

Early Foreign Language Learning – Benefits of a Lifetime

Most language classes begin in eighth grade or high school, but it is becoming more common to introduce foreign languages in the pre-school classroom setting. "We need a lifelong commitment to language. If we started math in eighth grade, we wouldn't be great at math either" explains Maria Schemel on her views of when to learn a foreign language (Chipongian, 2000). **Learning a foreign language early in life enhances a student's cultural awareness and understanding of the English language.**

Learning a foreign language is most effective before the age of six. After the age of six, the ability to learn a second language steadily declines. After the age of twelve, the brain begins to slow down in its ability to develop connections for putting the aspects of learning a foreign language together (Chipongian, 2000). The earlier a student begins learning a second language, the easier the language will be to learn and retain. By 2050 immigrants will account for twenty-four percent of people living in America. Today seventy-two percent of people living in America consider English their first or native language; in comparison, only fifty-three percent of people living in America in 2050 will consider English their native language (Curtain, 2005). Only thirty-one percent of elementary school (usually grades kindergarten through five or six) students receive foreign language instruction. Of the elementary school programs, approximately forty-five percent are programs which may lead to some language proficiency, while the remainder are exploratory programs, which most likely do not have proficiency goals (Redmond, 2005). In 1997, over four million elementary school students (out of twenty-seven million) were enrolled in foreign language classes across the country. Over two-and-a-half million students were in public schools and one-and-a-half million in private schools. In the

public elementary schools that taught foreign language, approximately half the students were provided foreign language instruction (Curtain, 2005).

Learning a foreign language, especially at an early age, helps prevent teenage stereotypes that may arise due to a foreign language or culture. The goals of many foreign language programs in pre-schools and elementary schools include cultural enrichment and awareness. Goal 1.3 of the Charlotte Mecklenburg School's Curriculum Guide for second languages states that "the purpose of foreign language education is to prepare young people to become culturally sensitive..."(Monroe, 2000; Wicker, 2000). Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) is a program that is specifically designed to teach young people (ages five to ten) the importance of cultural diversity. Mary Lynn Redmond, the Executive Secretary of the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL) explained the primary focus of FLES as the understanding and speaking of the language and the teaching of culture integrated throughout the program (Redmond, 2005). Every skill and outcome that is important to society is introduced through the elementary curriculum; FLES is pushing the idea that learning a foreign language is essential to society (Curtain, 1994; Pesola, 1994).

The North Carolina FLES program is designed to educate students that their culture (in this case the American culture) is not the only culture in the world. The FLES curriculum allows students to experience other cultures by watching videos, tasting food and creating native like crafts (Curtain, 1994; Pesola, 1994). The integration of a second language in a young child's life allows the child to be aware of various cultures throughout the world. Emphasis on the culture of the foreign language that is being learned lets the learner feel as if he/she is learning the language like a native of the country where the language is spoken. Young children learn languages with great enthusiasm when emphasis is placed on the culture that is parallel to the

language with which they are learning, "the goal is to create a love for language while they're still young" (Chipongian, 2000). FLES is a program that allows students to have fun learning about the culture, but at the same time learn how to speak and understand a second language.

Having an understanding of a foreign language and culture allows the student to feel more comfortable interacting with any natives, learning a foreign language at a younger age adds to how native the language sounds when spoken (Beazley, 2004). Early foreign language learning decreases the intimidation factor when visiting a foreign country. Being able to clearly understand natives and communicate with them is a huge encouragement to the student.

Learning and understanding a foreign language at an earlier age virtually guarantees that the learner will remember and apply the language for a longer period of time (Beazley, 2004). Many experts estimate that by age ten, humans have already lost the ability to hear and reproduce new sounds, resulting in a permanent foreign-sounding accent in any language. Allowing children to learn a foreign language in elementary school gives a deeper understanding of other cultures and permits the learner to develop more positive interactions with persons from other countries (Curtain and Pesola, 1994). Learning a foreign language at a younger age adds to how native the language sounds when spoken, decreasing the intimidation factor when interacting with natives. Learning a foreign language (particularly at an early age) "gives a child the ability to communicate with people she/he would otherwise not have the chance to know" (Beazley, 2004)

Early foreign language learning opens new doors to different cultures. Knowing that multiple cultures exist at a young age reduces the chances of labeling individuals in the future. Learning a foreign language encourages acceptance and appreciation of different cultures. Learning a foreign language before age six helps a child understand and value people from other countries (Curtain, 2005"). Overall, learning a foreign language early in life helps students to

increase their sensitivity toward the understanding of "the language, values, customs and traditions of others" (Redmond, 2005). Early foreign language learning also increases students' adaptability to different environments and modes of acting and thinking. Students are more willing to accept different lifestyles when the differences are introduced at a young age.

Redmond explained that learning a foreign language at an early age not only helps children gain language skills "but also helps them build self-esteem, thinking skills, math ability and especially a new appreciation of different cultures" (Redmond, 2005).

Early foreign language learning also allows students to compare their own cultures to the culture that they are studying. In pre-school and elementary school children do not know everything about the culture his/her country is associated with. Learning a foreign language in elementary school allows students to compare holidays, traditions and customs of various cultures before any idea, such as fictitious holiday characters, is set in stone in their mind (Chipongian, 2000). The learning of two cultures simultaneously allows for a comparison of both cultures with each other.

Learning a foreign language at an early age actually enhances children's overall mental development. Regardless of race, gender, or academic level, children taking foreign language classes had a significantly higher score on a standardized English test than children who were not involved in a foreign language class (Beazley, 2004). Early foreign language learning increases children's understanding of abstract concepts of the English language. Human beings are best equipped to learn a language, including their native tongue, when they are very young (Chipongian, 2000). Learning a foreign language at an early age improves a child's comprehension and performance in his/her native language. Student's exposed to foreign languages in the elementary and pre-school years have a much higher level of success in other

studies (Beazley, 2004). A child who learns a second language along with his native tongue stores this knowledge in a single sector of his brain. When a second language is learned after age six or seven, the brain designates a separate area for processing the newly learned language (Chipongian, 2000). Recent research has concluded that the window for acquiring syntax may close as early as age five or six, while the window allowing for the addition of new words may never close (Beazley, 2004). Mary Lynn Redmond, Executive Secretary of NNELL, states that after this critical period, the brain becomes "slowly less flexible, so that by the time the child reaches adolescence, the brain cannot normally develop any new cognitive system, including language" (Redmond, 2005). Other research has documented studies that support early language acquisition and believes that there clearly appears to be a "window of opportunity" when the brain is particularly efficient in learning (Curtain, 2005). Information released from Dr. Phelps of the Department of Molecular and Medical Pharmacology of the UCLA School of Medicine states that the learning experiences of a child determine which connections in the brain become developed and which will no longer function (Chipongian, 2000). Phelps also documented studies that have shown that the brain of a two-year-old has twice as many synapses or connections as an adult's brain. Consequently, the failure to learn a skill during this sensitive period holds important significance because the young brain must use these connections or they will be lost. Since the fixing of speech habits occurs at about the age of ten, the consequent age barrier in language acquisition is directly linked to psychological as well as neurophysiologic factors (Curtain, 2005).

Learning a foreign language at the same time or shortly after learning the English language allows children to compare and contrast concepts that are complex and difficult to understand. Being able to compare ideas, such as conjugations, tenses and subject-verb

agreement, allows for an exact definition of the idea (Curtain, 2005). Teaching these ideas at a young age, in two different languages, allows the learner to understand why by comparison. Early foreign language learning gives the learner a chance to develop a clearer understanding of the English language and greater sensitivity to structure, vocabulary and syntax (Curtain and Pesola, 1994).

Studying a second language in elementary school not only allows students to compare the English language to the new foreign language being learned, but also permits the learner to apply knowledge learned in the second language class to the English language. A stronger vocabulary is a benefit of learning a foreign language and English simultaneously. New vocabulary from the foreign language can replace overused vocabulary words when speaking English. Exposure to a second language helps the brain of young children grow connections that make a foreign language easy to learn and relate to the English language. Some studies have found that students who learn foreign languages early in life score statistically higher on standardized college entrance exams than those who do not (Monroe, 200; Wicker, 2000). For example, the College Entrance Examination Board reported that students who had averaged four or more years of foreign language study scored higher on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) than those who had studied four or more years of any other subject (Beazley, 2004). These findings, which were consistent with College Board profiles for previous years and with the work of NNELL, suggest that studying a second language for a number of years may contribute to higher SAT scores (Beazley, 2004).

Early foreign language learning improves students' general understanding of the English language and increases cultural consciousness. The benefits of learning a foreign language are especially useful at a young age. Accepting others because they are not exactly the

same is a big step for children; learning a foreign language at an early age helps overcome the fear of other cultures and customs. Learning a foreign language in elementary school also helps students understand and comprehend a significantly greater amount of the English language.

“Learning a foreign language (especially before age 6) is just an overall good decision” advised Mary Lynn Redmond. Foreign languages are making their way into elementary schools and making the learning process for students a more enjoyable experience.

Works Cited

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