

Learning a second language

Exposing your child to a new world of words boosts her brainpower, vocabulary and self-esteem. by Lynne S. Dumas



By building words in Spanish, children develop English vocabulary too.

"Bonjour," sang out the 4- and 5-year-olds as they trooped into the PreKindergarten French class at New York City's Trevor Day School. After greeting their teacher, Matt Dexter, the children settled down and joined him in a game: They thumped their thighs, clapped their hands, and, as the teacher pointed to a body part, called out its name in French: Le nez, la tête, les yeux."

When Dexter held up an odd-looking box and asked, in French, what the children thought was inside, Sarah, a little girl who had been hanging back, inched closer and peered quizzically at the container. Then her teacher opened it to reveal a tiny, make-believe kitchen, identifying it as "la cuisine," and a delighted Sarah and her classmates echoed his words: "La cuisine!"

"Oui. C'est bon!" praised Dexter. The kids beamed with pride.

Foreign language classes like this one not only help kids gain language skills but also help them build self-esteem, thinking skills, math ability, and an appreciation of different cultures.

And children are best able to absorb a second language when they are under 6 years old. "Language comes easily to very young children," says Nancy Rhodes, executive secretary of the National Network for Early Language Learning in Washington, DC. "At birth, they begin to learn their parents' language because they hear it all the time. Very young children can pick up a second language just as easily by hearing it, singing songs in it, and using it in their play," Rhodes adds.

Scientists' growing understanding of the brain helps explain why young children can learn languages so effortlessly. "From infancy to age 6 or 7, there is a great deal of neurogenesis--the development of new connections --going on in the brain," explains George Bush, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, who specializes in brain mapping. "A child's brain is shaped by his experiences--what he sees, hears, and touches," says Dr. Bush. "When it's exposed to the sounds of a second language, the brain of a young child will actually grow connections that make a new language easy to learn."

Around age 12, the brain not only begins to slow in its ability to develop those connections but starts to prune away any that aren't being used, Dr. Bush explains. Thus children who don't start

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learning a second language until later in life will often have a more difficult time doing so because their brain may not have developed the necessary connections.

"When kids learn a second language early on, say as toddlers, they tend to manage both their native and second language from the same

location in the brain," says Joy Hirsch, Ph.D., a professor of neuroscience at Cornell University Medical College in New York City. "Kids who learn later--as teenagers, for example--seem to manage their second language from a different and separate location in the brain." Dr. Hirsch hypothesizes that "older children may have a harder time because their brain has to do extra work to create additional space for the second language. And they must do this at a time when the brain is becoming less facile at generating new connections."

Largely due to parents' clamoring, a fast-growing number of elementary schools are offering second-language training to their youngest learners. According to the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC, the number of elementary schools holding foreign language classes climbed almost 10 percent between 1996 and 1997, to 31 percent. That means more than four million elementary school students are learning a foreign language in school before the age of 11. Seven states--Arizona, Arkansas, Louisiana, Montana, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Oklahoma --have instituted a second-language requirement for all children in elementary school. And Delaware, Florida, and Hawaii are considering a variety of ways to increase foreign language offerings.

How a second language boosts academic success

Research shows that learning a foreign language actually enhances children's *overall* mental development. A study of 13,200 third- through fifth-graders attending public schools in Louisiana was revealing: It demonstrated that regardless of race, gender, or academic level, kids taking foreign language classes did better in the English language arts section of the Louisiana Basic Skills Tests than students who were not studying a foreign language.

Math scores of children studying a second language improve, too. Carol Saunders, Ph.D., a professor at Georgia State University in Atlanta examined test scores off third-graders in 18 Georgia grade schools and found that kids who had had foreign language instruction since kindergarten did significantly better in the math section of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills than students with no foreign language training.

When given foreign language instruction by age 3 or 4, children are able to speak like a native in their second language. As a rule, says Donna Linton, director of the foreign language program at Trevor Day School, "the younger the children are, the better their accent will be, especially if they've had some foreign language training before learning to read English. This is because the system of sounds they learn in English interferes with the one they need for a foreign language. Once they've developed and concretized formal reading and English language skills, their accent in another language will never be quite as good."

Acquiring a native accent comes as a natural extension of growing up in a bilingual family.

But making sure your child is at ease with more than one language takes a great deal of patience even in a bilingual family, says Cristina Villalon-Kartheiser of New York City, who has spoken only Spanish to her daughters, Katie, 6, and Annie, 4, from the moment they were born. The girls' father speaks to them in English. 'You have to be very committed,' says Villalon-Kartheiser. "Whichever language one parent chooses to speak, he or she needs to maintain it all the time so that the child doesn't feel that either language spoken at home is less important in some way."

What if neither parent is bilingual? Try to make sure that your child has continual exposure to a native speaker of a language other than English, such as a grandparent or babysitter, suggests Villalon-Kartheiser. You can also read stories to your child that incorporate foreign words into English text, such as *Rosita's Calico Cat* by Emily Thompson. Cassettes or CDs of Spanish songs, such as *De Colores* by Jose- Luis Orozco, as well as videotapes in other languages, are especially helpful to parents who don't speak a second language themselves. Or try creating a picture dictionary with your child in a second language, using drawings or magazine cut outs to illustrate each word. You can also take a family trip to another country; immersing your child in another language is beneficial even for a short time.

School-based immersion programs, in which children spend part or all of the school day learning their lessons-- including math, science, and social studies--in a second language are another option, albeit harder to find. The goal of immersion programs is to enable a child to speak a second language fluently in a short period of time.

InterCultura is a foreign language immersion Montessori School in Oak Park, Illinois. Seven classes--five with children ages 3 to 6 and two with kids ages 6 to 9--bathe students in the sounds of either Japanese or Spanish. Classes, or "communities" as they are called at the school, consist of about 20 students each. "If you walked into our Japanese community, you would see what you see in other Montessori schools--kids exploring puzzles and toys, working on art projects, even learning practical tasks like using a broom or setting a table," says Michael Rosanova, Ph.D., the school's director. But what you'd hear is very different. For instance, the two teachers of Japanese, who are native speakers, speak only in Japanese to their young students. When they write, it is also in Japanese.

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Children can respond in English if they like, but as time goes on, they, too, begin to speak only Japanese in the classroom. "If a child starts with us at age 3, it might take 8 to 10 months for her to produce a second language spontaneously," says Dr. Rosanova. "But that's okay; the important thing is that she's learning the language. At what point she becomes fluent varies widely from child to child."

InterCultura children also teach each other. "The other day," says Dr. Rosanova, "a 5-year-old girl explained in Japanese to a newly arrived 3-year-old classmate: 'This water is pouring. It's pouring from one pitcher to another. Would you like to try it?'" Such interaction between children is at the heart of Montessori's immersion programs.

to age 12. Available in Spanish, French, Italian, and German, this program features the lovable Muzzy—who is part bear, part gorilla—and includes a CD-ROM, four videos, two audiotapes, and a parent's guide. Early Advantage, \$169, 888-327-5923.

JUMPSTART SPANISH Ages 3 to 6. Host Hopsalot invites children to count, paint, sing, and play word games in his clubhouse. Knowledge Adventure, \$30, 800-542-4240.

ALL-IN-ONE LANGUAGE FUN Ages 3 to 8. This program encourages children to play familiar games such as Binge and Concentration to learn Spanish, French, German, Japanese, and English. No reading is required. Syracuse Language Systems, \$25, 800-797-5264.

LYRIC LANGUAGE Ages 3 to 8. Lots of catchy songs are featured in French, German, Italian, Japanese, or Spanish. Penton Overseas, \$40, 800-748-5804.

ROSETTA STONE POWERPAC Age 5 and up. One package introduces Spanish, Italian, French, Japanese, Russian, German, and Chinese, with native speakers describing various scenes. Fairfield Language Technologies, \$40, 800-788-0822.

Ann Hieber's 4-year-old son, Liam, has gone to InterCultura since he was almost 3. "Why did I choose immersion? I felt it was the most effective way for him to learn. He learns everything else so rapidly, why not another language?" she says. Hieber, who lives in Chicago, was concerned that if Liam heard English spoken at home and Japanese at school, he would get confused. But experience allayed her fears. "He moves easily from one language to the other," she says. "He speaks to me and his father in English because he knows that's what we speak. In school, where everyone speaks Japanese, he speaks Japanese."

Self-esteem is one more by-product of early foreign language instruction. "Young children feel good about having this new competency," says Linton. Lynn Fantom, mother of Luisa Sperry, 6, of New York City, says that her daughter finds it particularly fun to teach her mother Spanish words she doesn't know. "She's as proud as can be that she knows something I don't," says Fantom.

Another plus to learning a foreign language at an early age is that it helps young children to understand people who are from another culture, reports Christine Brown, the director of languages for the public schools in Glastonbury, Connecticut, where foreign languages are part of the curriculum starting in first grade. Georgia Kaye, from Plano, Texas, has a 5-year-old son, Bobby, who's been learning Spanish at a local community center—in a 90-minute class once a week—for the past year or so. "Bobby's perspective is that people aren't different; they just speak different languages," says his mother.

Parents need to show lots of interest and enthusiasm about other languages in order to encourage their child's learning. "Attitude has a lot to do with it," notes Marcia Rosenbusch, director of the foreign language resource center at Iowa State University in Ames. "If your child says a new word in a second language—whether he learned it at school, from you, or from a grandparent—get excited, make a fuss," Rosenbusch urges. "This not only encourages development of a second language but also helps children feel good about themselves."

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