

Second Language Learning: Everyone Can Benefit

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The 1990s have been a decade of renewed interest in language learning. As always, political and economic concerns play a major role in the nation's perception of the value of learning a second language (Met and Galloway, 1992). In addition, there is now a growing appreciation of the role that multilingual individuals can play in an increasingly diverse society, and there is also a greater understanding of the academic and cognitive benefits that may accrue from learning other languages. During the past five years in particular, researchers, policymakers, educators, employers, parents, and the media have reexamined the advantages of foreign language learning.

In 1989, a presidential resolution declaring the 1990s the "decade of the brain" was announced. An increased level of research on brain development has been under way throughout the 1990s. Some of this research has analyzed the effect of language acquisition on the brain. The results of these studies have generated media interest in how early learning experiences—including first and second language acquisition—promote cognitive development. Newsweek magazine, for example, devoted a special edition to the critical first three years of a child's life and indicated that there is a window of opportunity for second language learning that begins when a child is one year of age (Lach, 1997). A recent article in *Time* magazine suggested that foreign languages should be taught to children as early as possible (Nash, 1997). And the television newsmagazine Dateline NBC aired a segment on first and second language acquisition in November 1997.

This article summarizes findings from numerous sources on the benefits of studying second languages and offers suggestions to parents and educators for encouraging language learning at home and at school. (A detailed list of ways to foster a language-proficient society appears in "Putting It All Together: Fostering a Language- Proficient Society" on page 70 of the [ERIC Review](#), from which this article is reprinted.)

Benefits of Second Language Learning

Personal Benefits

An obvious advantage of knowing more than one language is having expanded access to people and resources. Individuals who speak and read more than one language have the ability to communicate with more people, read more literature, and benefit more fully from travel to other countries. Introducing students to alternative ways of expressing themselves and to different cultures gives greater depth to their understanding of human experience by fostering an appreciation for the customs and achievements of people beyond their own communities. Ultimately, knowing a second language can also give people a competitive advantage in the work force by opening up additional job opportunities (Villano, 1996).

Cognitive Benefits

Some research suggests that students who receive second language instruction are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not (Bamford and Mizokawa, 1991). Other studies suggest that persons with full proficiency in more than one language (bilinguals) outperform similar monolingual persons on both verbal and nonverbal tests of intelligence, which raises the question of whether ability in more than one language enables individuals to achieve greater intellectual flexibility (Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker, 1974; Hakuta, 1986; Weatherford, 1986).

Academic Benefits

Parents and educators sometimes express concern that learning a second language will have a detrimental effect on students' reading and verbal abilities in English. However, several studies suggest the opposite. For example, a recent study of the reading ability of 134 four- and five-year-old children found that bilingual children understood better than monolingual children the general symbolic representation of print (Bialystok, 1997). Another study analyzed achievement test data of students in Fairfax County, Virginia, who had participated for five years in immersion—the most intensive type of foreign language program. The study concluded that those students scored as well as or better than all comparison groups on achievement tests and that they remained high academic achievers throughout their schooling (Thomas, Collier, and Abbott, 1993). Finally, a study conducted in Louisiana in the 1980s showed that regardless of race, sex, or academic level, students who received daily instruction in a foreign language (taught as a separate subject rather than through immersion) outperformed those who did not receive such instruction on the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade language arts sections of Louisiana's Basic Skills Tests (Rafferty, 1986). Numerous other studies have also shown a positive relationship between foreign language study and English language arts achievement (Barik and Swain, 1975; Genesee, 1987; Swain, 1981). **All of these results suggest that second language study helps enhance English and other academic skills.**

Some studies have found that students who learn foreign languages score statistically higher on standardized college entrance exams than those who do not. 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 (College Entrance Examination Board, 1992; Cooper, 1987). These findings, which were consistent with College Board profiles for previous years (College Entrance Examination Board, 1982; Solomon, 1984) and with the work of Eddy (1981), suggest that studying a second language for a number of years may contribute to higher SAT scores. (1)

Societal Benefits

Bilingualism and multilingualism have many benefits to society. Americans who are fluent in more than one language can enhance America's economic competitiveness abroad, maintain its political and security interests, and work to promote an understanding of cultural diversity within the United States. For example, international trade specialists, overseas media correspondents, diplomats, airline employees, and national security personnel need to be familiar with other languages and cultures to do their jobs well. Teachers, healthcare providers, customer service representatives, and law enforcement personnel also serve their constituencies more effectively when they can reach across languages and cultures. Developing the language abilities of the students now in school will improve the effectiveness of the work force later.

Getting Started

At School

Parents who are interested in enrolling their children in elementary school foreign language programs should first inquire about existing programs in the school district. If the neighborhood school does not offer foreign language instruction, it is possible that **immersion programs or language-focused schools exist elsewhere in the school district.** Enrollment information will be available at individual schools or at district administrative offices. If there are no foreign language schools or programs offered in the school district, then private language classes may be the only option.

Although second language classes are not always readily available, many **resources exist to help parents and educators establish a program in their school or school district.** (2)

Is Earlier Always Better?

Although people can learn languages at any age, some studies suggest that children who learn a language before adolescence are more likely than older learners to attain native-like pronunciation (Harley, 1986; Patkowski, 1990). A number of researchers have found that children have an innate ability to acquire the rules of any language, and that this ability diminishes by adulthood (Curtiss, 1995; Johnson and Newport, 1989). Older language students should take heart, however, in the results of other studies that report that although young children acquire pronunciation easily, they are not particularly efficient learners of vocabulary or other aspects of language structure (Genesee, 1978; Swain and Lapkin, 1989). Of course, the more years devoted to learning a language and the more opportunities available to use it in everyday situations, the greater the proficiency achieved (Curtain, 1997).

At Home

Long before their children begin school, parents can begin to facilitate second language learning. Children can learn elements of a second language from a babysitter, a nanny, a family member, or a friend; they can also attend a multilingual preschool or a preschool with a language program. If a child has a number of positive experiences with another language, he or she can become quite receptive to learning other languages.

Throughout the school years, parents can show their children that the ability to speak a second language is valued by encouraging an interest in other languages and cultures. Parents can show their respect for other cultures and ways of speaking by inviting people who speak other languages into their homes and by attending cultural events featuring music, dance, or food from other countries. They can also provide their children with books, videos, and similar materials in other languages, and they can send their children to foreign language camps.

To supplement language classes, parents of older children might also wish to explore the possibility of enrolling them in international exchange programs. Students normally live abroad with a host family, which provides them with a safe and sheltered environment where they can practice their language skills. These experiences offer valuable opportunities to complement second language study with firsthand exploration of a different culture.

Conclusion

Research has shown that second language study offers many benefits to students in terms of improved communicative ability, cognitive development, cultural awareness, and job opportunities. Society as a whole also profits economically, politically, and socially when its citizens can communicate with and appreciate people from other countries and cultures. Parents and educators would be wise to take advantage of the many available opportunities and resources for second language learning for the benefit of children coming of age in the 21st century.

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Second Language Learning and Children With Special Needs

The accompanying article points out the many benefits of studying a second language. Parents and teachers of children with learning disabilities or giftedness may have a special interest in how their children acquire a second language. **Learning Disabilities.** Generally speaking, students with learning disabilities can learn a second language and enjoy the many personal benefits of familiarity with a second language and culture (Baker, 1995). One important study of learning-disabled children taking a foreign language reported that students of average and below-average IQ performed as well as students of above-average IQ on oral production and interpersonal communication tasks (Genesee, 1976). Special multisensory techniques that emphasize the direct and explicit teaching of speech sounds through drill cards and reading, writing, and speaking exercises can facilitate the language learning of special student populations (Schneider, 1996; Sparks and others, 1991).

Some speech pathologists and pediatricians may discourage early foreign language learning, particularly when a child is diagnosed with dyslexia, aphasia, or a hearing impairment or scores low on tests of intelligence (Baker, 1995). A language specialist should be consulted before a child with a severe learning disability begins a second language program, but many students with learning disabilities can and do benefit from second language learning experiences.

Giftedness. Because linguistically gifted students are particularly good candidates for attaining native or near-native proficiency in other languages, some educators have advocated offering foreign language instruction early in childhood to fully develop that potential (Brickman, 1988). Typically highly verbal and with advanced vocabularies, these students ideally should be taught using curricula specially geared to their innate strengths, such as strong language, conceptualization, socialization, and productivity traits (Allen, 1992). Early exposure to second languages and cultures will help parents and teachers identify those children likely to exhibit strong language aptitude.

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Notes

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(1) Although the College Board studies show a correlation between studying a foreign language and achieving higher scores on the SAT, it is difficult to prove causality. It may be that the SAT scores of students who take several years of a foreign language are also influenced by other variables, such as their socioeconomic class, the educational level of their parents, or the resources available in their secondary school.

(2) Suggestions on advocating for second language study, developing a coherent rationale, and establishing a school program can be found in Curtain and Pesola (1994); de Lopez, Lawrence, and Montalvo (1990); and Lipton (1995).

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