

# Why, How, and When Should My Child 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 learn languages better than older children and adults. With so many demands already placed on children, parents ask, Is it important that my child learn a second language at a young age? If so, why? What can I do to help my child learn a language? What program options are available?

## What are the benefits of knowing a second language?

In addition to developing a lifelong ability to communicate with people from other countries and backgrounds, other benefits include 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. Results from the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) show that students who had studied a foreign language for 4 or more years outscored other students on the verbal and math portions of the test (The College Board SAT, 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 structure and vocabulary (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004).

Students of foreign languages may have better career opportunities (Carreira & Armengol, 2001). In a survey of 581 alumni of The American Graduate School of International Management in Glendale, AZ, most respondents said 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 (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 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 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, even if native-like proficiency is not the goal or the outcome.

### **What options are available?**

The types of language programs available in U.S. elementary schools can be placed on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are immersion programs, which offer the greatest amount of time in language study and produce students with the highest levels of proficiency. At the other end are programs that explore language and do not have language proficiency as a goal. The largest number of programs are FLES (foreign language in the elementary school) programs, in which 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.

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 from 50% to 100% of the instructional time. Children 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. However, these programs can provide a basis and motivation for later learning.

## What can I do to help?

If you live in a community that does not offer a language program, 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 and intensive study 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 start a language program in your community, speak to the school principal about your interest. 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.

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## For Further Reading

The following books provide helpful information about the topics discussed.

- Douglas F. Gilzow & Lucinda Branaman. (2000). *Lessons learned: Model early foreign language programs*. Washington, DC and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.
- Helena Curtain & Carol Ann Dahlberg. (2004). *Languages and children: Making the match. New Languages for young learners, grades K–8*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Gladys C. Lipton. (2004). *Practical handbook to elementary foreign language programs (FLES\*)*: Including FLES, FLEX, and immersion programs. (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Kensington, MD: Blueprints for Learning. PO Box 2632, Kensington, MD 20891.
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