

Early Launch for Language  
Young Children Have Advantage, but Linguists Say Lessons Benefit All

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One in an occasional series comparing two takes on teaching popular subjects.

Can kids learn anything if they are exposed to a subject for only half an hour a week, with no homework?

When it comes to learning another language, educators say yes.

"The kids getting it for 30 minutes won't become fluent, but that's not the point of those programs," said Julie Sugarman, research associate at the nonprofit Center for Applied Linguistics in the District. "It's to give them exposure to the language. Just because kids aren't able to do calculus in sixth grade doesn't mean we shouldn't teach math in elementary school."

Foreign language instruction is considered more important than ever as the nation's demographics and national security issues change and the world's economies become intertwined.

Although new brain research is revealing secrets about how people acquire language, complex questions remain about what constitutes effective teaching. In the No Child Left Behind era, which has focused on basic reading and math skills, some educators say time for teaching foreign languages is scarce. That means aiming for a goal short of fluency.

Spanish teacher Lisa Vierya emphasizes basic conversational skills in the half-hour a week she has with a second-grade class at Evergreen Mill Elementary School in Loudoun County.

Vierya wheels in a big cart packed with books, word cards and other materials. From start to finish, she speaks Spanish, even when the students don't understand her.

"¿Cuál animal es?" ("What animal is this?"), she asked her students after teaching them how to say "horse," "pig" and other farm animals. The students answered correctly until one confused a horse ("caballo") with the color gray, answering "gris."

"They eventually pick it up," she said later. No homework is required, but students are encouraged to practice. First- and second-graders receive 30 minutes of instruction a week; children in grades 3 through 5 have two 30-minute classes weekly.

Assessments in fifth grade, she said, show that the program gives students a grounding in the language that allows them to converse.

"Yes, I'd like more time. But there is value in this," she said.

A different approach is used in Susanna Winebrenner's second-grade classroom at César Chávez Spanish Immersion Elementary School in Prince George's County.

There, students receive instruction in Spanish and English virtually every day; subjects taught in Spanish are Spanish language arts and social studies.

It's called partial immersion, although down the hall in the kindergarten and first-grade classes, instruction is all in Spanish.

In immersion classes, students learn subjects in the target language through a variety of techniques. They differ from traditional methods, which emphasize vocabulary and grammar and often fail to produce proficiency.

"We are teaching literacy," said Principal José A. Taboada II. " We are not talking just about learning Spanish. When you learn a second language, you are also learning how to learn other languages, and not just the spoken language -- the language of mathematics, the language of computers. Your mind opens."

Asked about the chief obstacle to learning Spanish, Evergreen Mill's Vierya cited lack of time. At César Chávez, Taboada mentioned parents who fear that their own culture will be devalued.

"At the first open house of the year," he said, "I told the parents, 'Get out of the way.' "

Both programs aim to engage students at an early age.

"The younger they are, the more comfortable they are in acquiring language," Taboada said.

But parents who fear their child will miss the chance if they don't start by third grade can stop worrying.

Sugarman, of the linguistics center, said research shows that middle- and high school students often make faster progress learning languages than younger ones who are not cognitively ready for grammar rules and similar tasks.

Young children do well with language instruction, she said, not just because their brains are sponges but also because the material is the very stuff of elementary school: greetings, numbers, seasons, weather, days of the week and so on.

"If students start younger, it is much easier to match the language level with the student's development level," Sugarman said. "In kindergarten, you do colors and numbers and 'My name is.' That's what you do in early stages of foreign language learning. Student are doing things interesting and relevant to them.

"One of the reasons foreign language is less effective in upper grades is that students aren't able to do things at their cognitive ability, so they may be bored."

New research has yet to prove how the brain handles language, but many linguists agree that children and adults learn and retain second languages differently because the brain changes over time with knowledge and experience. Children learn inductively, by example and by interacting with the environment around them, and adults tend to learn analytically and deductively.

But people at both age levels can learn to speak. What a focused, older language student probably won't be able to do is pass as a native speaker; the ability to adopt a new accent appears to be age-related, experts say.

Ultimately, experts say, the real key is not the instructional method but the instructor.

"The quality of the teacher is the single biggest factor in foreign language learning," said Catherine Ingold, director of the National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland at College Park.

Sticking with it is also crucial. Research shows that becoming proficient in a second language can take four to seven years. And skills not sharpened become dull.

"If you don't use it, you lose it," said Taboada

