

Why, How, and When Should Children Learn a Second Language?

"Language and communication are at the heart of the human experience. The United States must educate students who are equipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language." (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999, p. 7)

Much attention has been focused on the importance of early foreign language learning. Some research reports that younger children have a greater chance of gaining native-like proficiency in a language than older children or adults. With so many demands already placed on children, parents and educators ask if it is important that children learn a second language at a young age. If so, why? What program options are available? What can parents and educators do?

What are the benefits of knowing a second language?

In addition to developing a life-long ability to communicate with people from other countries and backgrounds, children may derive other benefits from early language instruction, including improved overall school performance and superior problem-solving skills (e.g., Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991; see discussion in Hakuta, 1986).

Students of foreign languages tend to score higher on standardized tests conducted in English. The 2003 results of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) show that U.S. students who had studied a foreign language for 4 or more years outscored all other students on the verbal and math portions of the test (College Board, 2003).

Knowledge of a second language also seems to coincide with high academic achievement. A study by Horn and Kojaku (2001) shows that students who were in "rigorous" programs in high school, which included 3 years of foreign language study, were likely to earn better grades in college and less likely to drop out.

Learning another language can enhance knowledge of English. Learning the vocabulary and structure of other languages can help learners to better understand the structure of English, and cognates can help with the learning of English words (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004).

Students of foreign languages may have better career opportunities (Carreira & Armengol, 2001). In a survey conducted in 2003 of 581 alumni of The American Graduate School of International Management in Glendale, AZ, most of the respondents said that they had gained a competitive advantage from their knowledge of foreign languages and other cultures. They said that not only was language study often a critical factor in hiring decisions and in enhancing their career paths, it also provided personal fulfillment, mental discipline, and cultural enlightenment (Grosse, in press).

The benefits to society are many. Americans fluent in other languages improve global communication, enhance our economic competitiveness abroad, and maintain our political and security interests. In recent years, the U.S. government has expressed a need for fluent speakers of languages other than English, particularly in less commonly taught languages such as Arabic and Chinese (National Commission on Terrorism, 2000; U. S. General Accounting Office, 2002).

Is younger really better?

Learning a language at any age is beneficial. Some studies have shown that the human brain is more open to linguistic development during the years between birth and pre-adolescence and that children who learn a language before the onset of adolescence are much more likely to develop native-like pronunciation (e.g., Strozer, 1994). When children have an early start to a long sequence of language instruction that continues through high school and college, they will be able to achieve levels of language fluency that have not been possible in the past due to the late start of most language programs.

At the same time, older children and adults can still be successful at learning a second language, although the level of attainment may be less predictable because of factors that can influence language learning (see, e.g., articles in Mayo, del Pilar, & Lecumberri, 2003). Any exposure to a second language and culture is beneficial, however, even if native-like attainment is not the goal or the outcome.

What program options are available?

The types of language programs available in U.S. elementary schools can be placed on a continuum. At one end are immersion programs, which offer the greatest amount of time in language study and thus produce students with the highest

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levels of language proficiency. At the other end are programs that explore language and do not have language proficiency as a goal. In the middle are programs called FLES (foreign language in the elementary school). In these programs, a second language is taught as a distinct subject. ACTFL (1998) recommends that FLES classes be taught three to five times a week for no less than 30-40 minutes per class. Depending on the frequency of the classes and the opportunities for practice, children in these programs may attain substantial proficiency in the language studied. The largest number of early foreign language programs in the United States are FLES programs.

Immersion programs allow children to spend part or all of the school day learning in a foreign language. In full (total) immersion programs, which are available in a limited number of schools, children learn all of their subjects (e.g., math, social studies, science) in the foreign language. Partial immersion programs operate on the same principle, but only a portion of the curriculum is taught in the foreign language. The foreign language is the medium for content instruction rather than the subject of instruction and is used for 50% to 100% of class time. Children enrolled in immersion programs work toward full proficiency in the second language and reach higher levels of proficiency than those in other programs (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004).

Exploratory programs introduce students to other cultures and to language as a general concept. Classes meet once or twice a week to explore one or more languages or to learn about language itself (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004). Although some proficiency may be attained if the program focuses on a specific language, parents should not expect children to attain language fluency in an exploratory program. However, these programs can provide a basis and motivation for later learning.

What can we do to help?

If you live in a community that does not offer a language program that your child can enroll in, you can

still foster your child's interest and aptitude in other languages. If you are able to speak a second language, read or speak to your child in that language. If possible, supply books, videos, and other materials in the language. Attend cultural events that feature music, dance, or food from the country or countries where the language is spoken. Summer programs offering international exchanges are suitable for older children and offer valuable opportunities to speak a second language and explore a different culture firsthand.

If you would like to help establish a language program in your community, speak to the school principal about your interest in seeing a program established. Discuss the possibility at a meeting of the school's parent organization to see if other parents share your interest. Contact the teachers, school board, and school district headquarters.

Many resources are available to help parents and teachers establish a second language program. For information about early language programs contact the following organizations:

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)
700 South Washington Street
Suite 210
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone 703-894-2900
www.actfl.org
Email: headquarters@actfl.org

Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)
4646 40th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20016-1859
Phone: 202-362-0700
www.cal.org/earlylang
Email: info@cal.org

National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL)
Mary Lynn Redmond
Executive Secretary
PO Box 7266
A2A Tribble Hall
Wake Forest University
Winston-Salem, NC 27109
Phone: 336-758-5347
www.nnell.org
Email: Redmond@wsu.edu

References

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1998). *ACTFL performance guidelines for K-12 learners*. Yonkers, NY: Author.

Bamford, K. W., & Mizokawa, D. T. (1991). Additive-bilingual (immersion) education: Cognitive and language development. *Language Learning, 41*, 413-429.

Carreira, M., & Armengol, R. (2001). Professional opportunities for heritage language speakers. In J. K. Peyton, D. A. Ranard, & S. McGinnis (Eds.), *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource* (pp. 109-142). McHenry, IL, and Washington, DC: Delta Systems and Center for Applied Linguistics.

College Board. (2003). *College-bound seniors: A profile of SAT program test takers*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board. Retrieved December 22, 2003, from www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/about/news_info/cbsenior/yr2003/pdf/2003_TOTAL_GRP_PRD.pdf

Curtain, H., & Dahlberg, C.A. (2004). *Languages and children: Making the match. New languages for young learners, grades K-8*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Grosse, C. (in press). The competitive advantage of foreign language and cultural study. *Modern Language Journal*.

Hakuta, K. (1986). *Mirror of language: The debate on bilingualism*. New York: Basic Books.

Horn, L., & Kojaku, L. K. (2001). *High school academic curriculum and the persistence path through college: Persistence and transfer behavior of undergraduates 3 years after entering 4-year institutions* (NCES 2001-163). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Retrieved September 30, 2003, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/quarterly/quarterly/fall/q4-1.asp

Mayo, G., del Pilar, M., & Lecumberri, M. L. G. (Eds.). (2003). *Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

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partner news

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition

OELA's Weekly Newsletter

Find the latest information, publications, conferences and stories for educators and academics in the fields of dual language education, ESL, and EFL with OELA's weekly Newsline newsletter. OELA's researchers scour the Internet, journals, newspapers, and magazines to supply the most up-to-the-minute information available. To check out this week's issue, visit www.ncele.gwu.edu/newsline/index.htm.

Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NECTFL)

Summer Study Abroad Scholarships

NECTFL is offering summer study abroad scholarships for French, German, and Spanish teachers. Scholarship applications can be downloaded online, see www.dickinson.edu/nectfl/scholarships.html.

American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL)

Solidarity Awards for Travel to 2004 Annual Conference

AAAL has made available for travel to the 2004 Conference in Portland, Oregon, 3 travel awards in the amount of \$1,000 each. Each award also carries a waiver of the conference registration fee. These awards are for scholars participating in the conference program from parts of the world where economies make it inordinately difficult if not prohibitive for them to travel to the conference. www.aaal.org/aaal2004/solidarity_award.html

2004 AAAL Graduate Student Travel Grants

These grants support travel (and some expenses) for 6 graduate student members of AAAL to attend the 2004 annual meeting in Portland, Oregon. Applicants must be current members of AAAL (at time of application) who are in a university Master's or Ph.D. program in applied linguistics or a related field. Deadline: January 5, 2004. For further information and application procedures see www.aaal.org/aaal2004/travel_award_call.html. Questions should be directed to Jeff Connor-Linton at connorlj@georgetown.edu.

The National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC)

Elementary Immersion Learning Strategies Resource Guide

This resource is now available free online at www.pgcps.org/%7Eforlang/symposium.htm. With this interactive website, users can follow the resource guide sequentially, skip to topics of interest, or jump directly to printable resources like lesson plans, charts, and worksheets.

news from cal

New Publication

Enhancing Education in Linguistically Diverse Societies, CAL's revised publication on mother tongue education around the world, will be available on the CAL Web site and through the CALStore in January. This publication outlines key dimensions of organizing and delivering mother tongue programs for speakers of minority languages in the primary grades, and it profiles successful programs. UNESCO is emphasizing the importance of providing early education in the language of the student as a crucial part of the Education for All initiative. Order online from the CALstore: <http://calstore.cal.org>.

Tucker Fellowship

The Center for Applied Linguistics invites applications for the 2004 G. Richard Tucker Fellowship. During the period of June 2004 through May 2005, including a four-week residency at CAL in Washington, DC, the Fellow will interact with senior staff members on one of CAL's existing research projects or on a suitable project suggested by the Fellow. The fellowship pays a stipend plus travel expenses. Priority will be given to proposals that focus on any type of language education and testing or on language issues related to minorities in the United States or Canada.

The competition is open to candidates for a master's or doctoral degree in any field that is concerned with the study of language. Minorities are especially encouraged to apply. Applicants must be currently enrolled in a degree program in the United States or Canada and must have completed the equivalent of at least one year of full-time graduate study. Applications must be received on or before April 16, 2004. For further information, contact Grace S. Burkart at the Center for Applied Linguistics, 202-362-0700, grace@cal.org.

News from the National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE)

NCLE Symposium: Assessment and Accountability in Programs for Adult English Language Learners

The symposium "Issues and Challenges in Assessment and Accountability for Adult English Language Learners," was hosted by the National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) on May 16, 2003. Over 100 teachers, program administrators, researchers, test developers, and policy makers gathered at the Center for Applied Linguistics to discuss the field's vision for ESL program accountability and learner assessment. Read the synthesis of this symposium online: www.cal.org/ncle/accountability/

News from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE)

Building Partnerships with Latino Immigrant Parents. Practitioner Brief #6 Shannon Fitzsimmons, Center for Applied Linguistics

This brief discusses research findings on Latino immigrant parents' attitudes toward their children's education, lessons learned from CREDE projects in which these parents participated, and implications for instruction. Available online at www.cal.org/crede/pubs/PracBrief6.htm.

The Proceedings of the First Annual Conference for Educators of Newcomer Students Edited by Beverly A. Boyson, Bronwyn Coltrane, & Deborah J. Short

Drawn from the 2002 conference, these proceedings offer summaries of more than 35 presentations by researchers, educators, and policy makers. Presentations focused on design, curriculum and instruction, and professional development in elementary and secondary newcomer programs. Order from the CALstore at <http://calstore.cal.org>.

Secondary School Newcomer Programs in the United States. CREDE Research Report No. 12 Beverly A. Boyson & Deborah J. Short

This report presents a four-year study of newcomer programs in the United States. The report discusses findings regarding program model, program features, instructional design, student assessment, staffing and professional development, and parent and community connections. Available Winter 2003 from the CALstore: <http://calstore.cal.org>.

The Development of Bilingualism and Biliteracy from Grade 3 to 5: A Summary of Findings from the CAL/CREDE Study of Two-Way Immersion Education. CREDE Research Report No. 13 Elizabeth R. Howard, Donna Christian, & Fred Genesee

This report presents design and findings of the national longitudinal study of two-way immersion (TWI) students' language and literacy development across two languages. The report describes the Spanish and English narrative writing, reading, and oral proficiency development of native English speakers and native Spanish speakers. The report discusses levels of language and literacy attainment, growth in language and literacy ability over time, and the relationship between language and literacy growth in a student's first and second languages. Available winter 2003 from the CALstore: <http://calstore.cal.org>.

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The state of foreign language capabilities in national security and the federal government: Hearing before the International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services Subcommittee of the Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate, 106th Cong. (2000).

Strozer, J. R. (1994). *Language acquisition after puberty.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

U.S. General Accounting Office. (2002, January). *Foreign languages: Human capital approach needed to correct staffing and proficiency shortfalls* (GAO-02-375). Washington, DC: Author.

For Further Reading

The following books provide helpful information about the topics discussed in this brochure.

Gilzow, D. F., & Branaman, L. E. (2000). *Lessons learned: Model early foreign language programs.* Washington, DC, and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.

Lipton, G. C. (2004). *Practical handbook to elementary foreign language programs (FLES*): Including FLES, FLEX, and immersion programs* (4th ed.). Kensington, MD: Blueprints for Learning. PO Box 2632, Kensington, MD 20891.

Met, M. (Ed.). (1998). *Critical issues in early language learning: Building for our children's future.* Glenview, IL: Prentice Hall.

The information in this article is available in a brochure published by the Center for Applied Linguistics. See <http://calstore.cal.org>.

