

**The Home/School Connection:**  
*Collaborating to Promote Best Practice in World Language Education*  
Issue 5, March 2007  
*Are Children "Language Sponges"?*

Dear Parents,

After hearing repeatedly from language educators and experts in language acquisition that children are "language sponges", one may assume that children can gain second language fluency in a snap, but is it truly possible for children to learn a new language in a short period of time?

Well, not really. To be a "language sponge" does not mean that young children will get into an Italian class and be able to speak in Italian after four months. Unfortunately, language educators may have misled many people into taking the expression *literally*, when in reality it was coined to describe the unique characteristics of young children that make them especially capable of acquiring *some* aspects of a new language with more ease than older students.

That being said, there is still value to the expression. Let's examine what being a "language sponge" *really* means in this issue of Home/School Connection.

**Young Children Have an Auditory Advantage**

Studies have shown that babies can hear all the sounds in the world. However, from birth on, brain paths start to be developed *only* for the language or languages that they hear on a regular basis in early childhood. All others are trimmed out. The ability to detect sounds that have not yet been "registered" in the brain diminishes with age, and after puberty this ability is extremely difficult to develop, but can be learned through intensive phonological study.

**Young Children Let the Language Sink In**

Children are not linguistic analysts, as are most adults in their approach to learning new languages. They don't feel like they need to "dissect" the new language and know what each word means before starting to use it. Instead, they focus on the message. This more global/intuitive approach to communication of young children is a great advantage in helping them to build oral skills. On the other hand, adults have a greater advantage in writing and reading a new language, as they have already acquired the complex skills required for these tasks in their first language.

### Young Children Practice by Playing Interactively with Others

The younger the children, the less preoccupied they are with making mistakes, and therefore the more willing they are to try to speak the new language with their friends, teachers and caregivers, specially if it is for playful purposes. Practice is an essential component in learning another language, and young children possess an inner drive to use it in engaging interactions with others.

### So What Does It Mean to Be a “Language Sponge”?

For all of the above reasons, *children are sponges* in the sense that they are more porous and let the language flow in and out without over-analyzing it. *They are not sponges* in the sense of being able to acquire fluency in a short period of time. As a matter of fact, children pass through a so called “silent period” which tends to be longer the younger they are. However, the fact that babies, toddlers, and preschoolers may not be speaking in the new language does not mean that they are not learning. On the contrary, they are building foundational listening comprehension skills that will allow them to be able to speak when ready. This is what happens in their native language as well!

### Children and Adults Need to Study a Language For Many Years in Order to Achieve a High Command of It

It is important to note that in order to achieve a high command of a language, both children and adults need to study it formally during long sequences of

instruction. According to experts in applied linguistics:

It can take up to 720 hours of instruction for a student to achieve proficiency at the ACTFL *Advanced* level (one level below *Superior*); for a native English speaker to acquire proficiency at the *Superior* level in a language such as Russian, the Foreign Service Institute estimates that a minimum of 1320 hours is required (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001).

Obviously, children who start learning a language at a young age will have the necessary time to develop a high command of it. Reading and writing need to be formally taught in the target language in order for this to be true.

### NNELL’s Advice to Parents:

- Make choices for your child based on the program model, not on the language being taught. The language being taught is not as important as the fact that there is continuity in instruction from preschool or early elementary school through high school or college. Since children who study a second language develop a facility to learn other languages, they can always take a preferred third language later on during their school years.
- Get your children excited about learning a new language! Explain to them that people around the world speak different languages and do things differently. By learning another language, they will be able to speak with children in other

- countries (through [www.epals.com](http://www.epals.com); for example) or even in their own community. The skills that they are building today will allow them to build business and personal relationships, study, or work abroad when they are older.
- Prepare them for the fact that learning a new language takes time and work, but it will be well worth the effort!
  - Children's and adults' language learning skills are different but complementary. We encourage you to take the project a step further and learn the language yourself. Use it with your children in playful interaction at home, and learn together about the history, culture and society of the countries where the language is spoken.

By following these tips, you will be on your way to creating educated global citizens for tomorrow. And, as a sponge retains water, so your children will retain what is taught in a meaningful context in their early years of second language learning!

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NNELL can assist teachers, parents and administrators with learning and advocacy efforts. Contact your State Representative today. We would love to hear from you!

The "Home-School Connection" monthly flier with tips and resources can be found at [www.nnell.org](http://www.nnell.org). Teachers may reproduce it and send it home in their students' backpacks. Send suggestions/comments to Ana Lomba, Political Action and Advocacy Chair: [ana@analomba.com](mailto:ana@analomba.com).

\* Margaret E. Malone, Benjamin Rifkin, Donna Christian and Dora E. Johnson, "Attaining High Levels of Proficiency: Challenges for Foreign Language Education in the United States," 2005 <<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/attain.html>>.