3. engaging
4. imaginative/creative
5. fluid and active

6. predominantly for the moment, therefore more concerned with means than ends

7. it focuses on a playful ‘as-if’ attitude

8. intrinsically motivated

However, there are a variety of associations and lists on play in research, and there is no clear understanding of how many characteristics have to be met to classify something as play.

While Sturgess perceives play as something that does not necessarily follow any other purpose but enjoyment (see point 6), Pyle and Danniels, in their 2017 article entitled "A Continuum of Play-Based Learning: The Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Pedagogy and the Fear of Hijacking Play," point out that play can serve various purposes that may or may not result in learning. There is, however, also no consensus on this observation. While Pyle and Danniels believe that play may or may not result in learning, Pramling and Samuelsson, whose research focuses on younger children, believe that playing and learning are inseparable. They argue that "play and learning are dimensions that stimulate each other and could be seen as an indivisible entirety, which is part of children's experience and helps them create an understanding of their surrounding world in a lifelong process" (Pramling and Samuelsson 48).

Another debate in research in the context of play in educational settings is the degree to which an adult is involved. Two types of play are commonly distinguished in research: Free Play and Guided Play. Weisberg et al. wrote an influential article entitled "Guided

Play: Where Curricular Goals Meet a Playful Pedagogy" in which they say that Free Play is when children have the freedom to choose their activities and focus without any guidance from a teacher (Weisberg et al. 105). According to their definition, a child playing with building blocks without adult supervision or structuring would be considered Free Play. Guided Play, on the opposite side, is defined as "learning experiences that combine the child-directed nature of free play with a focus on learning outcomes and adult mentorship" (Weisberg et al. 177). In other words, Guided Play involves adults that are directing the children's play to achieve a certain outcome. Weisberg et al. differentiate between two forms of *Guided Play*.

1. The first form of Guided Play involves adults designing the setting with a particular goal in mind while still allowing children to explore independently within that setting.
2. The second form of Guided Play involves adults observing child-directed activities and offering comments, questions, or extensions to their interests (Weisberg et al. 178).

Considering the first version of Guided Play defined by Weisberg et al. raises the question if Free Play is even possible in educational contexts. As per the definition presented by Weisberg et al., the environment created by an adult is already a form of guidance for children. Therefore, as soon as a child enters a classroom with materials, they are engaged in the first version of Guided Play and not in Free Play, even if they

chose the materials freely. Most researchers, however, do not see this distinction between Free Play and Guided Play as clear cut. Especially in preschool and kindergarten settings, Free Play happens when children choose what they want to play without any adult guidance or goals in mind, even if that happens in an already prepared setting (see, for example, Fisher et al.).[5]

The distinction between Free Play versus Guided Play has led some researchers to argue that one or the other form of play is superior and more efficient in educational contexts. For example, in their article entitled "Taking Shape: Supporting Preschoolers' Acquisition of Geometric Knowledge Through Guided Play" Fisher et al. point out that Guided Play is more effective in achieving certain learning objectives than Free Play. The Field-study analyzed in this article focused on seventy 4–5-year-olds divided in three groups who were taught about the properties of four geometric shapes using Free Play, didactic instruction (meaning direct instruction), and Guided Play. The study found that children who learned the shapes through Guided Play (meaning that adults were guiding the children's play by scaffolding and shifting the children's attention) had a better understanding of the shapes than the other groups that would just play independently with materials without guidance or learn about the shapes through direct instruction. The study

[5] An interesting additional observation is that both forms of Guided Play, identified by Weisberg et al., can be prominently observed in Montessori pedagogy. The Montessori concept sees learners as individuals who should be able to choose what they want to work on and for how long. In such a setup, the teacher prepares an environment, demonstrates how the materials work, and then leaves the child to work and play freely with the materials while they also might comment on their actions (Winnefeld 70).

concluded that Guided Play was more effective in learning about shapes than Free Play (Fisher et al. 1872). Independently, Weisberg et al. agrees that Guided Play in educational settings is superior to Free Play. They write: "children cannot learn letter-sound pairings or addition by running around on a playground, even if that playground is covered in letters and numbers" (Weisberg et al. 178).

On the other side of this debate are those who believe that Guided Play means hijacking the Free Play of children. For example, in "Understanding Playful Pedagogies, Play Narratives and Play Space" Goouch unconvincingly advocates for Free Play over Guided Play in early education contexts and believes that there is no need for adults "hijacking or subverting children's intentions" (Goouch 95).

In response to the division between those who argue that Guided Play is superior to Free Play or vice versa, some researchers have suggested understanding play-based learning as a continuum of adult involvement instead of an either-or. In their above-referenced article, Pyle and Danniels convincingly maintain that perceiving play-based learning as either *free* or *guided* is too restrictive (Pyle and Danniels 276, 287). In a study discussed in their article, 15 public kindergarten classrooms in Ontario, Canada were observed. Their observations have led them to come up with different types of play-based learning, which they categorized as follows: 1. *Free Play*, 2. *Inquiry Play*, 3. *Collaboratively Designed Play*, 4. *Playful Learning*, and 5. *Learning Through Games*. Pyle and Danniels perceive these types of *Play* as a continuum in which *Free Play* is the most child-directed, meaning the locus of control is with the child, while *Learning*

Through Games is the most teacher-directed (Pyle and Danniels 277, 282). In the following list, these different types of play as defined by Pyle and Danniels will be explained in greater depth because of their relevance for this thesis.

1. *Free Play*: Pyle and Danniels observed that *Free Play* was the most common type of play in their study. 60% of the kindergarten classes they observed included *Free Play*, meaning that children were in charge of their play decisions. The teachers had little to no involvement in the play of the children. During *Free Play*, the children played with toys such as dinosaurs or cars, they also used sensory materials like sand, water, or Play-Doh (Pyle and Danniels 282).
2. *Inquiry Play*: According to Pyle and Danniels, *Inquiry Play* is similar to *Free Play* since it is child-initiated and gives the child the locus of control. In *Inquiry Play*, however, teachers extend children's play by integrating related academic standards based on the children's interests, given that an opportunity arises. For example, in one of the classes observed by Pyle and Danniels, the teacher was reading to the class when suddenly, a student threw a paper airplane into the middle of the class. Instead of cautioning the child to pay attention to the teacher-led activity, the teacher interrupted the planned classroom activity (reading) and helped the student to create a safe runway for throwing paper airplanes. Other children became interested and started constructing and flying their airplanes. The teacher then brought books about airplanes into class and introduced standard and non-standard measurement

tools to help the children determine how far their planes can fly. The children then built different airplanes, and the teacher assisted them with tape, glue, and staples and the children then explored the suitability of different types of airplane constructions. When engaging in *Inquiry Play*, teachers are encouraging children's natural curiosity, and they are guiding them toward becoming more focused and systematic in their observations. All the teachers in Pyle and Danniel's study used *Inquiry Play* in their classes alongside other forms of play (Pyle and Danniels 282f).

3. *Collaborative Play*: During this type of play-based learning the children and the teacher work together to design the context of play. This includes the theme and resources that are needed for the play. While the teacher determines the academic skills that the students should develop during this kind of play, the child and the teacher co-create the environment and the resources used for the play. Once the learning environment has been created, the children take over and direct the play. For example, in one classroom, the children's interest in animals led to creating a veterinary clinic. The children acted as veterinarians, receptionists, and pet owners, which helped them develop various academic skills. The teacher also interacted with the students during their playing. For example, the teacher introduced the concept of an X-ray when two children wanted to find out if a pet had broken a leg. The teacher encouraged them to research X-rays on a tablet and provided them with materials to build their own "X-ray machine." Learning how to set up a

veterinary clinic by reading about the X-ray machines and their use in the medical field, helped the children to develop literacy skills. In summary, *Collaborative Play* opened opportunities for child-directed play and for the teacher to foster academic skills (Pyle and Danniels 283).

4. *Playful Learning*: Another category that Pyle and Danniels observe in their research is *Playful Learning*. While *Collaborative Learning* is useful, some academic skills do not naturally develop during playtime but need to be acquired through some more explicit learning process. The idea behind *Playful Learning* is to teach the children in a way that they do not even realize that they are learning. Just like all other forms of play defined by Pyle and Danniels, they can discern *Playful Learning* by observation in the classroom. In their study, those researchers use the following example to illustrate their understanding of *Playful Learning*: The teacher set up a flower shop where children fill out order forms with sections for flower type, color, extras, and total cost. These activities are designed for the children to practice math and literacy concepts that were taught to the classes via direct instruction. The children still had control over certain aspects of the play. In Pyle and Danniel's classroom study they, for example, requested flowers for a particular event, like a picnic (Pyle and Danniels 284).

5. *Learning Through Games*: This is the most teacher-centered form of play-based learning defined by Pyle and Danniels. In this form of play-based learning, teachers use games to make learning more interactive and fun and

while playing, children engage in learning without even noticing that they do so. Teachers, however, direct the outcomes and prescribe the process of these play episodes while the children are following the rules of the games. For example, one class that Pyle and Danniels observed played a game called "Words with Friends," in which children used letter tiles to spell words on a board. Other classes that they observed played word and letter bingo, or they went fishing for letters using magnetic fishing poles (Pyle and Danniels 284).

Learning Through Games is also addressed by Deguang Zhu in the article from 2012 entitled "Using Games to Improve Student's Communicative Ability". Zhu also talks about *Learning through Games* and categorizes different types of games in the context of foreign language classes. Other than Pyle and Daniels who researched kindergarten contexts, Zhu focused on adult learners. In his research, Zhu classifies:

1. *Guessing Games*: one person has information that the other person must discover (a word, object, or activity).

2. *Picture Games:* students work with pictures describing features, differences, relationships, or create stories around pictures.

3. *Mimes:* an individual or group mimics an activity while others guess what is being acted out.

4. *Fact-finding Games:* students discuss and research facts such as historical facts or interesting occurrences.

5. *Debates:* students are given a topic that they must debate about, with one person or group supporting a position and the other opposing a certain opinion.

6. *Jigsaw Games:* every person has a crucial piece of the puzzle that needs to be put together to find a solution.

7. *Role Plays:* real-life or imaginary situations are played out, and students use the language creatively and spontaneously (803f).

It has been shown that there are many different ways of defining play and play-based learning. In order to focus on play-based learning in my own study, I used the studies referenced and analyzed them as a foundation to now develop a working definition of play-based learning for the purpose of this thesis.

Within the context of this thesis, play is something that children are generally motivated to engage in and that is enjoyable and exiting to them. Children are also generally actively engaged in Play.[6] The understanding of play in this paper is non-restrictive. Play can, but does not have to, involve the following features:

1. Play can be freely chosen by children, in other instances, the teacher gives the incentive for it.
2. Play can be non-literal and involve some form of pretend play.

[6] It needs to be noted that problems in children's personal lives such as socio-economic stress can impact if children have fun when playing.

3. Play can involve the children using their imagination.
4. Play can make children be creative.
5. Play can be active and thus involve movement.
6. Play can be done just for the purpose of joy, or in educational contexts, it can follow the purpose of meeting a certain learning objective.
7. Play can be child-centered or led by a teacher or something in between.
8. Play can foster learning by engaging children in games such as *Guessing Games*, *Picture Games*, *Mimes*, *Fact-Finding Games*, *Debates*, *Jigsaw puzzles*, or *Role Plays.*

Benefits of Play-Based Learning

There is an extensive corpus of research highlighting the general benefits of play for learning. Walsh et al. conducted a study in Northern Ireland schools in 2006, that analyzed the effects of play on learning in 4–5-year-olds. The study shows that through different forms of play-based learning, children displayed more independence and engagement when faced with challenges. Other findings of the study include that children developed a greater inclination toward learning and showed improvements in their emotional, social, and physical development and their well-being (Walsh 202).

In another research project that summarized 62 studies from different countries, Bubikova et al., found that many teachers who used play in their early education classes reported improved social, emotional and cognitive skills as well as improved language

skills (in the first language). Teachers also observed improved language and social skills in children's interactions. Furthermore, teachers believed that play enhanced the reading and writing skills of the children (Bubikova et al. 786).

An article by Ya-Lun Tsao with the title "Using Guided Play to Enhance Children's Conversation, Creativity and Competence in Literature" also shows that pretend play has a crucial role in children's development of literate, oral language because it motivates children to generate language for the play (Tsao 519).

In their article "Accessing the Inaccessible: Redefining Play as a Spectrum" Zosh et al. also distinguish between the benefits of different forms of play. They argue that free play is often associated with social development, while guided play is proposed as an effective pedagogical approach in academic settings, which can help in fostering certain learning objectives (Zosh et al. 3).

Since this thesis deals with the context of foreign language classes, I will now highlight benefits of play that are specific to foreign language learning. A study by Liu et al. with the title "Using Games to Promote English as a Foreign Language. Learners' Willingness to Communicate: Potential Effects and Teachers' Attitude in Focus" suggests that using games in the English Foreign Language classroom has a positive impact on students' attitudes towards learning English. It also suggests that games play a role in improving learners' willingness to communicate (Liu et al. 1). Another finding of the Liu et. al study is that language games have positive benefits, such as lowering the anxiety of

learners and providing opportunities to use a language in a meaningful way in the classroom (Lui et al 9).

The previously referenced *Nürnberger Recommendations* on Early Foreign Language Learning also highlight the benefits of play-based learning for children learning a foreign language (Widlok et al.). In the section on *Developmental Psychology*, the *Nürnberger Recommendations* highlight that: "Children are able to concentrate for short periods; playful means should be sought to address and further develop their usually good memory powers" (14f). This suggests that using play in the classroom can make use of children's natural strengths by helping them to stay engaged during class time.

The *Nürnberger Recommendations* also refer to the use of play in the Foreign Language classroom in the section on *The Child's Needs*. The document points out that among other needs, a child needs "to play, be active, move, romp about" (16). Play-based learning can be an approach to meet this necessity in the foreign language classroom. The need for movement and its positive effects on learning achievements in elementary school children have also been confirmed in other studies (Petrigna et al. n.p.). Using movement-based games in the classroom can thus be another benefit of play-based learning in the elementary foreign language class.

Another benefit of play-based learning is that it can be a good starting point for fostering *intercultural competence*. The *Nürnberger Recommendations* suggest that role-playing can aid in training for intercultural situations (28). This, however, can only be achieved once the children already have a certain degree of fluency.

This chapter analyzed different viewpoints on play and play-based learning and came up with a working definition of play for the purpose of this thesis. It also highlighted benefits of play for learning and specific advantages of using play in the context of foreign language learning. The following chapter will analyze how play-based learning is connected to both Communicative Language Teaching and research from Second Language Acquisition.

CHAPTER 2: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND PLAY-BASED LEARNING

Task-based Learning

As Claus Brandl points out in his book "Communicative Language Teaching in Action", Communicative Language Teaching focuses on communication through task-based learning. While traditional language teaching methods oftentimes focus on grammar topics or texts where teachers present a targeted grammatical structure and some vocabulary that is then followed with some production activities, Communicative Language Teaching focuses mainly on the development of communicative skills. Grammar and vocabulary are introduced only as much as needed, before the teacher moves on to give students certain tasks that allow them to use and practice the newly acquired knowledge. There is no consensus on how to define "task", but Brandl notes that many of the common perceptions of what a "task" is include the following aspects: Such tasks focus on meaning, they are connected to the real world, and they often include working toward a goal like finding solutions to a problem or performing a dialogue (Brandl 7-10).

When children play, there also needs to be a real-life connection for the children to understand the rules of the game or to find interest and enjoyment in the play-based activity. For example, the previously stated veterinarian visit can only be fun and engaging for children if they at least have a basic understanding of what is being done at a veterinary office. This means that play and play-based learning in most cases require a

real-life connection that children can make. In this sense, Communicative Language Teaching and Play-based learning require a similar basic constellation, namely meaningful communicative situations.

Brandl points out that one example of a task in Task-Based Learning can be the performance of a dialogue. This kind of performance can often be found in children's pretend play or dramatic play, which was defined to be a possible part of play-based learning by Sturgess, as highlighted in Chapter 1. Through dramatic play, children can have fun and practice authentic real-life scenarios in which they use language that prepares them for real-world communication. To illustrate this with an example: Children have to come up with a dialogue in which they ask each other about how they are feeling. They become creative and imagine a playful context in which this dialogue is embedded. Teachers provide materials, like costumes or other props, that have the children defocus from the speaking tasks and reduce anxieties. The children are divided up in small groups, and the groups then enact the dialogue. For example, students could play ice cream store and order different flavors of ice cream. They might use ice cream toys or costumes to make this more fun. A possible variation of this setting is to have the groups observe and comment on each other’s performance, and teachers have the option to add guidance for this by assigning observation tasks. For example, groups could be asked to present the dialogue in a specific mood (like happy or angry) and those observing the presentation would then be asked to guess what mood or emotion the group expressed

during their presentation. Pretend play, in this case, functions as a meaningful contextualization in which communication in the target language is being generated.

Learning by Doing

Brandl highlights that "Learning by doing" is important for Communicative Language Teaching because it allows students to use the language within a wide range of contexts (Brandl 2). The importance of creating output in the Communicative Language Teaching classroom is widely supported by Second Language Acquisition research. For example, Swain and Lapkin highlight the importance of output, namely actual language production, in the context of Second Language Acquisition in their study entitled "Problems in Output and the Cognitive Processes They Generate: A Step Towards Second Language Learning" from 1995. Swain and Lapkin observed that when adolescent learners produced utterances in the L2, they started to become aware of linguistic problems. Noticing these grammatical structures helped them to modify their output. So, producing output leads to noticing, which leads to the modification of the output. By identifying gaps between what students intended to say and what they were saying, they reflected on their language usage and often improved their speech production (Swain, Lapkin 386-388).

Games can provide a meaningful context in which learners are encouraged to speak in the target language, and their participation in the game activity allows them to recognize patterns and pay attention to form. Play-based learning pushes output in

different ways. For example, children could be asked to develop a game for which they must create and negotiate rules in the target language. There is also a large array of games that foster some form of interaction between participants, which forces learners to talk to each other. Overall, games or other play-based activities can offer several practice opportunities for language output to happen.

Rich Input

Brandl identifies “rich input” as another key principle of Communicative Language Teaching. Brandl points out that when learning a first language, learners are exposed to various language patterns, chunks, and phrases in different contexts and situations. While Brandl points out that this kind of rich input cannot be fully replicated in the classroom, he insists that instructors should still aim at providing their learners with input embedded in immersive contexts that approximates the level of ‘rich input’ as close as possible (Brandl 13). The idea that the input in the classroom should be as rich as possible is also supported by research in Second Language Acquisition. Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis from the 1980s places great emphasis on the significance of input. According to Krashen, students can acquire a language with comprehensible input only. Although more recent research challenges this notion, Krashen's hypothesis underscores a crucial realization: input is essential to language learning (Krashen 2-3).

Anne Dahl’s empirical study on “Input and Language Competence in Early-Start Foreign Language Classrooms” also highlights the importance and benefits of immersive environments with high levels of rich and comprehensible input when teaching a foreign

language to children in elementary school. In her research, Dahl investigated if increased input in the classroom also led to more successful language learning in children, and she concludes: "Explicit instruction may be beneficial, but input is absolutely crucial for acquisition. This is probably especially true for young learners, who most likely excel at implicit compared to explicit learning" (Dahl 128). In her study, Dahl focused on 60 Norwegian-speaking children who were learning English. The average age of these children was 6, and Dahl divided the group into a control group (29 children) and a treatment group (31 children).

In the control group, no changes were made, and English was instructed more explicitly. In the treatment group, the Norwegian L1 speakers mainly used English in class for communication. There were also input-heavy activities like read-aloud or talking and listening activities that focused on objects or pictures. Thus, English was used more naturally in this treatment group than in the first group (Dahl 131). After only one year of altered instruction in the treatment group, a comparison between both groups yielded that the children's mastery of English in the treatment group was measurable higher than in the control group. Even though the altered instruction in the treatment group was different from acquiring a foreign language in an immersion setting, its overall positive impact was significant (Dahl 139). The greatest benefit of increased rich input was found in sentence comprehension (Dahl 143). The results of Dahl's study are clearly in-line with Brandl's postulations concerning Communicative Language Teaching, namely that providing a rich input of the target language is a factor that significantly benefits foreign language acquisition.

How can play-based learning help with providing rich input? While games can be a great source for pushing output, they also create a large array of opportunities to provide input. For example, in the game "Simon Says", children can listen to the teacher naming many different body parts and they can observe how other students make sense of the input provided by the teacher. Another example for providing rich input is pretend play, where students alternate between producing utterances in the target language and listening to others. When discussing the rules of a game, one or several learners are talking while others are listening. Games that involve video and audio materials can also be planned in such a way that they provide rich input. For example, children listen to a song and have to clap whenever they hear a specific word in a recording they are listening to. In activities like this, children might not be able to understand everything, but they might still be able to get the gist.

Meaningful Input

Another important aspect in the context of Communicative Language Teaching and input is that input should not only be rich, but also meaningful, as stated by Brandl. He points out that input needs to be "meaningful, comprehensible, and elaborated" (Brandl 16). The information directed at the learner must be relatable to the existing knowledge of the learner for learning to occur. In that way, new information can cognitively be assimilated. Brandl also points out that input cannot be meaningful unless it is comprehensible. The learner, thus, must understand the majority of what the speaker is saying to make it possible for acquisition to happen. Brandl suggests several strategies that can help teachers to make input more accessible and comprehensible to students. He

suggests confirmation checks, comprehension checks, accessibility to students' questions, non-linguistic input through body language, slower speech, modified language use through repetition, enhanced enunciation, and simplified language structures. Brandl argues convincingly that these strategies can help learners process form-meaning connections more efficiently (Brandl 16-18). This also goes in accordance with research from Curtain and Dahl presented in "Making the Match – World Language Instruction in K-8 Classrooms and Beyond". Just like Brandl, they highlight the importance of comprehensible input in the foreign language classroom. Their suggestions on how teachers can make themselves more easily understood when using the target language strongly overlap with Brandl's recommendations. In addition, they also highlight that incorporating visuals, gestures, and concrete references can help with understanding (Curtain Dahl 4).

Including visuals, gestures or concrete references can be implemented through play-based learning in the foreign language classroom. Teachers can use toys to make it easier for children to understand what the teacher is trying to communicate. For example, children can engage in a pretend game, like being at a veterinary clinic.[7] The teacher can observe the students as they engage in this pretend game and intervene by introducing certain toys while saying the respective words in the target language. The teacher, for instance, brings a new stuffed animal into the play and says that the "Schildkröte" (turtle) is also sick and needs care. By looking at the turtle stuffed animal, the children can

[7] This example is borrowed from Pyle and Danniels and is discussed in more detail in the previous chapter on page 10-11.

understand the meaning of “Schildkröte”. This benefit of play-based learning is also acknowledged in the previously referenced *Nürnberger Recommendations*. These guidelines published by the Goethe Institut also highlight that children benefit from using toys when they learn a foreign language by stating: “For the child’s learning process, real objects from the immediate surroundings and the natural world, toys, glove puppets, and games including board and dice games are preferred.” (36)

Recognizing Affective Filters

Another principle of Communicative Language Teaching referred to by Brandl is to respect affective factors of learning (Brandl 20). The concept of affective filters was first introduced by Stephen Krashen. According to Krashen, the affective filter in the brain blocks out second language input, even if the input provided is properly designed. He assumes that the filter is activated when there is anxiety, low self-confidence, and a lack of motivation. The filter is lowered, so that the language input can get through when the learner’s motivation and self-confidence are high and when the environment is relatively anxiety-free (Krashen 13).[8] In the context of Communicative Language Teaching, Brandl also points out that attitudes, motivation, performance anxiety, and achievement impact second language learning. It is thus important to acknowledge that learners' feelings towards the language they are studying not only play an important role with regard to motivation and engagement but also have an impact on students’ overall

[8] Krashen also believes that the affective filter becomes significantly stronger around puberty, which he sees as a crucial turning point. In his view, the filter is so potent after puberty that it rarely decreases enough for adults to achieve native-like fluency (Krashen 13).

level of achievement. As a result, a learning environment with no anxiety where the affective filter is low is crucial for language learning. Anxiety has a negative impact on learning success, and therefore, it is crucial to keep it at a minimum level for optimal learning (Brandl 20f, Krashen 13).

Play-based learning can be beneficial when it comes to creating an anxiety free learning environment. As discussed previously in regard to Walsh's study on page 15, the very act of playing can have a positive impact on learners' well-being (Walsh 202). Generally, playing is considered fun and enjoyable, which normally reduces feelings of anxiety. Sometimes, children may experience some level of anxiety when participating in activities that involve winning. Therefore, teachers should be mindful of the games they select for their classrooms to ensure that all students can equally enjoy the activity. Another way in which play-based learning can help with lowering the affective filter is through dramatic play. The latter can help children assume different roles and along with this enables them to focus on the play and makes them almost forget that they are speaking in the target language. Similarly, hand puppets or stuffed animals can provide a sense of comfort, allowing children to communicate more freely.

Overall, play-based learning provides a meaningful and effective extension of Communicative Language Teaching, which can benefit the student's Second Language Learning process in the elementary school classroom. The following chapter highlights that the connection of communicative language teaching and play-based learning also brings out the strengths of children's language acquisition in immersive contexts.

CHAPTER 3: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND PLAY IN IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Play-based learning does not only complement Communicative Language Teaching, but it also taps into the natural ability of younger children to acquire second languages in immersive contexts. In the following discussion, this thesis will present a study by Lilly Wong Fillmore from 1972 because it documents that play is a big part of Second Language Acquisition of the children. Even though this study dates back to the early 1970s, it still offers valuable insights into key strategies that children commonly use when learning a second language in immersive environments. Fillmore's observations and findings are instrumental in understanding how instructional contexts can be crafted in such a way that they make use of children's innate ability to learn second languages in immersive environments.

Over the course of one year, Fillmore studied the second language development in English of five children with similar backgrounds and Spanish as a first language. All five children spoke Spanish and had recently moved from rural Mexico to the United States. Each child chose an English-speaking friend with whom they played in a supervised setting once a week throughout the year. The study took place in a playroom filled with school materials and toys that was observed by Fillmore, who analyzed the cognitive and social processes involved when children learn a new language from those who already speak it as their first language. The hour-long sessions were recorded and

transcribed. None of the children received formal language instruction; they learned English only from being exposed to and interacting with their teachers and classmates. The study found that Nora, the youngest child in the group who was almost six years old at the beginning of the study, showed remarkable progress. After just three months, she produced better formed and more varied sentences than her peers, and by the end of the year, she was nearly as proficient in English as her English-speaking friends (Fillmore 205-207). According to Fillmore, playing with the chosen English-speaking friend contributed immensely to this accomplishment.

Fillmore summarized the strategies that the children used to learn the language. She listed three social strategies and five cognitive strategies (Fillmore 209). The first social strategy was to "join a group and act as if you understand what's going on, even if you don't" (Fillmore 209). Fillmore explains that this first social strategy was crucial because it allowed the children to communicate with others (Fillmore 209f).

The first cognitive strategy Fillmore observed was "Assume that what people are saying is directly relevant to the situation at hand, or to what they or you are experiencing. Meta strategy: GUESS!" (Fillmore 210). Fillmore explains that this cognitive strategy helped children understand what was happening around them.

The second social strategy listed by Fillmore was to "give the impression-with a few well-chosen words- that you can speak the language" (Fillmore 210). She noted that the English-speaking friends of the five children observed in this study only tried to communicate with their respective partners if they gave the impression that they could

speak and understand some English (Fillmore 211). This was achieved with the help of the second cognitive strategy that Fillmore describes as "Get some expressions you understand and start talking" (Fillmore 211). The five children in the study used this strategy to mimic formulaic expressions without understanding the underlying form of it.[9] According to Fillmore, this is important since it allows the five children to get started to talk with only very little knowledge of the target language. For example, Fillmore found expressions like "Lemme see, You know what? […] Whaddya wanna play, It's time to clean up" in Nora's formulaic speech (Fillmore 211). Using formulaic expressions allows learners to be part of activities with other children, which then expose them to more input in the target language. According to Fillmore, the acquisition of English was successful because the five children in the study were not only passive observers but rather acted as active participants by attempting to communicate in English (Fillmore 211).

The third cognitive strategy that Fillmore listed was "Look for recurring parts in the formulas you know" (Fillmore 212). By noticing how parts of expressions that others used changed in different situations, the children were able to learn new words and sentence structures. Another observation that was made was that the children paid close attention to those parts of other children's utterances that they were able to recognize already. That way, children, step by step, were able to make sense of this type of input. For example, Nora had the following two formulaic expressions in her speech repertoire:

[9] Another question would be to what extent children at that age are even able to grasp grammatical structures explicitly.

"I wanna play wi' dese, and I don' wanna do dese" (Fillmore 212). This indicated that she noticed that part of the utterance *wanna* was interchangeable. By figuring out which parts of the formulaic expressions can be modified, Nora was able to generate new constructions. One of the chunks that Nora varied a lot was "How do you do dese X" (Fillmore 213), which then changed to "How do you [or] How did you?". She was also able to distinguish "How do, How does, How did" and in the end "How" was isolated out of these formulaic expressions and recognized as a word that can be transferred to and used in other contexts (Fillmore 214). This suggests that the construction "How do you do dese" was increasingly analyzed by Nora up to the point where she recognized it as the question word "How" (Fillmore 215). This also supports the results from the study of Swain and Lapkin where students recognized patterns and altered their output according to these observations.[10]

The fourth cognitive strategy identified by Fillmore allowed the five children in the study to develop fluency in English, it is also connected to the second social strategy “Make the most of what you've got" (Fillmore 215). The children in the study made overly generous use of the forms that they had already mastered, sometimes the resulting language production was appropriate within the given context and sometimes it was not (Fillmore 216). For example, Nora used the adverb "anyway" a lot. It allowed her a certain level of fluency instead of always stopping to speak each time she did not know

[10] For details on this study by Swain and Lapkin’s see chapter 2, page 20.

the word. Overall, all of the children in the study maximized the use of English they knew already, and they even did so early on in the study when the level of their actual mastery of English was still very low (Fillmore 217).

The last cognitive strategy that Fillmore lists is: "Work on big things: save the details for later." The study found that children were focusing on major constituents first and worried about the grammatical details later. It would have been overwhelming for them to be concerned with all the grammatical aspects at once, so it made sense for the learners to deal with the larger parts first and then deal with the smaller things later. This was, for example, apparent in the example of Nora's use of "How do you do dese" (Fillmore 218).

The final strategy that Fillmore lists is the following social strategy: "Count on your friends for help" (Fillmore 218). Fillmore points out that the English-speaking friends of the five children in the study greatly enhanced their language-learning process. The children whose first language was English helped the five children in the study by projecting that they were convinced that their friends were able to learn English.[11] They were talking and interacting with them in ways that guaranteed that they learned. They also helped by using nonverbal modes to communicate. And lastly, the biggest help provided by the children whose first language was English is the fact that they provided the linguistic input needed for language acquisition. The children sometimes intentionally

[11] In this context, it is possible to raise the question if children at that age can project such an analytic mindset.

simplified the structures and expressions they used or made modifications that make it easier for the learners to understand them; they also avoided talking about displaced objects (Fillmore 218f). To some degree, the children were assuming the role of a communicative language teacher in a play-based classroom who modifies their input through different strategies and uses the environment as contextualization to make the input meaningful.

In summary, it can be stated that the children in Fillmore's study were joining a group that spoke the target language, which enabled the learners to communicate. The children were using context to make sense of what was going on around them. They acquired some formulaic expressions and started talking, they noticed patterns in the input and compared it to their output. They also started talking even if it was not perfect yet: they did not worry about details too much initially and started with understanding bigger language components first. Lastly, they had friends who provided them with valuable input and by modifying their own language in such a way that it helped the five children in the study to understand their utterances.

Within the context of this thesis, the most important point to make is that the children were engaging in play while they were learning English. Nora displayed the most impressive progress, which can be partly attributed to her affinity for verbal play. While her peers favored less communicative games like baseball, kickball, and marbles, Nora liked theatrical activities that involved assuming various character roles. Such imaginative play provided her with opportunities to hone her proficiency in English

(Fillmore 223). It is important to note that she did not improve her proficiency in English through independent Free Play (see chapter 1). Her learning was fostered and guided through the input and scaffolding of her English-speaking friend. Teachers in elementary school foreign language classrooms could mimic this immersive context from the study by using communicative language teaching and incorporating play to reproduce this authentic environment in which children interact and learn.

CHAPTER 4: PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF PLAY-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSES

While the previous chapters highlighted how play-based learning, Communicative Language Teaching, and Second Language Acquisition within immersive contexts are connected, the following chapter discusses and analyzes specific examples of instructional settings in which play-based learning constitutes a central component of an elementary school foreign language program.

4.1 A Play-based Elementary Foreign Language Class in Thailand

The first practical example discussed in this chapter is a study that was conducted by Cheep-Aranai et al. in 2010 in an elementary school in Thailand where English was taught to children. For this study entitled "Implementing Play-Based Language Learning with Children: From Potential to Practice," Cheep-Aranai et al. developed a curriculum that integrated play-based learning in elementary school English classes (Cheep-Aranai et al. 141). This curriculum was implemented in a 15-week program where students were taught one hour of English three times a week. The program thus entailed a total of 45 hours. The students who participated in the program were between 8 and 9 years old, and to obtain school approval to ensure that the students were not at a disadvantage compared to other classes, the research team continued to use the previously used textbook but restructured how the classes were conducted. The learning outcomes in the study were based on various national and international standards to integrate the course closely with the rest of the curriculum at that school in Thailand. The specific play-based activities

used in their classes were sourced from literature and online videos showcasing various play activities. The list of included plays comprised of games such as playing with toys, singing, dancing, running-freezing-tag, snakes and ladders, Monopoly board games, playing dress-up, paper dolls, coloring, playing shopping, and other games (Cheep-Aranai et al. 145-147).

Each class session was divided into three parts. First, the children and teachers sat in a circle, so that the students playing was guided, and the children would engage in Language Play and Physical Play. During this phase, children, for example, listened to stories told by the teacher, or they engaged in different tasks related to the lesson topic. They were also introduced to formulaic speech by the teacher, for example in one of the circle times they talked about body parts and the children learned phrases like "What can you do? I can run very fast" (Cheep-Aranai et al. 147). The latter was mainly intended to create a situation where the children felt comfortable to speak in English. Following this introductory phase, learners chose one of three group centers led by a teacher where they engaged in Creative Play, Games with Rules, and Pretend Play. Through games, they were encouraged to use the English phrases and vocabulary they had been introduced to during the first part of the lesson. The teachers introduced the students to additional phrases in English to broaden their understanding and thus improve their communicative skills in English for better communication in the centers. Cheep-Aranai et al. labeled the final phase of each class session as "chitchat," and here the children and teachers talked about the centers, shared ideas, talked about feelings, and the children demonstrated what they learned in the centers by sharing examples (Cheep-Aranai et al. 147).

Cheep-Aranai et al. provided a categorized list of games that they used for practicing English in the centers (Cheep-Aranai et al. 148f). These games included:

1. *Creative play* which involved dancing, painting, and using recycled materials. This type of play can encourage students to do something while also sharing their feelings and thoughts in the target language.
2. *Games with rules* in which children learned flexible rules before moving on to conventional games with external rules. Negotiating rules in the target language was important.
3. In *Language Play*, children explored sounds and words, manipulating them, and using rhythm and repetition. They created nonsense words and told jokes and funny stories.
4. In *Physical Play*, children used their whole bodies to refine gross and fine motor skills, like building something with different materials while also talking in the target language.
5. In *Pretend Play,* children used their imagination to create make-believe scenarios using the target language. They created different stories or acted out real events, such as playing out different occupations using props like cameras or phones. Cheep- Aranai et al., explain that social pretend play allows children to practice communication skills in different scenarios, helping them to develop proficiency in the target language (Cheep- Aranai et al 148f).

Over the course of 15 weeks, these class sessions that utilized this play-based approach were recorded on video and observed by a second teacher who took notes. After each of the three chapters covered in the 15 weeks, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with the children to see how they were feeling and what experiences they had with the approach. These interviews were conducted in Thai to make the communication easier. Feedback was also gathered from parents about their impressions of the approach. Additionally, school administrators and volunteers in the class were asked about their experiences (Cheep-Aranai et al. 151). In the following, I will summarize central points that Cheep-Aranai et al. shared about this feedback related to their study and I will then analyze these observations.

During the 15-week study, several changes were observed in the children's response to the play-based class structure. On the first day, the children were confused by the setup of the first phase, where they sat in a circle. Some children were quieter than usual or did not speak up at all. During the second phase, when they started playing in the centers, the children became more excited, and the quieter ones started to participate more actively. In the third phase ("chitchat") some children, however, became shy again. Over time, the students became more familiar with the routine, this changed. After 3-5 weeks, the children started to become more involved and engaged in the play-based setup of the class. Halfway through the study, the children were noticeably louder, more confident, and participated more attentively than at the beginning of the 15 weeks (Cheep-Aranai et al. 151-152).

During their study, Cheep-Aranai et al. encountered some challenges. One of the challenges was that not all children enjoyed every type of play. Some didn't like to dance, some didn't like specific games or dressing up, while others were hesitant to try new games. However, as time passed, the children became more confident and were more willing to try new types of play (Cheep-Aranai 152).

Another challenge was that many children instinctively used Thai instead of English during play. To overcome this, the adult playmates encouraged the children to speak English. However, there was still some code-switching, but the children gradually became more comfortable using English. Towards the end of the study, the researchers observed that the children were more at ease using English during pretend plays. Another observation they made was that the children remembered the introduced and practiced vocabulary and expressions used during these weeks remarkably well (Cheep-Aranai et al. 152f).

Cheep-Aranai et al. also noted that school administrators and parents were interested in the approach, with some even requesting more play-based courses in the future. It was apparent that the children were having fun and talked a lot in the target language, which increased their confidence over the duration of the course (Cheep-Aranai et al 153).

Cheep-Aranai et al. found that the playing in the foreign language classes at the elementary school was enjoyed by the students as it created a relaxed environment where children were willing to work together, take risks, speak in the target language, and negotiate meaning while playing with peers or adults. Cheep-Aranai et al. connected their

findings to Krashen's affective filter theory, and they hypothesized that the students' affective filter had lowered as they became more comfortable performing in the new language (Cheep-Aranai et al. 153f).

It is important to note that the authors recognize that play-based learning can be time-consuming due to the preparation required for the activities and the challenges related to finding appropriate materials and creating suitable environments. Cheep-Aranai et al. found that there was a lack of high-quality materials that catered to the needs of the young learners in their class and the play-based set-up of their lessons (Cheep-Arani et al. 154).

Through their study, Cheep-Aranai et al. clearly demonstrated that play-based learning in a foreign language elementary school classroom setting can be highly effective. This study presented how a foreign language elementary school class can be organized and structured for play-based learning to occur. The authors also point at possible limitations by highlighting challenges that became apparent during the study.

4.2. Play-based Language Learning in the Context of SPARK for German

The SPARK for German Program

Before analyzing how play-based learning is implemented in “SPARK for German”, it will be important to briefly introduce this program. "Spark for German" is a joint project between the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG), the

Goethe-Institut, and the German Federal Foreign Office that was established in 2019. The acronym "SPARK" stands for "Structured Program for the Acquisition of German in the U.S. - Resources and Know-How". The project offers German students at American universities the opportunity to teach German at elementary, middle, or high schools in the USA. The schools, in return, receive a German after-school program: “SPARK offers a playful approach to German lessons in after school programs providing early access to language instruction and creating opportunities for students to learn German into advanced levels. SPARK’s long-term goal is to increase demand and build capacity to integrate German into the regular curriculum in immersion, elementary, middle, and high school programs.” (SPARK Brochure n.p.) Participating in SPARK allows university students to “gain professional experiences and to explore careers in education” (SPARK website n.p.). Upon completion of the SPARK project, SPARK instructors also receive a certificate, and some participating universities have the option to allow their students to earn credits for their work in a SPARK Lab, often in the form of a community service practicum or service learning (Brochure Goethe-Institut n.p.). University students that participate in the SPARK for German program also have the opportunity to participate in pedagogy training, in language courses, in intercultural communication trainings, webinars, and they have the possibility to receive summer scholarships that foster their language or teaching skills.

Goals of the Elementary School Program SPARK

The SPARK program has a dual purpose: Firstly, it aims to empower German university students with the competencies they would need in the future as prospective

German instructors if they decided to consider a teaching career. Secondly, SPARK for German has the goal to introduce the German language to younger students (mainly K-8 but in some instances also K-12) in the USA. Ultimately, the project aims to enhance the offer of German instruction at elementary, middle, and high schools while inspiring more university students to pursue a career in German language instruction (Brochure SPARK n.p.). In addition, SPARK's mission is to strengthen the community between German teachers and German learners. The program also aims to "Promote diversity and inclusion through high-quality after school programs that connect language learning and teaching with a range of contemporary issues" (Brochure SPARK Washington, SPARK Website n.p.).

SPARK Elementary School Materials

SPARK offers a large array of different teaching materials for elementary, middle, and high school settings. The recommended elementary school materials are *Hans Hase*,[12] *Felix und Franzi*,[13] and *Kinderuni*[14]. These materials are also included in a password protected Moodle room to which all SPARK instructors have access. In addition to these and other teaching materials, the SPARK Moodle room contains training materials, like the SPARK handbook, a coloring book, flashcards, songs, videos, cultural tips, recordings of webinars, tutorials for the white board apps and other

[12] https://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/spr/unt/efd/hah.html
[13] https://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/en/spr/unt/kum/dfk/dff.html
[14] https://kinderuni.goethe.de/?lang=en

pedagogical training materials. Moreover, the Moodle room serves as a central place for communication for the entire US SPARK network (Moodle Goethe Institut SPARK n.p.).

In the following, I will elaborate on the *Felix und Franzi* materials since the main concern of this thesis is play-based foreign language learning in elementary schools. The *Felix und Franzi* curriculum is structured around a narrative in which Felix (a frog) and Franzi (a duck) relocate from a Zoo in Berlin to London and explore their new environment. These *Felix und Franzi* materials offer a range of scenarios for children to learn different German vocabulary and phrases, and they are initiated to cultural aspects that pertain to the German-speaking countries. For example, topics for the first units include greetings, colors, fruit, breakfast, clothes, weather, body parts, and sample phrases taught include "Wie gehts? Mir geht es wunderbar." or "Was ist deine Lieblingsfarbe? Meine Lieblingsfarbe ist rot." The class sessions follow a slow progression since classes only take place once a week for 45-60 minutes. Additionally, due to SPARK being an afternoon program, there are no grades or homework, and the groups are oftentimes very heterogenous when it comes to their reading and writing skills in their first language. Music is an integral part of the *Felix und Franzi* materials, with each lesson starting and ending with a song that incorporates greetings for *Felix* and *Franzi*. Each chapter also features songs that match the theme of the lesson. Additionally, the *Felix und Franzi* teaching materials include videos, with each chapter having a video that shows Felix and Franzi in a new situation or setting like a party for the duck Franzi with her other animal friends. The physical hand puppets of the duck and frog allow

children to interact with Felix and Franzi in class. During their German lessons, children work on different tasks that aim at strengthening their German, such as matching activities and vocabulary recall using animated PowerPoint slides (PowerPoint Presentation on Moodle Goethe Institut SPARK n.p.). The materials provided through the SPARK for German program provide a core curriculum, and SPARK Lab instructors are encouraged to adapt them in such a way that they fit their own teaching environments and circumstances.

SPARK for German in Knoxville, Tennessee

In the fall semester of 2021, a group of University of Tennessee students in Knoxville began to teach German at an elementary school in Knoxville within the context of the SPARK for German project. A group of around 15 elementary school students in grades one through four learned German using the *Felix und Franzi* materials. Additionally, a group of middle school students from the same school was instructed in German with the help of the *Kinderuni* materials. The group of middle school students was taught by a second team of teaching students from UT.

In the spring semester of 2023, the SPARK program provided through the UT Spark Lab expanded to include another elementary school. At this school, two classrooms of first graders with a total of more than 30 students were combined for their weekly German lessons. This larger group size and the fact that this group of learners was more homogeneous with regard to age, required several adaptions of our weekly lesson plans. Another difference between the two schools is that at this school, SPARK was not an

afternoon program: instead, the school allocated class time to the SPARK project as an option of their regular "Cultural Enhancement Programming".

Apart from the regular weekly classes, the UTK student instructors meet in groups at least once a week to prepare for the classes. Additionally, the student instructors meet weekly with their mentor to share their classroom experiences, discuss any issues they face, and gain insights into effective classroom management and teaching strategies.

The SPARK labs are currently ongoing in the two elementary schools in Knoxville, and other schools have shown interest in implementing the program at their school in the future. The expansion of the SPARK lab at the University of Tennessee Knoxville is, however, dependent on the number of students who express interest in participating in the program.

Publications about SPARK for German

Thus far, the SPARK project has only been discussed in a few publications because it is still relatively new. In 2022, Baumgartner et al. published an article entitled "Sparking Interest in German through the Goethe Institut/AATG-sponsored SPARK Program" in *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*. This article analyzes whether the SPARK program bears the potential to get middle schoolers interested in German and if student instructors, parents, and stakeholders in the program experienced SPARK as a viable academic experience (Baumgartner 126). Baumgartner et al. used a survey to gather feedback from parents and students. Overall, the parents survey indicated high

satisfaction, with 90% of parents expressing happiness with the program, and 100% willingness to recommend it to others. Middle school participants reported enjoying the diverse class structure, including vocabulary lessons and exposure to German music and culture. The university student perspective revealed mixed opinions on the relevance of materials provided by the Goethe-Institut. Some also suggested the need for better support in areas such as classroom management, curriculum design, and lesson planning. Despite this, the university students all acknowledged the benefits of the Goethe Institut language courses that they were able to participate in through SPARK. Baumgartner et al. also highlights: “The more hands-on approach in this course resonated deeply with this group of students, and student-teachers felt enriched rather than exploited by the experience." (Baumgartner 136) The faculty perspective also emphasized the success of the program in sparking interest in German among middle schoolers. The collaborative design of the project, which allowed students autonomy, was considered valuable (Baumgartner 132-136).[15]

Very recently, in 2023, Anita McChesney published a forum contribution on “Training transferable skills: Using “SPARK” as a steppingstone to career readiness, social engagement, and program relevance” in the magazine *Die Unterrichtspraxis/ Teaching German*. McChesney, who is leading a SPARK Lab at Texas Tech University, convincingly emphasizes the importance of aligning language studies with transferrable skills valued by employers such as teamwork, critical thinking, communication skills, creative thinking, or intercultural competence. The article suggests that SPARK enhances

[15] In the context of this thesis, three stakeholders were also interviewed about their experience with the SPARK program in Knoxville. A transcript of these interviews can be found in the appendix of this thesis.

the relevance of language studies even for those who do not necessarily want to pursue a teaching career, due to its contribution to career readiness and personal development (McChesney 82-83).

The most recent publication on the SPARK for German program was another forum contribution in the magazine *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German* in 2023. In "Beyond teaching heritage speakers: Prioritizing diversity in an elementary school-university SPARK teaching partnership," Pascale LaFountain discusses her SPARK Lab at Montclair State University from the perspective of using the program to enhance intercultural awareness and to promote the diversity of the German teaching field. The article discusses how SPARK addresses the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion by emphasizing accessibility, free materials with diverse representations, and extracurricular flexibility. The article highlights the benefits for both university students and elementary school students since SPARK fosters global awareness, language learning, and intercultural curiosity (LaFountain 1-4).

In the following, this thesis is adding to the existing corpus of research in SPARK by looking at the role of play-based learning in the context of the program. Baumgartner et al. report about their SPARK lab in a middle school in Utah: "Neither the parents nor the SPARK team was convinced by a "fun-and-games" approach to learning German" (Baumgartner et al. 135). Despite that this thesis focuses on play-based learning in elementary schools, the following findings can still be potentially applicable for SPARK

labs that teach in middle schools, or it might give them a starting point for further adaptations of the materials.

Examples of Play-based Learning from the SPARK Lab in Knoxville

In the following, I will present several play-based and communicative classroom activities that have been implemented in the SPARK for German program that is taught in two elementary schools in Knoxville, Tennessee. This chapter provides insights into how play-based learning has been implemented into these SPARK Labs, and it evaluates the integration of play-based learning at these schools.

Adult Involvement in Play-based Activities in the SPARK Classroom

At the two elementary schools in Knoxville, the SPARK classes are taught by a small team of instructors. These classes are jointly planned by, on average, three instructors who also decide on who is taking the lead for which segment of the lesson. Those who are not teaching observe or support the students while they engage in pair- or group-work. Occasionally, instructors also teach a specific part of the class together, thus modeling activities and exchanges to help students find their way into these activities and understand what they are expected to do without explaining too much in English.

The SPARK lab in Knoxville does not use *Free Play*, *Inquiry Play*, or *Collaborative Play* and focuses mainly on what Pyle and Danniels called *Learning Through Games*. This is a conscious choice because students in a foreign language classroom need to be guided in their learning through input from their teachers, and teaching materials are usually not self-explanatory enough for children to just learn facets

of the target language by playing with them. Another reason is that some of the classes in the SPARK lab in Knoxville would be too big to make *Free Play, Inquiry Play,* or *Collaborative Play* realistic.

In the SPARK Lab in Knoxville, instructors use phases of *Playful Learning* where the locus of control is more with the children than with the teacher. Most of the time, teachers guide the class or small groups during groupwork, but during activities in which children work individually, the teachers also observe and comment on the children's progress, making the activities more child-centered and child-led. In those situations, the teachers act more as observers and commentators. The role of the teacher that acts as an observer and commentator has also been described as a part of guided play in chapter 1 (see page 6-7).

Using Songs and Puppets to Push Output

Curtain and Dahl suggest that songs can be an effective tool to help children start speaking and learning a new language. They also argue that songs can aid in the repetition and memorization of vocabulary and language chunks, thus making them more meaningful for the learners (Curtain and Dahl 109). Additionally, songs can help learners internalize the sounds, vocabulary, and structures of the target language, which will make it easier for some to eventually transfer the knowledge acquired into real-life situations (Curtain and Dahl 370).

In the SPARK lab in Knoxville, songs play a big role. The *Felix und Franzi* materials provide a variety of song files and lyrics that match the current topic of the lesson. For example, when the children learn the animals, they learn the German version

of “Old McDonald has a farm”. In addition, two specific songs are used to establish a routine in the classroom: The classes always begin with the welcome song “Hallo Felix, Hallo Franzi” that both the children and instructor sing together, and classes always end with the goodbye song “Tschüss Felix, Tschüss Franzi”. The welcome song aims at ‘motivating’ the puppets, Felix and Franzi, to join the class. Most of the time, the instructors have the students sing the song more than once, sometimes louder as the instructor states that the puppets cannot hear them or sometimes more quietly as the instructor explains that the puppets were too scared by the loud singing. The children usually sing very enthusiastically and this ‘opening exercise’ gets them excited for a the lesson. The teachers then use the hand puppets to greet the class in German and to introduce themselves to Felix and Franzi and each other. This models for the students how they can introduce themselves. Felix and Franzi then turn to the class and ask students who they are “Wer bist du?”. Mirroring the chunks that the instructors and the puppets were using, the children repeat “Ich bin…” and introduce themselves to the class. This also works with other topics or songs that introduce the children to formulaic speech, like the “Wie geht’s” song.

Creating a Meaningful Context through a Narrative

During class, the instructors use a Smartboard with PowerPoint presentations to organize the lesson. After the initial song and hand puppet routine, the teacher is reviewing some content from the previous session. For the most part, interactive PowerPoint slides are utilized to support the children's learning. The slides, for example, feature Felix and Franzi taking clothes off a drying rack and putting them in their

suitcase, prompting the children to recall the vocabulary about the clothing that they had previously learned. The context is provided through Felix and Franzi, and the visualization allows the children to associate the words with the picture on the PowerPoint without making it necessary for instructors to switch to English. As a result, the children are able to repeat the vocabulary in a fun and engaging manner.

Using Videos to Provide Meaningful Input

The teaching team at the SPARK Lab in Knoxville also uses videos to provide meaningful input to the children. The language in the videos is tailored to the children's needs as they use simple language, and language chunks that are repeated throughout the videos. For example, in the video on clothing, there is a dialogue between Felix and Franzi that goes as follows: "Freitag, Waschtag! Die Hose, der Schal, die Socken. Wir waschen, wir waschen, den ganzen Tag! Oh nein! Die Waschmaschine ist kaputt, kaputt, kaputt! Wir müssen waschen: Das Kleid, die Jacke, der Rock, der Pullover, der Hut! Nein, der Hut nicht. Die Socken, die Schuhe. Nein, die Schuhe auch nicht. Der Schal, die Hose. Wir waschen alle Sachen!" (SPARK Moodle, n.p.) In some videos, there is also some English included. For example, in the introductory video there is a narrator that embeds the German dialogue between Felix and Franzi and their friends into an English story that the children would not be able to understand in German. The video goes as follows: "Hallo! Hallo! Guten Morgen! Das ist der Zoo, der Zoo Berlin. Guten Morgen! Hallo! Guten Tag! Hallo! Ich bin Felix! Hallo! Ich bin Franzi. Felix und Franzi sind im Zoo Berlin und das sind ihre Freund. Tschüss! Bis bald! Why is everyone saying goodbye? Well, Felix and Franzi are moving to England. And look what is this? An old

German letter box in an antique shop. They love it and move in. Now it's time to say hello to their new neighbors: Hallo Frau White! Ich bin Felix. Guten Morgen, Herr Brown. Ich bin Franzi. Das ist der Briefkasten. Das ist ihr neues Haus. Felix and Franzi are tired, but they are happy in their new house." (Moodle SPARK, n.p.)

The use of language chunks as they were presented in the video, was also successful in the second language acquisition process of Nora, that was described in Fillmore's study in chapter 3. Furthermore, meaningful and rich input as it is provided in these videos is also a crucial part of Communicative language teaching (Brandl 13-18). Moreover, the repetition of language chunks has been found to be beneficial for language acquisition (Ortega 106). The children usually enjoy watching the videos, even though they are sometimes outdated from a technical perspective[16]. The videos are very short and are typically around 2 minutes long. This also seems to be beneficial as the attention spans of the children tend to be rather short. After showing the videos, the instructors usually ask the students questions about what they have seen. Often with the support of additional scaffolded PowerPoint-slides and possibly other follow-up activities such as partner dialogues. This engages students to talk in the target language, which was pointed out in chapter 1 to be a crucial part of second language acquisition and communicative language teaching. In Chapter 1, the significance of talking was also emphasized by citing research conducted by Swain and Lapkin. Fillmore's study also highlighted that

[16] The videos were made 10 years ago and may sometimes depict animals in a two-dimensional manner with basic movements that don't seem very realistic. However, the children mostly don't seem to be bothered by this. In fact, this could even help them stay focused on the audio and the video, as the visuals can be a bit comical at times.

Nora's success in language acquisition was mainly due to her outspokenness and frequent use of the target language.

Using Formulaic Speech to Push Output

After the children are introduced to the new vocabulary through the video, the teacher usually uses interactive PowerPoint slides or other activities like partner dialogues or manipulative items to practice the new vocabulary with the children. Most of the time the teacher introduces the language chunks, makes the children repeat them together, and then has them work in small groups or with a partner. The positive aspect of this is that there are also several teachers in the classroom that can support the children when they are practicing new vocabulary and language chunks in their small groups. The students are, for example, asked to identify the colors of different items on the PowerPoint, and the corresponding German words appear on the slide after the children have named the color in German. The new vocabulary is presented in various contexts to help the children understand it better. The children are also encouraged to talk about themselves. For instance, they are asked to share their favorite color in German. To facilitate this, the teacher provides them with formulaic speech, whose underlying structure the children do not necessarily understand, for example, “Was ist deine Lieblingsfarbe? Meine Lieblingsfarbe ist rot.”

Creative Tasks and Hand Puppets

Once the children have gained confidence in understanding the new vocabulary, the instructors give them tasks that require them to link the new words and chunks with those they already know. For example, they are asked to describe the colors of their clothing using chunks like “Die Hose ist blau”. At this stage, the children are also encouraged to talk in pairs or small groups. For instance, the children are asked to say the color of an item of their neighbor's clothing. In this part of the lesson, the other student-instructors give support to smaller groups of children and provide feedback on their communication skills.

Often, teachers also prepare activities that allow the children to engage in creative play, such as coloring clothes for Felix and Franzi. The students then describe the clothing of Felix and Franzi to their neighbor using the target language. Again, the student-instructors primarily observe and offer assistance as needed. This approach can be considered a form of Guided Play, which was discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis. While the children are provided with an environment in which they are often given choices between different activities that are designed to reinforce what was studied, the teachers observe and comment.

The use of puppets also greatly improves communication in the classroom. In situations where children are shy, the puppets Felix and Franzi are particularly helpful in facilitating the engagement of the students by either conversing with the teacher through Felix and Franzi or by speaking German to themselves. Curtain and Dahl also emphasize

the benefits of using puppets and stuffed animals in the elementary school classroom. Puppets can be effectively used to model conversations and are often a favorite item in the classroom with younger children, with children wanting to hold them, play with them, or talk to them (Curtain and Dahl 317). However, these stuffed animals can also lead to distraction, as children are sometimes more engaged in playing with the toys than using the stuffed animals as a 'medium' to talk in the target language.

Movement-based Games

Teachers in the Spark Lab in Knoxville also often incorporate play-based activities that include movement. For instance, when introducing vocabulary for body parts, instructors play the game "Simon Says" or "Simon Sagt". The children first learn the rules through the guidance of the instructor, who provides directions. Later, the children follow the rules independently while instructors observe and eventually take turns in leading this game. This is an example of *Learning through Games* in the classroom. Teachers assist children in learning the rules, and the children apply them while playing using the target language. These movement-based games usually alleviate the mood and children usually laugh a lot which is beneficial for lowering the affective filters.

The teachers in the SPARK Lab in Knoxville also utilize play-based activities that include songs and dance to help students learn. For example, the children are taught the German version of the children's song "Head-Shoulders-Knees-And-Toes." The teacher

explains the lyrics and has the students repeat them before dancing to the music and pointing at the respective body parts. The children particularly enjoy being encouraged to exaggerate their movements, such as singing and dancing in slow motion or super-fast. According to Ortega (106), repetition can be beneficial for second language acquisition, and the use of different modes of repetition of songs is not as monotonous or boring to the children.

During the lesson on the naming of the body parts in German, the instructors, for example, also use the "Körperteile-Blues" (Lichterkinder n.p.). By following a video and singing along, the children can move freely and dance to the music, which creates a relaxed and anxiety-free atmosphere. Lowering the affective filter through an anxiety-free environment has been proven to help with language learning (see Krashen in chapter 1). Additionally, dancing and singing align with the principles of play-based learning, as they allow for spontaneous, fun movement.

Another way in which movement is used to teach the children in the Knoxville SPARK Lab new vocabulary is the introduction of German numbers. To teach counting to five, the children are required to stand up and perform a specific movement for each number. For example, for "Eins", they give a thumbs up, for "Zwei", they jump twice in place, for "Drei", they stomp their foot three times, for "Vier", they clap four times, and for "Fünf", they quickly find a partner and give them a high five. The children are sometimes asked to perform the movements quickly or in slow motion, which adds to the fun of the exercise. During the semester, the instructors also involve the children in

creating new movements for higher numbers, and soon the counting routines can be expanded up to larger numbers. The numbers also serve as a great starting point for intercultural reflection because the children are surprised to learn that German speakers count differently than people in the USA. They find it amusing that "Eins" means giving a thumbs up instead of using the index finger to count.

Another game that is frequently used during the SPARK sessions in Knoxville is a game that involves movement to teach the children how to say, "How are you?" in German, along with responses like "wunderbar" (wonderful), "gut" (good), and "schlecht" (bad). The game is based on the *Felix und Franzi* song "Hallo Felix wie geht's", which the children learn early in the program. To play the game, all the children have to stand up in front of their chairs, sing along to the song, and sit down quickly whenever they hear the line "Wie geht's", before standing up again, and they have a lot of fun playing the game. This game is also a great example of how children recognize patterns in the input provided (see Swain, and Lapkin 386-388). Although the children do not comprehend each and every word in the song, they are attentive to the song and enjoy moving to its rhythm.

Games with Visualizations

Another game that is frequently used in the SPARK Lab in Knoxville is *Bingo*. When introducing the vocabulary for animals, the children are given different handouts with an array of pictures of animals whose names were introduced before. When the

teacher says the word for an animal, the students are asked to cross out the picture of the animal. The first child to have all the animals in a vertical or horizontal row crossed out yells, “Bingo!” To make the game more engaging for all the students, the teachers also change the rules to “Now we move on until all the animals are crossed out” so that all the children are able to cross out all the animals on their sheet and thus are exposed to listening to the words for each of the animals depicted on the handout. Curtain and Dahl also recommend Bingo for practicing new vocabulary (Curtain and Dahl 349).

Games on Worksheets

A game that is used when, for example, the vocabulary for fruit is introduced to the children is a Word Search. Each child is given a worksheet on which they have a long list of words in a row, without any spaces. The children do not know the majority of the words in one line, but they do know the words for various fruits. They are asked to underline the vocabulary that is related to fruit in the long lines of words, and the other student-instructors help the children during this task. Younger learners are given a word bank to facilitate finding the word.

Using Realia for Meaningful Input

To teach new vocabulary, the instructors teaching in the SPARK for German program sometimes use physical objects and toys to introduce new words or to make the children talk. For instance, when introducing the names of different fruits, instructors utilize the plastic fruit that comes with the Felix and Franzi material kit to create the

following game: While a song is playing, the children pass around a puppet (either Felix or Franzi), as if it were a "hot potato". Once the music stops, the child who holds the puppet has to reach into a bag that contains plastic fruit and pick one without looking. The child then shows the fruit they picked to the rest of the class and names it: “Das ist der Apfel.” Sometimes children are also asked to state the color of the fruit, for example: “Der Apfel ist rot.”. The children usually find this game entertaining, and they are motivated to learn the vocabulary for different fruit items. Furthermore, the game allows the children to listen to the target language through the song they listen to. It also allows them to speak and understand the context through the plastic fruits, which provides the children with meaningful input. Similar to Fillmore's experiment, toys are utilized to convey meaning so that children who do not yet know a specific word can comprehend it with the help of the toys.

Summary on Play-based Learning in SPARK for German in Knoxville

This chapter aimed at illustrating the use of communicative play-based language learning in the SPARK lab in Knoxville. The children in these classrooms are exposed to Felix and Franzi videos, songs, slides, and toys, and they have teachers who provide input in the target language (German) in a meaningful context. Carefully selected supporting materials and activities ensure that learners can understand the message, even if they do not comprehend every part of an utterance. The learners are encouraged to produce output by communicating with others, participating in games, or by singing along to a

song. To support the children in their endeavor to produce output in the target language, the learners are, for example, introduced to chunks. These chunks also help them to recognize patterns in the input, as it is for example the case in the activity build around the ”Wie geht’s” song outlined above. Moreover, the overall atmosphere created in the SPARK Lab through play-based activities helps to reduces anxieties. The SPARK instructors in Knoxville also started to include “fun facts” about German culture and the German-speaking countries. For example, connected with cultural insights on German candy: While green gummy bears are flavored like Strawberry (“Erdbeere”) in the USA, green gummy bears are apple-flavored (“Apfel”) in the German-speaking countries.

Incorporating play into the SPARK classroom has resulted in significant improvements in the children's language skills. The children are particularly adept at memorizing toy names (fruits) and song lyrics. The Knoxville SPARK Lab is mostly teacher-led or teacher-guided. The latter is necessary because some of the classes are quite large with roughly 30 children, and the overall instruction time of only 45 minutes for each class session seems too short to allow for more child-centered forms of play such as *Free Play*, *Inquiry Play* or *Collaborative Play* as introduced by Pyle Danniels in Chapter 1. The SPARK materials are also designed in a way that teacher- guided play-based learning is the most suitable and can be realized by the forms of play listed in this chapter. Additionally, planning some of the games requires a significant amount of preparation time. It also needs to be mentioned that some of the games discussed in this chapter were created by the SPARK instructors and therefore Knoxville SPARK

instructors often relied on materials provided through the “SPARK for German” national initiative by using them ‘as is’ or- as was frequently the case- by adapting them for the specific circumstances in their classroom. As Cheep-Aranai et al. concluded, planning play-based foreign language classes requires a considerable time investment for class preparation (Cheep-Aranai et al. 154).

CHAPTER 5: GUIDELINES AND IDEAS FOR FUTURE COMMUNICATIVE PLAY-BASED FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

The first part of this chapter focuses on giving guidelines for implementing play-based learning into elementary school foreign language classes. The second part of this chapter gives examples and practical ideas for play-based activities that can be used in the elementary foreign language classroom.

Selecting the Right Games

When integrating play-based learning into the elementary school foreign language curriculum, it is important to select the games carefully so that they suit the abilities of the learners and support the learning objectives of the class.

When choosing games and play-based activities for foreign language classrooms, the research conducted by Curtain and Dahl, Navarro Perez and Ewa Guz stands out due to their emphasis on the practical implementation of play-based learning in elementary school classrooms. The work of these researchers provides valuable guidelines and suitable ideas for incorporating play into elementary school foreign language classes.

According to Curtain and Dahl the games that are best suited to support foreign language acquisition are games whose rules are easy to understand without lengthy explanations. They also recommend incorporating a bit of competition, elements of mystery or surprise, or both to transform a simple activity into a game. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of ensuring that the games used in the foreign language classes

are enjoyable to students (Curtain, Dahl 341). More specifically, Curtain and Dahl give the following guidance:

1. “Focus on Communicative Language Chunks” (Curtain and Dal 341): Games should be chosen and possibly adjusted in such a way that playing these games helps students understand the target language and express themselves in it. Using language chunks from the target language when playing these games instead of just single word messages, supports students early on in getting used to communicating in the target language in full sentences (Curtain and Dahl 341).
2. “Engage all Learners” (Curtain and Dahl 341): It is important to provide a maximum opportunity for all students to participate. Ideally, all learners are engaged in the activity at all times. When playing games where children are eliminated from the game as a consequence of a wrong response, being “out” of the game should be turned into a temporary status by proving pathways or guidelines that allow those who are “out” to re-enter the game, for example by assigning them new roles or tasks (Curtain and Dahl 341).
3. “Provide Suspense but Avoid Intense Individual Competition” (Curtain and Dahl 341): While Curtain and Dahl recommend adding elements of suspense or competition, they - at the same time - advise to avoid intense individual competition. Teams should form in such a way that they are evenly matched with equal opportunity for success. Another possibility is to have the whole class compete against the teacher or an imaginary villain (Curtain and Dahl 341-342).

4. “Choose Short, Easy Games” (Curtain and Dahl 342): It is advisable to select games that are moving quickly so that they can possibly be repeated during a class session instead of introducing games that take up a large portion of the class period and possibly cannot even be finished in one session. In addition, games should be simple, so that learners do not have to use their first language to explain themselves or the game (Curtain and Dahl 342).

5. “Keep Games Fresh and Motivating” (Curtain and Dahl 342): Teachers should stop the game or activity when the class is still fully engaged rather than continuing until the interest begins to wane. Rotating games so that individual games are used sparingly helps to keep them ‘fresh’ and along with this keeps learners interested and motivated to play them (Curtain and Dahl 342).

6. “Use Noncompetitive Games” (Curtain and Dahl 342): This can ensure that everyone plays to the level of their ability, and it promotes a fair play (Curtain and Dahl 342).

7. “Give Games and Activities a Name” (Curtain and Dahl 342): This helps younger learners in particular to regard the game as something ‘special.’ It also makes it easier to talk about the game outside of the classroom without paraphrasing what it is all about in the respective L1 and to request that it be played in the foreign language classroom in the target language (Curtain and Dahl 342).

8. “Look for Games from Other Cultures” (Curtain and Dal 342): Whenever possible, games that are played in the target culture or different cultures around the world should be included (Curtain and Dahl 342).[17]

In her article “Teaching English Through Play” from 2022 Navarro Perez convincingly provides, independently from Curtain and Dahl, further guidelines for choosing games in the classroom. Perez’s research focuses on “sentence construction awareness in nursery and primary grades” (Perez 1). Perez develops a list of characteristics that she considers important for activities that are planned for foreign language instruction at the elementary school level. For 5-6-year-old children Perez lists the following five criteria (Perez 5):

1. The games should give students the opportunity to work with concrete manipulative materials.
2. The games need to encourage movement.
3. The games or activities should have visualizations like pictures.
4. There should be various games and activities to maintain the students’ attention.
5. Repetition and the establishment of a routine help students to become familiar with frames, which might help to perform the tasks with more ease.

[17] This can also be a great starting point for intercultural reflections.

Another article that fits in the context of this is an article from 2016 by Ewa Guz with the title “Learning A Foreign Language Through Play”. In her article, in which she discusses the importance of playing for foreign language teaching, Guz makes the following recommendations for the selection of games in the elementary school foreign language classroom:

1. *The game should be worth the effort of preparation*. Guz highlights that it is important to keep the linguistic benefit of games in mind. She points out: “there needs to be a balance between the costs and the pay-off” (Guz 48). If a game takes too long to prepare and there are not enough benefits for meeting the linguistic learning objectives, then the game should not be used in the classroom.
2. *Play-based learning activities need to be structured*. They need to be broken down into smaller stages that are introduced one at a time. Teachers need to give brief and clear instructions and need to keep in mind that activities that are games need to be implanted into each session in such a way that they support the overall flow of the envisioned unit more. For example, ‘energizing’ activities are very well suited for the warm-up phase (Guz 48f).
3. *The Game should keep the learners' abilities in mind*. Another aspect that is important to remember is that the learners’ age and development need to be kept in mind. Also, individual preferences such as the attitude to competition needs to be evaluated before using a specific game in the classroom. This

includes keeping the classroom set-up and duration of the class in mind (Guz 48f).

In conclusion, games should be enjoyable and engaging for all learners while also promoting communication. They should have an element of suspense without too much individual competition, and be easy, short, and motivating. Non-competitive games are also a great option, and inspiration for games can be drawn from different cultures around the world, including the target culture. It can be helpful to name games for easy communication and reference. Additionally, games should allow for the use of materials that can be manipulated and games should encourage movement and visualization. It's important to have a variety of different games throughout classes in order to maintain students' attention. Routines and repetition of games can also help students become more familiar and comfortable with playing certain games. When selecting games, their 'linguistic value,' namely the degree to which they foster foreign language acquisition, should always be considered when evaluating whether the prospective gain justifies the time-effort needed for preparing a game.

Suitable Ideas for Games in the Play-based Foreign Language Classroom

In the following, I will introduce and discuss several games that are suitable to foster foreign language acquisition in an elementary school classroom setting because they, for the most part, can be implemented according to the guidelines discusses in the first part of chapter 5.

Memorization games

Playing “Memory” can be an effective way to reinforce new vocabulary after introducing it through pictures or objects. Memory games can be distributed in multiple copies so that all children in the class can engage simultaneously in this activity in pair- or small group arrangements. The memory game offers various options. For instance, children can be tasked to pair identical pictures and are required to say the word or phrase associated with each picture every time they turn over a piece. Alternatively, children can match the correct words or phrases with the relevant pictures. It is suggested that teachers or other student-instructors play the game with the children to ensure that all of them understand the rules and receive guidance and feedback regarding the pronunciation of words or phrases. If there are fewer helpers than groups of students, the picture and word pairings can be displayed on a Smartboard or a poster so that children can check the words if necessary. One of the advantages of this game is that it centers around images, it is easy to understand, and creates more or less equal opportunities for all participants to collect matching pairs.

Another game that is fun and enhances foreign language classes at the elementary school level is called "Remember the Picture". In this game, a picture is presented to the children, such as a bowl of fruit or a group of animals, for a limited amount of time and then the picture of one item depicted is taken away, for example a banana or an apple. The children then must recall and identify the item that ‘disappeared’ from the picture by naming it in the target language. This activity can also be played in teams, where children

negotiate (in the target language) which of the items that disappeared from the original image they are able to remember and name in the target language. This game is easy to understand, uses visualizations, and it fosters the use of the target language.

Games using Digital Resources

In “Guessing the Animal Sound”, the teacher uses resources from the internet to play different animal sounds. The objective of this game is for children to guess which animal made the sound and name it in the target language. This game also provides opportunities for cultural reflections. For example, the teacher could point out that a rooster makes a sound like "Kikeriki" in German, instead of "cock-a-doodle-doo" in English. To promote communication in the target language, the game can be played in groups and one can also turn it into a competition by awarding points to the group that is first in correctly guessing the animal sound and naming the respective animal in the target language.

After introducing new vocabulary, teachers can also use *Kahoot* to enhance learning. On the Kahoot website, teachers can customize games with various question types, such as multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, matching, or drag-and-drop. As many schools have adopted tablets, this game can also be used in foreign language classrooms for elementary school students. Perez, in her article, highlights how much six-year-old students in her English class in Barcelona enjoyed Kahoot (Perez 6). Kahoot is a great online tool to ensure maximum participation from all learners simultaneously and using it in the foreign languages classroom thus aligns directly with one of the guidelines for

foreign language instruction in elementary school settings, namely lessons should be planned and delivered in such a way that all learners stay engaged at all times.

Perez, in her article, also suggests a game called 'Spot the Sentence.' In this game, students are shown different parts of a sentence, possibly with the support of a picture, and the students must identify the sentence and either write it down or say it (Perez 9). Perez found that this game was extremely motivating for her students and helped them improve their understanding of sentence structure. As a result, they became more confident when speaking. However, Perez only used these games with a small group of students in a workshop, and these activities have yet to be tested in in larger groups in elementary school foreign language classrooms. (Perez 10).

Movement-based Games

A game called “Keep up the balloon” is ideal to be played when teaching vocabulary for body parts, which is usually one of the first topics covered in foreign language classes. The game involves giving each child a balloon and instructing the learners to keep it up in the air using a specific body part as called out by the teacher or a student. For instance, the teacher could say the German word for head, "Kopf", and as a result, the children would need to prevent the balloon from falling on the floor by only using their heads. The game can be made more challenging by adding numbers to the instructions. For example, the teacher could say "two hands” or "Zwei Hände" to give the instruction. This game is also recommended by Curtain and Dahl who call it *Balloon Bounce* for foreign language classrooms at the elementary school level (Curtain and Dahl

352). The game allows for variations such as playing in teams and having students give the commands that clarify which body parts need to be used to keep the balloon afloat (Curtain and Dahl 352). When using this game, it is important to keep the the classroom size in mind, as highlighted previously by Guz.

In a game called “Find the Color”, all children leave their seats and stand up. The teacher or a child announces a color in the target language, and the children have to look around the classroom to find something in that color. Again, the size of the class should be considered before playing this game, as it could become chaotic when played in larger groups.

The “Weather Game” is a game that can be played to help students learn weather-related vocabulary. The teacher or student can announce a type of weather, and the children walk around the classroom in a certain way. For example, "sunny" or "sonnig" can require the children to walk on their tiptoes, while "thunder" or "Donner" can require them to walk like a crab. For "lightning" or "Blitz," the children can freeze. This game can also be adjusted to help students learn words from other subject-areas.

Perez suggests another game to practice vocabulary and sentence structure called “Seek and Stick”. The teacher displays columns of words written on sticky stripes of paper around the classroom and the students have to locate the correct word in the classroom. They then need to return to their seat and stick the word under the corresponding image on their worksheet. The game can also be played in reverse, where students need to find the correct image in the classroom to match a given word on their

worksheet (Perez 8). Perez also notes that this activity can be used to practice sentence recognition. In this case, the teacher displays an image and the correct sentence, while the students have to find the corresponding words in the classroom and then stick them on their worksheet in the correct order (Perez 8).

Games using Toys

One way to practice a foreign language is to play a game that uses real objects, like a modified version of the game “Jenga”. In this game, the instructor writes numbers on the blocks, and the students have to say the number on the brick every time they pick a piece. Alternatively, colored bricks can be used, and the children would say the color of the brick they pick. This game is a great way to help students practice their foreign language skills in a playful and engaging way.

Board games can be another great tool to help children learn a new language. Teachers can create different games that cater to the specific needs of their students. For instance, they can create game boards with questions related to the days of the week, such as "On which days do you have German class?" To make the game more engaging and fun, teachers can add special fields like "skip a round," "roll the dice again," or "wait for the next player to arrive on your spot." This approach not only helps children learn new vocabulary and grammar but also makes the learning process more enjoyable for them. Curtain and Dahl also suggest an adaptation of this game, which they call *Life Size Board Game*. In this adaptation, ropes and tape are used to create shapes on the floor. Then,

pictures, colors, shapes, or other symbols are placed on the different fields. The children then move like figurines on the board and complete different tasks. The advantage of this version of *Boardgames* is that there is movement involved, which is beneficial for learning (Curtain and Dahl 354).

Challenges for the Implementation of Play-based Learning in Elementary Foreign Language Classes

Despite the many options for play-based learning and the great results that they can produce in elementary foreign language classes, there are still challenges that elementary schools may face when they enhance foreign language programs at their schools through games that foster foreign language acquisition.

Bubikova et al. report that when play-based learning was implemented in the early education classroom, some teachers expressed skepticism toward the effectiveness of play-based activities. Additionally, teachers encountered obstacles when implementing play-based learning because of policy mandates, teachers' concerns about the curriculum, and parental attitudes and beliefs. Teachers also faced difficulties with their educational background, pressure from colleagues who use different approaches, structural challenges, and the unique characteristics of the children in their class (Bubikova et al. 785-787). Despite these challenges, it is imperative to not lose sight of the many advantages that come with using play-based learning in the elementary school foreign language classroom.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This thesis analyzed how foreign language classes should be structured to meet the specific needs of elementary school-aged children, and it proposed a combination of play-based learning and communicative language teaching as a suitable and effective instructional approach for this age group.

The first chapter discussed the concept of play, emphasizing that there is no clear-cut definition of the term and that various approaches are typically used in current research to describe play. Some researchers differentiate between free and guided play (Weisberg et al.), while others suggest that play can range from child-centered *Free Play* to teacher-centered *Learning through games* (Pyle and Danniels). To establish a clear understanding of play within the context of this thesis, a working definition was introduced that specified 'play' as an activity that children are motivated to engage in and that they generally perceive as enjoyable. This working definition of play also entails that children get actively involved, for example through non-literal and pretend play, that children can be actively engaged in play, which may involve non-literal and pretend play, imagination, and creativity, as well as movement. It further stipulates that 'play' can also be freely chosen by children or introduced by the teacher, and that this activity can be done solely for enjoyment or for meeting certain learning objectives in educational contexts.

The following benefits of play for learning were established: Play can help children become more independent, engaged, and inclined towards learning. It can foster children's overall development, such as improving their social, cognitive, and language

skills. In the context of foreign language learning, research has shown that play can change students' attitudes toward the target language, making them more engaged in conversations, lowering anxiety, providing meaningful contexts in the classroom, and helping them stay engaged during class time. Lastly, research suggests that play can foster intercultural competence through pretend play in the context of foreign language classes.

In the second chapter of this thesis, the connection between communicative language teaching and play-based learning was further analyzed. It was noted that both task-based learning, which is part of communicative language teaching, and play-based learning aim to develop communicative skills that equip students with the knowledge that is needed to interact in real-life situations in the target language. Both communicative language teaching and play-based learning include the production of output, which research in Second Language Acquisition has shown to be an integral part of foreign language learning. Play can help to push output since it encourages students to negotiate rules or meaning in different play activities. Furthermore, communicative language teaching emphasizes providing rich input that closely resembles immersive contexts and games can provide rich input, when students are listening to pretend play of other children or when they engage in games that entail video or audio material. Additionally, communicative language teaching seeks to provide meaningful input by using different cues to make input more comprehensible. Play-based learning can assist with this by using toys and games for contextualization, thus making the learning process more meaningful for students. Lastly, communicative language teaching acknowledges the

importance of reducing anxiety and stress levels in the context of foreign language learning. Play can help with lowering the affective filter by diverting the foreign language learners' focus away from speaking by directing it towards playing. Puppets and other toys can also provide comfort to children who may otherwise feel more anxious about speaking in the target language.

The third chapter highlighted that a combination of communicative language teaching and play-based learning can, to some degree, mimic how children acquire a new language in immersive environments. Within this context, especially Fillmore's study on *Individual Differences in Language Ability and Language Behavior* in which she focuses on strategies that children utilize to successfully acquire a new language by playing with children who speak this language as their L1, served as the most important reference point. Based on this analysis, I argue that the combination of communicative language teaching with play-based learning can create a classroom environment for learners that bears similarities with immersive contexts.

In the fourth chapter, the thesis discussed two specific examples of how play-based learning can be incorporated in elementary school foreign language education. The first example chosen was Cheep-Aranai et al.'s study that focused on the implementation of play-based learning into a foreign language elementary school classroom in Thailand. In this study, each lesson was structured into three distinct phases: 1. A circle set up which prepared children for learning centers, 2. Communicating and playing with teachers in different play set ups, 3. Discussing what was learned in the learning centers in the whole group. The play that children engaged in in these centers included various

games, such as games with rules, language play, physical play, pretend play, and other creative play-based activities. Cheep-Aranai et al.'s findings include that this play-based approach made children more excited and more confident when speaking in the target language. The elementary school students in this study remembered vocabulary and structures well, and they were able to negotiate meaning in the target language while having fun. However, there were some challenges, that presented themselves in the study such as initial hesitation with the approach among the children, individual differences, using the first language instead of the target language, and finding suitable classroom materials to foster language learning.

The second example discussed in chapter four of this thesis was the program called SPARK for German, which involves university students of German who introduce students in elementary- middle, or high school to German language and culture. The program's objectives, materials, and publications on SPARK were discussed, and the program implementation at two elementary schools in Knoxville, TN, was discussed in detail, and a selection of play-based activities used in the SPARK classroom in Knoxville was analyzed. These included the use of hand puppets, interactive PowerPoint slides, crafts, movement-based games, toys, and games with pictures and music. The SPARK teams teaching at the two Knoxville schools, primarily used guided play in the classroom, specifically *Learning through Games*, to introduce glimpses of German language and culture to elementary school students. The teaching teams found remarkable improvements in the student's learning progress with this approach.

In chapter five, several important guidelines for implementing play-based learning in elementary school foreign language classes were discussed and augmented by some practical ideas and tips for creating play-based activities that foster foreign language learning. These guidelines entail that games should focus on introducing communicative language chunks and engage all learners while avoiding intense individual competition. Games should also be simple enough to ensure that language production stays in the target language. Furthermore, it is important to keep games fresh and motivating, by frequently using different materials and by altering classroom activities. Games should also include visualizations, repetition, and well-structured rules with brief and clear instructions. It is important to pay attention to a balance between the cost and time that go into preparation and the payoff in terms of learning outcomes when selecting play-based activities for the classroom. Furthermore, it is important to keep learners' abilities in mind and tailor games to their respective level of understanding. Finally, it is crucial to consider the surroundings and context in which the games are conducted in a foreign language environment. In the second half of chapter five, various games that are suitable for elementary school foreign language classrooms., such as memorization games, digital resource-based games, movement-based games, and games using toys were introduced and discussed. Following these recommendations, this thesis also highlights some of the challenges that might present themselves when implementing play-based learning in foreign language classes at the elementary school level. These challenges may include skepticism from teachers, colleagues, and parents, difficulties in meeting curricular goals, and addressing the individual needs of children in the classroom.

It would be interesting and important to conduct further empirical research on the effectiveness of different forms of play within the context of play-based and communicative foreign language instruction in elementary schools. Future research could analyze how effective *Free Play*, *Inquiry Play* or *Collaborative Play* may be in foreign language classes, in contexts like SPARK. This could entail the analysis or creation of materials that are suitable for a more child-centered play-based approach to language learning. Moreover, further research could examine other SPARK labs across the United States to establish to what extent play-based learning was used, and if so, how effective this approach has been for achieving certain learning objectives.

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APPENDIX

In order to develop some initial understanding regarding the impact of the SPARK for German Program in Knoxville thus far, a standardized interview was conducted with administrative stakeholders in Knoxville schools who have immediate insights related to the implementation of this program in Knoxville. Some of the questions included in this standardized interview are partly informed by the work published on SPARK for German by Baumgartner et al. in 2022 where perspectives and attitudes of parents, students, and faculty about the SPARK lab offered through the University of Utah are presented and discussed (Baumgartner et al. 132-134)

In their 2022 article entitled "Sparking Interest in German through the Goethe/AATG-sponsored SPARK Program", Baumgartner et al. highlight that the expectation of parents of the middle school students who participated in the program were met or exceeded. Out of the ten total responses, 90% of the parents indicated that they were happy or very happy with the program, and 100% of the parents indicated that they would recommend this program to a friend. One suggestion made by parents interviewed by Baumgartner et al. was to ensure that students get even more motivated to use German during and in-between the weekly class session. Here it needs to be noted, that these comments were made on the portion of the implementation phase where German instruction offered through this SPARK lab had to be conducted online during the lockdown due to COVID-19, and these circumstances may have influenced these parents' expectations and recommendations. The survey by Baumgartner et al. also indicated that 80% of the parents said that, based on their experiences with the SPARK

for German program at the middle school level, they were likely to enroll their children in a high school German program (Baumgartner et al. 132).

Baumgartner et al. also examined the perspectives of the student instructors on SPARK. The students who shared their views stated that the materials were of only limited relevance to them. These circumstances made their engagement in the SPARK lab more challenging and time-consuming than anticipated because they decided to create – at least to some degree – their own curriculum and some teaching materials to support it. Based on this experience, they wished that the Goethe Institut would create more materials for this age group so that they could be more easily adapted for use in their own classroom. While the university students stated that they had not noticed a change or only a slight change in their German ability, their German professor noticed strong language gains in all students. Overall, the University of Utah students who completed the survey referenced in the article by Baumgartner et al. evaluated their experience with the SPARK for German as engaging and enriching, they enjoyed working in a cohort, and it made them feel like a part of a community that shared similar interests (Baumgartner et al 133).

Lastly, Baumgartner asked faculty from the University of Utah about their perspective on the SPARK lab. The faculty reported that the goal to spark interest in German among middle schoolers has been reached. Based on their insights and experiences, they also concluded that SPARK was a viable academic experience for the university students participating in the project. Problems that the faculty indicated in the

survey related to the communication with the school in which the SPARK program took place, as well as time management issues due to different semester systems. The faculty also highlighted the positive and fruitful cooperation between students and faculty as an important asset (133f).

While Baumgartner et al. already collected data on the perspectives of parents, students, and faculty, the three interviews with select administrative stakeholders in schools in Knoxville transcribed below aim to augment the corpus of documented experiences related to SPARK for German. The interview was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Tennessee, as well as from another research board affiliated with one of the schools where SPARK takes place.

Interview with Principal about *SPARK for German*

I. Attitudes towards foreign language learning in US elementary schools

a) What benefits do you see attached to teaching foreign languages in elementary schools?

"I am a big fan of any foreign language instruction in elementary school, just because not only does it engage the students in unique ways, in terms of understanding language and communication, but for me, it's more about cultural understanding and understanding that we live in a global society. And not everyone is like us, we don't have the most diverse school, I've lived in other places that are much more diverse. And so, I think is really important for students to have any exposure in any way shape or form to people, or languages or traditions that are different from what they know."

b) To what extent can a program like SPARK for German influence the attitude of different stakeholders towards foreign language learning?

"I think the great thing about SPARK is that it does not have the pressures of traditional academic classes in terms of "Oh, am I going to pass the test? Am I going to get the grade?" It's more fun. And so, I love it when the kids sit, and they're trying out their new German vocab and stuff like that. So, it definitely creates a positive association with learning a foreign language. At a younger age, that's so much more important as they head off maybe to middle or high school when they will encounter a more academic

setting, a slightly more rigorous setting. And so, their attitude going into that will be much improved as a result of something like Spark."

II. Expectations and Feedback about SPARK

a) Did you find the information on the SPARK website helpful?

"I thought, in true German fashion, it was a very thorough and well-organized website. No, it was. I was really impressed. I was like, wow, this is great. Yeah, it was a good website."

b) What were your initial expectations of SPARK? Which elements of the program surprised you?

"Um, I guess, I wasn't quite sure what to expect because it was clear it was not a traditional like language instruction course. I was surprised by how well the younger grades were addressed and geared towards younger students. I thought that was incredibly well done. I was impressed with the ability of the teachers we've had in Spark. I know we've had some people who have limited experience working with younger children or students of elementary age, but really, the instructors have done a great job of jumping in and finding joy in it. And that to me, goes a long way as well. With instruction, half the battle is finding people who are excited about teaching so that the students can be excited about learning."

c) What are the main benefits of SPARK for elementary schools?

"Yeah, it's hard for any school to get in all they need and all they want to. You want your students to be so well rounded. Which means PE, it means art, it means music, it means language and SPARK is an opportunity for providing that diversity in education and instruction in a way that's approachable and fun, especially for younger students who maybe don't need more on their plates. And so, you're increasing that global and cultural awareness, while making it fun. It provides something different too. I think in terms of extracurricular activities, there's so many traditional things that you see. There's always some athletics and other clubs and after school activities may not be quite as diverse in terms of their options. And for students who may have different interests. So, I think that's actually a huge benefit for schools, when they're looking at what they want to offer their students and what they want to do in terms of growing their school community and what their school culture looks like. SPARK can be very helpful for that."

d) I assume you received formal and informal feedback from many stake holders in your school community. Would you be able to share some of that feedback with me?

"I would say it goes really well with my younger students, my first, second, third, my fourth graders. I know we have the SPARK program for older children, but trying to engage students in middle school or approaching middle school is a little harder. As somebody who loves teaching middle school and works with them, they are a hard group to impress. So, I think trying to figure out a way to maybe more engage those adolescents

who are technically in elementary school, but as we've learned, kids are maturing faster and their tolerance for things is limited and trying to engage that group of kids is a challenge for anyone. So, I think that's something I've heard that they would like to learn a foreign language, they'd like the idea of it. But finding ways to engage them that they will buy into it is a challenge. But my younger students have really dived in, and the parents love that it's an option and, they feel like their kid is getting something extra and above and beyond their normal education. So, they're always thrilled about it."

III. Fostering language learning and intercultural competence

a) In your opinion, in how far can a 50-minute afternoon program such as SPARK ignite children's curiosity for the German language and culture?

"I think it can do a ton because you're getting a regular introduction to it and it is scaffolded so well, building on itself each week! I was amazed at being able to sit in this year a little more, and seeing how much the kids retain from one week to the next. You know, it's cliche, but those kids really are sponges. So, their interest and their excitement level grow very quickly. And so there is enough time to where it starts to settle into that deeper memory, and it's not as superficial, but you're changing the activities often enough that you're keeping the students engaged. I think it does in terms of their interest in their engagement in German language and culture."

b) How did songs, movement-based games, and crafts aid in the children's acquisition of some basic German and in the acquaintance with glimpses of German culture?

"Yes, um, as an educator we see again and again, there's a reason that people retain the nursery rhymes, the poems those things that they learned in preschool and kindergarten. How can somebody whose learned a poem in kindergarten remember that poem, but can't remember where they put their keys? Well, that's fundamental in our ability to learn. And when you set things to a rhythm with songs, or you're doing something with your hands, and there's kinetic learning. It's key. I mean, we've discovered in education, you cannot just sit down at a chair, look at words on a piece of paper, and expect every child to be able to learn that way. So, as I mentioned earlier, the way that you approach things differently, you're changing the tactic regularly throughout the class with movements to stand up and to sit down the bingo games, all of that stuff that play-based learning that gamification is the term we like to use some for the older kids, is, it's essential. And it's also what students have come to expect. And so, if students are coming in expecting learning to be fun, especially if it is an after-school event, or it's an extracurricular event, they want to feel like they're doing something different and interesting. And so, that's essential to their learning and engagement and getting their buy in."

IV. Outlook

a) Are there any aspects of SPARK that you would like to see added to the program?

“I mean, I think right now, everything they're doing is setting them up in the in the right direction. And it's a great foundation. I mean, obviously, maybe making some adjustments for those, the slightly older students who are a little more cynical, but as of right now, they're doing a great job. I'm really impressed with how thorough it is how thorough the curriculum in the program is.”

b) If the circumstances would allow it, would it be attractive to you and your school to establish a regular multi-year German program? Why/ Why not?

“I feel like we're a bit of an anomaly at this, I think it would be something our school would be interested in. But we are also a Lutheran school that has a tradition of German culture. Our school, our church was originally only German speaking. So, for us, it is a more logical growth. I also think German is a useful language to learn. It's a helpful one, and students seem to enjoy it. And that is a big thing. I think any language you're learning can be helpful for that. So, I personally would love a multi-year German program. Finding German teachers, that would be the other thing.”

Interview with a Stakeholder about *SPARK for German*

I. Attitudes towards foreign language learning in US elementary schools

a) What benefits do you see attached to teaching foreign languages in elementary schools?

"Well, we have a huge body of research in world languages that tells us that language learning correlates with higher academic achievement just generally, and that language learners outperform non language learning students in pretty much every area. And again, it's you know, this is all coming from this huge body of research that we have available to us. And I think if anything, it's just maybe a little frustrating as a world language educator that either it isn't widely known, or that people aren't paying attention to it. So, I think that this program is actually one way that we can highlight that when you have a high-quality program, like SPARK that administrators and district leaders can see in practical application, and then connect that student data back to the language programs. I feel like that's sort of the part we need to focus on, because we already know, the benefits."

b) To what extent can a program like SPARK for German influence the attitude of different stakeholders towards foreign language learning?

"Yeah, so again, just that, that high quality teaching and learning, like seeing that the practical application of that and how it builds the connections to content, and how language learning does impact all of these other areas. And just having that evidence. So, I feel like this program can provide that evidence, because that's how we create and

influence mindsets, I think, being really evidence based and proving it even though the research should already do that for us."

Expectations and Feedback about SPARK

a) Did you find the information on the SPARK website helpful?

"I think that is super helpful to anyone who might be considering an elementary World Language Program. Since I already have a lot of background information with the Goethe Institute with Spark for German, I sort of already knew what the program had to offer. So, when I went there, I was really looking about specific implementation, if it is going to fit into this format that we already have available. And being able to see how adaptable it is was very helpful to me. I think that's something that would also speak to principals because they're the ones who ultimately make the decisions, whether or not to institute something in their building. And so yes, it was very helpful. Also, the outcomes are very clear. And the connections to those research-based practices are also very clear they are the lens through which we're always looking, are these research-based practices. Does the implementation program fit the structures that we have available? And what sort of student outcomes can we expect?

b) What were your initial expectations of SPARK? Which elements of the program surprised you?

"Again, being familiar with the really high level of expectations that the Goethe Institute has for anything that it does and knowing that their programs are always going

to be grounded in research, and the practical application of that research. Like my expectations were pretty high. And I don't know that I could say it surprised me though, because it's just sort of what I've come to expect from anything that that they put out there. And also, knowing the level of excellence with which Dr. Ohnesorg runs her programs, and the high-quality educators that she turns out in her programs like that, you know, I didn't have any hesitations about it. And I was not surprised when I went into that classroom. And I was like, Oh, look, they already look like expert teachers in here implementing this really engaging curriculum and students are into it from that first second. I think the other educators might have been a little surprised, because I think so many people are only ever exposed to world language in that traditional sense of the way we've done it, mostly wrong, in US schools. So then something like Spark comes out that's exciting and engaging and high quality and connected to content in a real way. And authentic communication. And the kids are, you know, up moving around and engaging, but they're on task or doing the things that you want them to be doing. But there's like a lot of movement, a lot of action. I think sometimes for people who haven't had that experience in their own language learning that's a little surprising. But for me, it was just really exciting.

c) <u>What are the main benefits of SPARK for elementary schools?</u>

"So, I think SPARK in particularly is an exemplary model of that practical application of those research based, second language acquisition strategies that we know work. And it just really sort of sets the expectation of what a language learning program,

especially at the elementary levels, should be all about: Student engagement and getting kids excited about learning and excited about language! Like, this does that and that's what's important. Like, we need that model, we need the thing to point to say, this is what we're language education is supposed to look like. All right, that's early on. So, we don't really have a whole lot of data yet about the outcomes. That, but I know that we'll be there."

Fostering language learning and intercultural competence

a) In your opinion, in how far can a 50-minute afternoon program such as SPARK ignite children's curiosity for the German language and culture?

"Well, again, it's engaging and authentic. So, it has the elements that get kids excited, motivated. And you know, ideally, this would be a few times a week, because we know that with language learning, if you can do it in small interval, it travels regularly. That, that it's much better. So, you know, once a week probably isn't enough, you know, if we're trying to build proficiency, but I think for an exploratory program, it will at least introduce them to these ideas and be an enjoyable place for learning because learning should be enjoyable. And so, I think that that is probably in terms of benefits, the biggest thing that it's going to get them excited, right, it is engaging, and they do have an opportunity to interact in a positive way. Because we know as language educators, it's not just about the language that you're teaching, the language that you're teaching is really kind of the vehicle what you're really teaching is good communication skills, how to build community, how to make connections. And those are the things that kids want to

do. I mean, we're social beings that this gives them an opportunity to practice all of those sorts of things."

c) How did songs, movement-based games, and crafts aid in the children's acquisition of some basic German and in the acquaintance with glimpses of German culture?

"Well, again, I'm not always really good at just giving my opinion, because I always like to go back to the research. And, you know, we know that comprehensible input has the greatest impact on acquisition, and it's the quickest way to build proficiency. And even though that's not necessarily the purpose here, where we're trying to introduce kids to language learning, and to German and German culture, all of the things that you just listed are ways to provide comprehensible input. So, I mean, that's, that's the standard, right? That's the way we're supposed to do it. Luckily, and again, it goes back to engagement, like if we're doing it right, it's fun, and kids are going to be motivated to participate and learn it, and then they want to do the work."

Outlook

c) Are there any aspects of SPARK that you would like to see added to the program?

"Well, a lot of that are things that we don't necessarily have control or influence over. Because it would be wonderful if this were something that students were able to encounter every day or every other day instead of just once a week. So that's sort of, I

think, the thing that I would add is just more of it. And if we could ever get to a point where we could like really do that in a way that we could start building proficiency earlier, that would be fantastic. Because, like, I don't know the exact numbers off the top of my head, but I feel like in other countries, it's something like above 90% of students learn another language to proficiency before they're done with school, and usually more than one. And in the United States, only about 23 to 25% of people ever learn another language, and there's just this huge disparity there. So, I feel like, we just need more language learning. Again, Spark is a great model of that. And so, if this was something we could take and implement in all of our elementary schools in a real way where students could experience that it would be fantastic. So more of it."

d) <u>What kind of next steps would be necessary to establish new German programs in elementary schools?</u>

"So, that is the challenge. And we have to have schools who want it, and the communities who want it in their buildings. So, I think having a model in one of our buildings you can point to and say, here's what it looks like. Here's what it has to offer. And especially when we have some of that data in the backend that says, here are the outcomes, here's how it has impacted student learning generally. We also know that it impacts math, scientific reasoning, again, the college going rate and the career readiness, like all of these things, like, if we can start making those connections over time, then people are going to start to want it. So just making it visible, communicating to people about the importance of it, advocating in those communities. A lot of times it helps if the

community is asking for a program. And then the staffing positions, that's the one thing that's like never really within our control or influence. But hopefully as we start, you know, valuing this more highly then that will become a priority in staffing at some point, so, again, a lot of things that we can't necessarily control, but we can try sort of grassroots advocacy."

VITA

Anna McDaniel was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. In 2021, she graduated from the University Bielefeld with a Bachelor of Arts in German and Teaching German as a Foreign Language. In December 2021, she moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, and enrolled in the M.A. program in German Studies at the University of Tennessee - Knoxville. During her master's studies she also took part in the program "SPARK for German" in two elementary schools in Knoxville. In her second year, she started to teach lower-division German classes as a Graduate Teaching Associate. Anna McDaniel graduated from the University of Tennessee with a Master's in German in May 2024.