

Essential Information for Education Policy

Research Points

Foreign Language Instruction: Implementing the Best Teaching Methods

From preschool parents to Pentagon chiefs, people are calling for more foreign language instruction.¹ Factors driving the demand include China's economic growth, which has prompted the College Board to add Chinese to its list of Advanced Placement tests.

Meanwhile, President George W. Bush, citing national security concerns, has called for the expanded teaching of languages not typically offered in public schools, including Arabic, Farsi, and Chinese. Also fueling interest are the growing ranks of "heritage" language students who are raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken. At the same time, more parents and schools are recognizing the value of preparing even very young children for life in a broad international community.

In funding and implementing language programs, three questions policymakers and instructors often ask about foreign language learning and teaching are:

- ▶ At what age should foreign language learning start?
- ▶ What teaching methods should be used?
- ▶ To what extent is there a special aptitude for foreign language learning?

Should Foreign Language Learning Start Early?

It is now well established that young children tend to absorb relatively easily any language that they are surrounded by, and they appear to learn to speak a new language more easily than adults do.^{2,3} Compared to an older student, a child's language learning advantage is greatest in the area of pronunciation, somewhat weaker in the area of grammar usage, and slight when considering the size of their vocabulary. Still, the apparent overall benefit of early learning is leading many to implement foreign language programs in elementary school or even earlier. Is this the best or even an advisable use of resources, especially children's time? The answer depends on what you want to achieve and how much you are willing to invest. A few hours a week of foreign language instruction focusing on learning words, songs, and a few ritualized exchanges is good for cultural exposure and appreciation, but do not expect real mastery.



The implication of the research is not so much that one should start language teaching early — say, age 6 — and expect spectacular results, but rather that the teaching should be age appropriate. When considering the “earlier is better” approach, three points often are overlooked:

- ▶ A young child tends to absorb a language through massive amounts of input and exposure, while explicit learning, involving rules and systematic practice, plays an important role for adolescents and adults.⁴
- ▶ The impact of age of learning on ultimate proficiency is not always clear cut; in other words, some child learners end up with accents and incomplete second language grammars, and some adult learners become, for all practical purposes, as skilled as native speakers.
- ▶ While young learners are more likely than older students to ultimately speak a new language like native speakers, adolescents and adults actually learn foreign languages faster.⁵

If proficiency is the goal, teaching young children a foreign language in an age-appropriate manner means providing a full-immersion education,⁶ taught by teachers who know the language well. Such programs simulate the environment of growing up with a language by:

- ▶ Integrating the second language with instruction in other subjects;
- ▶ Giving learners ample opportunities to engage in meaningful discourse with other students and teachers using the foreign language;
- ▶ Exposing learners to a variety of native speakers of the target language; and
- ▶ Focusing instruction on attaining the language skills needed for communicating about and understanding academic subject matter, not on mastering a foreign language for its own sake.

Some parents and teachers may be concerned that total immersion in a foreign language could impede a child’s grasp of English and ability to learn other subjects. However, studies have shown that, while there can be an initial lag in English achievement, full-immersion students catch up, scoring at least as well as other students on verbal and mathematics skills.^{7,8} They may even exceed monolingual children on some measures of cognitive processing.⁹ Also, many language programs that call themselves “immersion” fail

to produce the expected results, apparently because they do not provide an experience similar to exemplary immersion programs like those used in Canada to teach French and other foreign languages to English speakers.^{10, 11}

Teaching Older Students

Immersion is not the only efficient way to learn a language. For older students, effective foreign language instruction includes direct teaching, systematic practice involving rules and grammar, and plenty of opportunities for conversation. It should be aimed at having students express and understand fully formed ideas and phrases, as well as learn the language’s structure.

A balanced instructional approach is vital. Too much focus on meaning fails to create the knowledge of structure necessary for anything beyond the most basic conversational skills. At the same time, while teaching structures directly is highly productive,¹² an over-reliance on structure, perhaps through endless mechanical drills, can lead to the “boredom factor” — students want to actually communicate in a foreign language, not labor over the nuts and bolts.

In the proper dosage, focusing on the foundations of grammar and language structures will support a student’s ability to express himself or herself readily.¹³ There are many ways to draw attention to the form of a language (whole words, sentence structures, stress, and intonation patterns), depending on the student’s aptitude, motivation, and previous experience and on the educational and learning goals of the student and the teaching program. Much research is available to guide educators in managing the balance between structure and meaning.^{14, 15, 16}

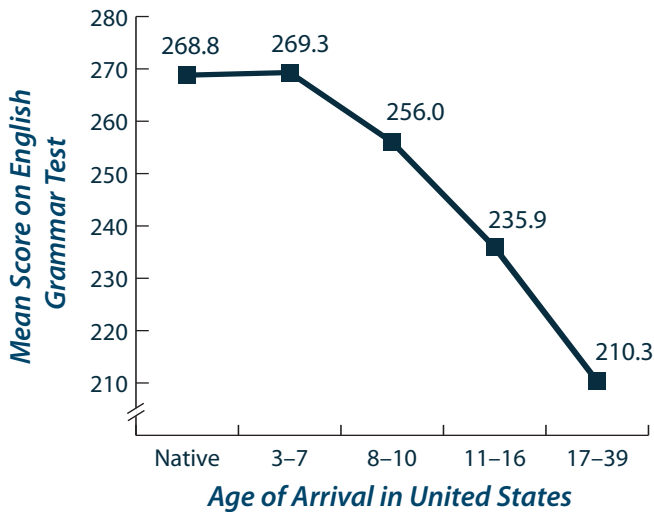
Can Everyone Learn Foreign Languages Well?

As with any type of learning, students’ individual differences have an impact on how well each one grasps a subject. For adolescents and adults, a student’s aptitude and motivation can be key factors in his or her foreign language learning.

Aptitude for language learning can be measured through specialized tests,^{17, 18} and large amounts of research suggest that it is the second most important language learning characteristic after age.^{19, 20} Foreign language aptitude consists of several components

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Reaching Language Proficiency at All Ages

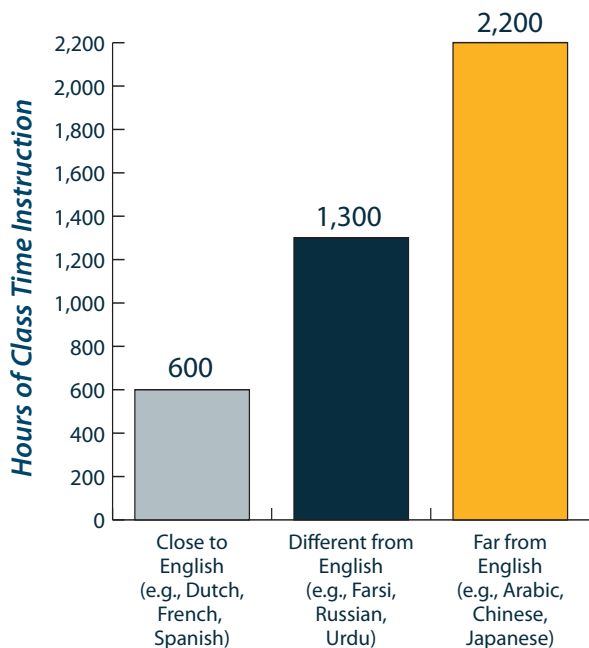


Early Immersion for Young Children Leads to Nativelike Language Ability

The power of immersion language education is reflected in the experience of immigrant students who, in effect, live in an immersion learning environment when they relocate to a new country.

In a study of immigrants who spoke Korean or Chinese at home but English outside, those who came to the United States between the ages of 3 and 7 had average English grammar test scores as adults equal to those of native English speakers. Those who arrived at later ages had less mastery of grammar as adults.

Source: Johnson, J.S., Newport, E.L. (1989). "Critical Period Effects in Second Language Learning: The Influence of Maturation State on the Acquisition of English as a Second Language." *Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 21, pp. 60-99.



Language, by Degree of Difficulty

Source: Adapted from National Virtual Translation Center (2006). "Language Learning Difficulty for English Speakers." <http://www.nvtc.gov/lotw/months/november/learningExpectations.html>, accessed March 31, 2006.

Adults Need Varying Amounts of Study Time To Reach Proficiency in Different Languages

At the elite Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State, students studying full time to achieve professional speaking and reading proficiency in "easy" languages (those closest to English) spend 575 to 600 hours in class — 25 hours per week plus three to four hours per day of directed self-study. For languages very different from English, class time jumps to 2,200 hours, with half of that time spent in the country where the language is spoken. A typical year of college language instruction is three to five hours per week — 180 hours per year at most — plus homework.

Fact at a Glance

- ▶ Effective language teaching is age appropriate. Young children need full immersion that imitates growing up with a language. Older students require grammar and structure along with meaning and conversation.

including sensitivity to sound, which is important for pronunciation; sensitivity to structure, which affects a student's grasp of grammar; and memory, which can determine how well a student learns and retains vocabulary. Furthermore, the precise impact of a student's foreign language aptitude is affected by three important variables — age; type of exposure to the language; and “linguistic distance,” or the degree of difference between the native and the foreign language. In the end, aptitude, while difficult to define, clearly is an important factor for adolescents and adults learning a foreign language in the classroom.^{21, 22}

In conjunction with aptitude, foreign language mastery also is enhanced when a student is sufficiently motivated to learn a language, for example, to gain employment, travel, or integrate into a community.²³

Conclusion

Determining which type of foreign language instruction is best depends on a number of variables: the learner's age, aptitude, and motivation; the amount of time available for instruction; and the difference between the native and the foreign language.

For young children, starting early can lead to mastery of a foreign language — with no long-term detriment to their grasp of English — only if it is taught through a well-developed form of total immersion instruction. A program consisting of a few hours of foreign language teaching per week is not enough.

Older students and adults, on the other hand, need a judicious mixture of practice and communication. Deliberate direct instruction (e.g., studying grammatical structures, memorizing lists of vocabulary words) is vital, along with ample classroom and study time. As such students progress, their instruction should become increasingly communicative and should include an extended stay abroad for greatest effect.

First, recognize that simply starting early does not guarantee that a language will be learned.

Second, support age-appropriate foreign language teaching — a total immersion program for young children, moving toward a more explicit focus on structure for adolescents and adults.

Third, be realistic with students and parents about how much foreign language skill a few hours a week of instruction can generate, especially for preschool and elementary school learners. Such limited instruction will not lead to mastery, but it may build motivation and a “taste” for language learning.

Fourth, recognize that for almost everyone, high proficiency in a foreign language will develop outside the classroom, through conversations with native speakers made possible by the skills acquired in the classroom.

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