

# Today is the Day to Start Teaching Your Child French . . . or Any Foreign Language!

If it's true that everything we need to know we learn in kindergarten, then that is the time to start teaching world languages and cultures (. . . or even earlier!) The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages recommends beginning language instruction as early as possible in school, and connecting continuous instruction from grade to grade for 90 minutes per week.

Researchers have found that the optimal age to acquire a language is before adolescence. Children are natural language “sponges” and learn easily through repetition and play . . . not analysis. Evidence shows that early exposure to foreign languages helps develop near-native pronunciation, raises test scores in all areas, helps children to develop a global view and cultural understanding, and allows for a longer sequence of study and higher levels of language proficiency.

Read on for the . . .

## Top Ten Benefits of Early Language Learning

### I.

**Brain research indicates that children are at an optimal age for language learning.** Although language study is beneficial and effective at any age, some studies suggest that the human brain is more open to language learning from birth to preadolescence. During this critical period, or “window of readiness,” there are greater synapses and plasticity that is highest before the age of six, and then gradually declines. (Nash 1997). Fortunately, researchers have not found an age in which the language window closes completely, especially in the areas of grammar and vocabulary. (Chipongian 2000). In fact, 5% of adult bilinguals mastered their second language well into adulthood. (Singleton 2004). However, there is evidence that children learn languages differently than analytical adolescents and adults. Brain imaging reveals that children store both their native and second language in the same sector of the brain, while adult learners store their new language in a separate area. (Winslow 1997).

## 2.

**Early language learners have the ability to develop native-like pronunciation.** While learners of all ages are capable of developing bilingual skills, young learners have an edge when it comes to pronunciation. Children who learn a language before adolescence have the ability to develop native-like pronunciation. (Strozer 1994.) A long-standing study on foreign language pronunciation tested 4-9 year old native-English speakers by introducing new French words. On post-tests, the French pronunciations improved with age up to 8 and 9 years, and then decreased. (Misrachi and Denney 1979)

## 3.

**Elementary foreign language study offers the opportunity to support, re-teach and reinforce content across the curriculum.** The 1983 congressional report, “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” called for high expectations and a rigorous core curriculum that includes English, science, math, social studies, as well as foreign languages. Twenty-five years later, our schools continue to grapple with the same challenge of delivering a rigorous curriculum. We are still a nation at risk. (Ravitch 2009). Content-related foreign language instruction not only addresses the call for foreign language education, but it uses foreign languages as the vehicle for teaching subject content. This integrated approach allows for the additional teaching of literacy, math, science, social studies, and the arts within the foreign language class. The academic content provides the context for language learning. (Curtain and Haas 1995.) Your child can benefit from learning a language, while receiving additional review and reinforcement in other subject areas at the same time.

## 4.

**Early language learning leads to denser brain development and higher cognitive ability.** Several studies indicate that learning a second language as a child increases cognitive ability. One researcher, D.W. Robinson, concluded, “. . . a youngster whose experience with two language systems seems to have left him or her with a mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, and a more diversified set of mental abilities.” (Robinson, 1992.) In 2004, Andrea Mechelli and other researchers from London’s Wellcome Department of Imaging Neuroscience studied the brain densities of bilingual people. They found that bilingual speakers had greater gray matter density in the areas of language, memory, and attention than did monolingual study participants, particularly in the brain’s left side. The earlier the second language learning, the denser the gray matter in the brain’s left region. These findings suggest that the actual structure of the brain is altered by the acquisition of a second language. (de Vries 2004).

## 5.

### **Children who receive instruction in two languages typically score higher on standardized tests.**

Dr. Ellen Bialystok of York University found that bilingual children scored twice as high on language tests than their monolingual peers. (Bialystok 2001) Another researcher, C.M. Saunders, studied the performance of third graders from the Georgia Elementary School Foreign Language Model Program. These students received four years of foreign language instruction five days per week for 30 minutes. Their Iowa Basic math scores were significantly higher than students one year older who had not been exposed to foreign languages. (C.M. Saunder 1998.) Even more compelling is a study in which experimental groups of third graders received 30 minutes of Spanish three times per week for one semester, instead of the equivalent amount of extra math time in the control classes. Even after that short amount of time, one of the Spanish classes outperformed the control classes in math. (Armstrong and Rogers 1997.)

## 6.

**Universities prefer or require students to demonstrate proficiency in a second language.** Language proficiency is rigorous, but necessary for providing students with the tools they need to succeed at college and in the work place. According to Dr. Sharif Shakrani, “A number of recent educational studies indicate that a key predictor of whether students will graduate from college is not race, gender, ethnicity or economic conditions but whether they completed a rigorous course of study in high school.” He goes on to report that 90 percent of the fastest growing jobs will require post-secondary education. (Shakrani 2006.) We can give our children an advantage in fulfilling language requirements by providing a strong foundation in the early grades in the same way that advanced math and science skills build upon early learning.

## 7.

**Elementary language programs allow for long sequences of foreign language study, resulting in higher SAT, ACT, and AP scores.** The College Entrance Examination Board consistently reports that students who study languages score higher on both the verbal and math portions of the SAT. The more years of language study, the greater the results. In fact, four or more years of language study has a greater impact on SAT scores than four or more years of any other subject. Consider these gains of 2-year and 4-year language students versus those with no language background: (College Board, 2002)

<u>Years of Foreign Language Study</u>	<u>SAT I Verbal</u>	<u>SAT I Math</u>
2	60 point gain	48 point gain
4	149 point gain	150 point gain

Likewise, students who study a foreign language achieve higher reading and math scores on the ACT. (Olsen and Brown, 1979.) AP French, German, and Spanish exam survey data also indicates a strong connection between a long sequence of language learning and higher AP scores. (Baum, Bischof & Rabiteau 2002.)

## 8.

**The United States has a critical national security need for proficient, bilingual speakers.** Especially in the post 9/11 world, our nation's security and prosperity are strengthened when we have the ability to communicate and encourage reform, respect, and cultural understanding worldwide. (Powell 2006) The National Virtual Translation Center reports that only 9% of Americans can speak their native language and another fluently, versus 53% of Europeans. Yet, only 44% of high school students study a foreign language. This deficiency compromises U.S. security interests. According to a congressional report by the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, serious language gaps in the State Department impact our ability to communicate with foreign audiences and execute critical duties. (Senate Foreign Relations Committee 2006). In 2006, President George Bush launched the National Security Language Initiative. This national plan is a collaborative effort by the President, Secretary of State, Director of National Intelligence, and the Departments of State, Education, and Defense. The plan is designed to fund U.S. foreign language education beginning in early childhood, throughout formal schooling, and into the work force. (Powell 2006).

## 9.

**Bilingualism offers career opportunities to individuals and is crucial to the economic success of the U.S.** Knowing another language will be a vital skill to graduates as they enter the work force. Experts estimate that one in five U.S. jobs is directly tied to international trade and most of the future growth will most likely be in overseas markets (The Asia Society 2008) In a recent survey of American companies, 40% indicated that international sales are increasing more rapidly than domestic sales, and over 60% expected this trend to continue. (Committee for Economic Development 2006.) Not only will graduates with these necessary linguistic skills be in high demand, but they will also help insure our country's economic success in a global economy.

## IO.

**Languages help children develop cultural understanding to live in a multi-lingual society.** There is no denying the fact that we live in a pluralistic society and a global community. According to the National Virtual Translation Center, we are far from a being monolingual country. There are, in fact, 311 different languages spoken in the U.S. A language other than English is spoken in 14 million U.S. homes, and one fifth of the population over the age of 5 speaks a language other than English. English-only households account for just 82.1% of the population. Cultural understanding is a vital skill children will need throughout their lifetimes. Piaget found that at about the age of ten, children begin to perceive nations and groups as “other.” Information received before this time is more easily accepted. (Lambert and Klineberg 1967.) Language and culture are intertwined. Buffy Sainte-Marie, a Native American educator and social activist, expressed it well: “Language and culture cannot be separated. Language is vital to understanding our unique cultural perspectives. Language is a tool that is used to explore and experience our cultures and the perspectives that are embedded in our cultures.”

The National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project beautifully expresses what we must do: “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.”



## “TOP TEN BENEFITS OF EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING” BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armstrong, P.W. and J.D. Rogers. (1997). Basic Skills Revisited: The Effects of Foreign Language Instruction on Reading, Math and Language Arts. Learning Languages, Spring, 20-21.
- Baum, D., Bischof, D., & Rabiteau, K. (2002). *Before and Beyond the AP Foreign Language Classroom*. <http://collegeboard.com>
- Bialystok, Ellen. (2001). *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy, and Cognition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chipongian, Lisa. (2000). Is There a Critical Period for Learning a Foreign Language? <http://www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=fa/critical-period>
- College Board, <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/data-reports-research/sat/archived>
- Committee for Economic Development. (2006). Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security, Washington, D.C.
- Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate report, Department of State Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps, 2006.
- Curtain, Helena and Mari Haas. (1995). Integrating Foreign Language and Content Instruction in Grades K-8. <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/int-for-k8.html>
- De Vries, Lloyd. (2004). Being Bilingual Boosts Brain: Increased Brain Density Leads to Improved Skills and Abilities. Source: Mechelli, Andrea. (2004). Nature, vol 431, p 757. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/10/13/health/webmd/main649050.shtml>
- Lambert, Wallace E., and Otto Klineberg. (1967). Children's Views of Foreign People. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Misrachi, Evelyne and Dency, Nancy W. (1979). Developmental Study of Foreign Language Pronunciation. Developmental Psychology. Vol 15(4), July 1979, 458-9.
- Nash, J.M. (1997). Special Report: Fertile Minds. Time Magazine, 149/5.
- National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999). *Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Yonkers, NY.
- National Virtual Translation Center, <http://www.nvtc.gov/>
- Olsen, S.A. and L.K. Brown, (1979). The Relation Between High School Study of Foreign Languages and ACT English and Mathematics Performance," ADFL Bulletin 23, no. 3 (1992.)
- Powell, Dina. (2006) Briefing on the National Security Language Initiative. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/58733.htm>
- Resnick, Lauren, editor. (2006). Foreign Language Instruction: Implementing the Best Teaching Methods. Research Points: Essential Information for Education Policy, Washington D.C., Spring 2006, Vol. 4, Issue 1.
- Robinson, D.W. (1992). The Cognitive, Academic and Attitudinal Benefits of Early Language Learning.
- Sainte-Marie, Buffy. [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/buffy\\_sainte-marie/](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/buffy_sainte-marie/)
- Saunders, C.M. (1998). The Effect of the Study of a Foreign Language in the Elementary School on Scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and an Analysis of Student-Participant Attitudes and Abilities. Unpublished dissertation, University of Georgia.
- Shakrani, Sharif. (2006). The Michigan Merit Curriculum, New Educator, 2006. <http://www.educ.msu.edu/neweducator/fallo6/curriculum.htm>
- Singleton, David. (2004). Language Acquisition: The Age Factor. Multilingual Matters.
- Strozer, J.R. (1994). Language Acquisition After Puberty. Georgetown University Press.
- The Asia Society. (2008). A Leadership Network of International Studies Schools." <http://internationalstudieschools.org/about.com>
- Winslow, R. (1997). How Language is Stored in Brain Depends on Age. The Wall Street Journal, July. (Summary of Distinct Cortical Areas Associated with Native and Second Languages, Nature, 388, 1997).