

Tots take on foreign words

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WALNUT CREEK, Calif. -- Susan Winchester knew that the foreign language classes her toddler was taking were having an impact one day at the diaper-changing table.

The Orinda, Calif., woman, who is bilingual, asked Douglas in French, "What color is the sun?"

"He looked up at me with a sparkle in his eye and said, 'amarillo.' And it wasn't a mistake."

"Amarillo" is the Spanish word for yellow, and Douglas, at just 2, was letting his mom know he is trilingual.

Winchester is one of many parents who are recognizing the value of offering foreign language classes to kids as young toddlers. It's a trend that is spawning more and more preschool classes and elementary enrichment classes with a foreign language component.

Certainly the value of learning a second -- or third -- language has not been lost on most parents and educators. Studies show that people who are bilingual have stronger brain development, and the earlier children learn a second language, the better.

'Window of opportunity'

"Studies show that there is a 'window of opportunity' for optimal brain enhancement," says Amy Casey, who runs Walnut Creek's Spanish for Kids program. "And that is usually in the preschool ages." She adds that auditory development in people usually peaks by age 12 -- right about the time many American kids are just beginning to study a foreign language.

Research from the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Applied Linguistics suggests that children who learn a second language are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not.

Other studies show that a 2-year-old brain has twice as many synapses as the adult brain, and the young brain must use these connections or lose them.

Many educational experts agree with such studies. Nancy Rhodes, director of the Center of Applied Linguistics, says that in the late 1980s and 1990s, the number of Spanish programs offered in elementary schools -- via curriculum or enrichment -- increased by 10 percent. But just in the past two to three years, the classes for preschool-age children and even babies have mushroomed.

"There have been many studies that show that people who are bilingual have certain cognitive advantages," Rhodes says.

But is it better to start earlier? Rhodes says that while the research in that area is still being compiled, as a mother of two young children who speak Spanish and English, she can say unequivocally "yes."

Certainly a child's enrichment is a great reason to introduce a foreign language, but there is also another major reason in our increasingly global community: Kids, raised in predominantly English-speaking schools, are losing the ability to speak to elder family members.

Susan Wang, director of the Albany-Berkeley Chinese School, says that about 70 percent of the students in her preschool and after-school Chinese program are of Chinese descent and mixed race.

"The parents may be first-generation Chinese, but they want their children to learn about their culture as well as function in American society," she says.

Wang says her preschool -- for children as young as 2 -- is becoming increasingly more popular. It offers a traditional program of activities, singing, circle time and snacks, but most of it transpires in Chinese.

"Kids learn Chinese characters and proper pronunciation, but it's still in a fun preschool environment."

As young as 3 months

Catherine Jolivet Johnson, who runs the French for Fun school in Lafayette, Calif., starts her young students off even earlier. Her "Mommy and Me" French class includes infants as young as 3 months old. She teaches songs and beginning sounds, and offers bilingual parents the opportunity to brush up on their own French.

"It makes sense to introduce children to foreign languages as they are developing their language skills," Johnson says. "They pick it up much easier."

A little help from a nanny

As toddlers, Johnson's young students move up to an hour-and-a-half program, the one Douglas Zeller, Winchester's son, attends three days a week. On the off days, he attends the Kids Into Speaking Spanish preschool in Lafayette. His Spanish is also aided by a native Spanish-speaking nanny Winchester hired when Douglas was born.

"Speaking Spanish was one of the criteria we looked for in a caregiver," she says. "I wanted to make sure he was introduced to foreign languages as early as possible."

Winchester did encounter one of the drawbacks to teaching young children a foreign language, as Douglas was slow to develop his speech patterns.

"Children who learn several languages as babies and toddlers may not speak as quickly as their peers who are only learning English," Winchester says.

"My husband and I were worried when younger kids were speaking better than Douglas," she says. "We were second-guessing ourselves."

Just in the past couple of months, however, Douglas, now 3, "has bloomed," his mom says. "He was slower to talk, but when he did, it came out in technicolor."

Most of the experts agree that one of the most important things a parent can do is converse with his or her child in a foreign language.

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