



The importance of children learning a foreign language

Research shows that our capacity to learn a language diminishes gradually over time, so, in general terms, the younger someone's mind is, the easier it is to learn a second or even a third language. This is because learning a new language involves an obvious amount of effort for anyone, but the younger you are, the easier it is.

Although researchers have not been able to reach any firm conclusion about the existence of a critical age, they agree that young children learn languages differently from older learners and have some advantages over those who start later. There are several reasons for this: children can spend more time and effort on learning than adults who have many other demands; the habits of pronunciation and grammar of their first language are less deeply ingrained and as a result easier to overcome, and, of course, all learning gets harder with age.

For years it was thought that teaching foreign languages to children as young as three was futile. In fact, research findings indicate quite the opposite; teaching young children how to speak a second language is good on a cognitive level, on a cultural level and may be beneficial for their future career.

Benefits of learning a language on a cognitive level

In the past it was thought that learning a

second language could cause language confusion, a language delay or a cognitive deficit. According to studies at the Cornell Language Acquisition Lab (CLAL), children who learn a second language can maintain attention, despite outside stimuli, better than children who know only one language.

There are incredible psychological benefits of learning another language, and studies by Harvard University confirm that learning additional languages increases critical thinking skills, creativity and flexibility of the mind in young children. At a cognitive and academic level, children learning an additional language are more creative, better at solving complex problems and usually score higher on standardised tests, indicating that learning an additional language is a cognitive activity not just a linguistic one. Moreover, once children know a second language, it is easier for them to understand further language structures, which is why experts say that every new language learnt is easier than the one before.

The most effective way to learn a second language is to put the young child in situations where the second language surrounds them. The earlier a child learns a second language, the more likely the child will attain native-like language proficiency.

Early learners tend to be more intuitive,

less anxious and better at acquiring the sounds and rhythms of the new language. This is because at this age, young children learn through play-like activities. Language lessons can be informal and children's minds are not yet cluttered with facts to be stored and tested. Before children become self-conscious, they can try out their newly acquired languages without fear of embarrassment.

Barbara Lust, a developmental psychology and linguistics expert, professor of human development and director of CLAL says: "One of the greatest feats of human development is learning language. It's remarkable how well equipped children are, beginning at birth, to accomplish the complex task of learning a language."

Children acquire a native-like pronunciation

Experts say that children who learn a language before their teenage years are more likely than older learners to achieve native-like pronunciation, an ability that disappears by adulthood; it looks like the younger the learner, the better they are at mimicking new sounds and adopting pronunciation. The brain is open to new sounds and patterns in pre-adolescence and native sounds are not yet completely ingrained.

Possible benefits for their future career

When considering having your children learn a foreign language, it is important to think about the benefits that knowing and

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gaining this skill might bring to your kids in the future. Professionals able to communicate in a second or third language are always more desirable because they can embrace additional responsibilities and job opportunities.

In terms of the languages that could be more useful to know in the future, English remains the main language for business at a global level, which is why families all around the world are prioritising English as one of the best languages to learn. In addition, languages such as Chinese-Mandarin, Spanish, German and Portuguese are becoming increasingly popular as business-skilled languages.

Benefits on a cultural and personal level

At a personal level, the more languages a person speaks, the better access they will have to different people and resources from other countries and cultures. Speaking other languages helps children to better understand other cultures, expressions and

styles of communication. Children who grow up learning other languages also develop empathy for others, a curiosity for different cultures and ideas and will open their mind greatly, becoming real ‘citizens of the world’.

Finally, children that are advanced or fluent in a foreign language will feel especially satisfied when using it abroad. Discovering that they are able to communicate with more people will boost their self-esteem, autonomy and confidence.

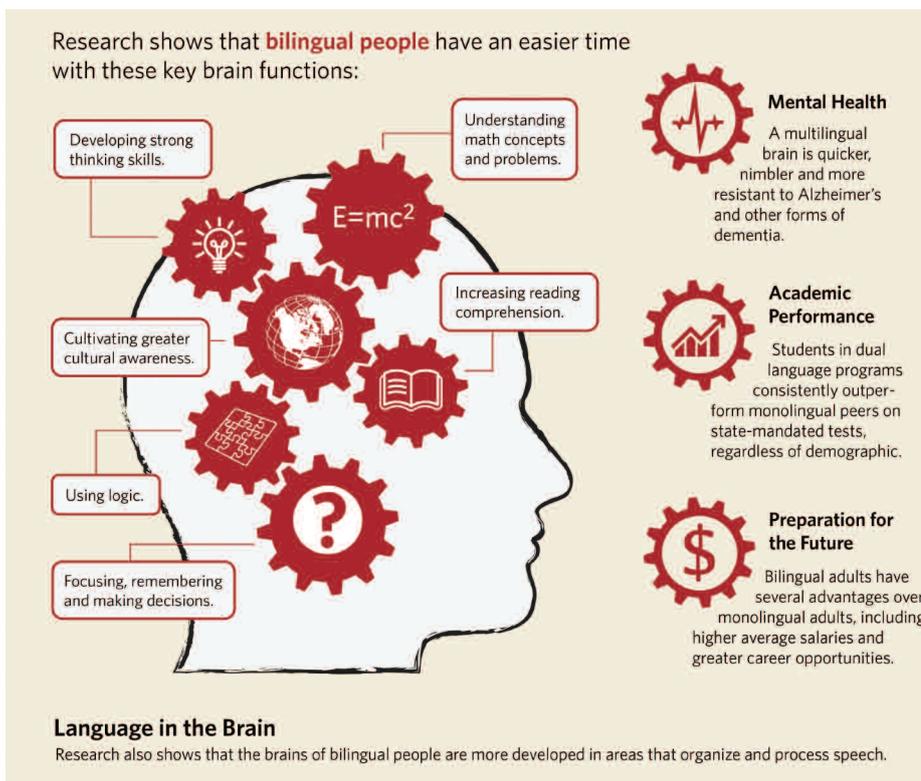
As Mary Lynn Redmond Director of Foreign Language Education & Associate Professor of Education at Wake Forest University says: “Children should start learning a foreign language in kindergarten and continue through high school.” She adds: “Learning languages helps increase listening ability, memory, creativity and critical thinking - all of which are thinking processes that increase learning in general.”



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TIPS TO TEACH A CHILD A SECOND LANGUAGE

- 1 Maintain home (heritage) language when a second language is being learned outside the home.
- 2 Surround the child (the earlier the better) with more than one language through conversations, games and songs, and using different languages.
- 3 Expose children to multilingual environments and give them plenty of opportunities to play with children who speak the second language.
- 4 Promote reading and storytelling in multiple languages.
- 5 Provide fun and interactive language-learning environments (e.g. music, dance and film) in both languages, and often with children of a similar age.
- 6 Maintain a positive attitude toward languages and cultures children learn.



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