

Myths and Facts about World Languages in Elementary Schools

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Myth: Children are better and faster language learners

Fact: Young children are very inefficient language learners

A child's constructions are shorter, simpler and vocabulary is smaller. Therefore, a child gives the appearance of having learned more quickly, when in fact, and compared to adults and adolescents, that is not the case. A child does not have to learn as much as an adult to achieve communicative competence. Adults can learn language faster because they are quicker to recognize structures, have more efficient long-term memory, and can apply formulas and the knowledge of their own learning processes (CAL Digest).

Children need a lot of repetition, exposure and reinforcement for long-term retention of content. For this reason, the elementary curriculum must create interesting and exciting ways to repeat, re-visit, and spiral information.

Myth: It is easy for children to learn languages

Fact: Language learning is as difficult for a child as it is for an adult.

It may even be more difficult because children do not have the cognitive resources of the adult. Adults are quicker to recognize structures, have more efficient long-term memory, and can apply formulas, can draw on the knowledge of their own learning processes and are able to read and write without difficulty in their own language (CAL Digest).

Myth: Children are uninhibited

Fact: Children are more likely to be shy and embarrassed around peers than adults.

Children from some cultural backgrounds can even become extremely anxious when singled out to perform in a language they are in the process of learning. Therefore, the WL classroom must nurture an environment of inclusion, empathy and tolerance (CAL Digest).

Myth: My child will be fluent once s/he exits the Elementary Program

Facts: Your child will be on his or her way, but won't be there yet.

Students exposed to world languages and cultures at an early age become more comfortable with language and are better risk-takers. This leads towards higher rates of acquisition. Research indicates that although children are slow about the language acquisition process, those exposed to world languages in early years will catch up and surpass the achievement of those who begin language study later (Haley). Their pronunciation and accent will also better approximate that of a native speaker as they will not be hindered by neurological constraints nor the fossilization of nerves and muscles necessary for articulation until puberty (Warsi).

Myth: Students with learning disabilities will only be confused by another language.

Fact: The repetitive spiraling and multi-sensory nature of our WL program supports the Sp.Ed. student.

An additional support to learning-disabled or students struggling with first language literacy is the metacognitive, analytic and synthetic way WL looks at new words and the writing system (Ganschow and Schneider). Notably, the cognitive abilities acquired in the learning of one language can be put to use in the acquisition and proficiency of the other language.

The fact remains that the English language is 60% Germanic in origin and 40% Latin in origin. Providing students with continued exposure to Germanic- or Latin-based languages will provide them with avenues for greater proficiency in the English Language (Caccavale). Learning a language or multiple languages is like filling one bucket with water from various sources. Language is language, and what a child knows in one language is transferable to other languages (Bournot-Trites). Higher verbal IQ is ultimately achieved (Landry).

Myth: Elementary school WL is not important— it’s just “fluff”

Fact: Young learners derive a variety of critical, long-term benefits from the language classroom

The study of world languages in elementary school brings about cognitive, academic, social and attitudinal benefits to young learners.

COGNITION, INNOVATION AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

Early study of languages triggers brain growth and has an impact on the ultimate size of the adult brain. Researchers found that language study stimulated growth of the hippocampus - the deep structure of the brain responsible for the development of new knowledge, orientation in space and the consolidation of short-term memory into long-term memory (Filomonova). Other studies indicate modifications of the brain’s inferior frontal cortex. This is a multi-layered mass of neurons that plays a major role in functions such as thought, language, consciousness and memory (Kar).

Experience with a world language develops greater flexibility in thinking. It provides students not only with the ability to depart from traditional approaches to a problem, but also supplies them with rich resources for new and different ideas (Landry). “Ultimately, the study of a foreign language acts as a catalyst for innovative thinking in a child’s conceptual development” (Chen). In short, studying another language makes kids smarter (Marsh).

ACADEMIC

WL study enhances cognitive development and therefore, increases academic achievement. Studies have shown that students who receive foreign language instruction score higher on tasks involving evaluation-- a higher cognitive function per Bloom’s taxonomy (Foster and Reeves).

In early elementary years, the study of world languages positively influences achievement in other disciplines and results in higher test scores in reading and math (Stewart). Children studying a foreign language consistently outperform their monolingual peers and demonstrate growth in all content areas, with the most significant gains in English experienced by average to below-average students (Caccavale). Higher verbal IQ is achieved (Landry). As WL study increases knowledge of words (word power), it also increases performance scores across all areas of the curriculum; not only in language arts and math, but also in science and social studies. (Bournot-Trites).

SOCIAL AND ATTITUDINAL

Early exposure to languages and culture helps children develop more positive and tolerant attitudes towards diverse cultures. It also enables children to incorporate global concepts early on into their “realm of understanding” (Chen).

Language study provides students with an experience in linguistic and cultural diversity that is desirable in today’s global society. Due to increased awareness of a wider set of options, more effective problem-solvers who can come closer to achieving solutions to pressing social problems are cultivated.

These are critical 21st-century and career-readiness skills which lead to tangible advantages in the job market, increased international opportunities and greater social and emotional success.

In summary: Early exposure to language study and culture . . .

- Benefits academic progress in other subjects;
 - benefits basic skills development;
 - benefits higher order, abstract and creative thinking;
 - enriches and enhances cognitive development;
 - enhances a student’s sense of achievement;
 - helps students score higher on standardized tests;
 - promotes cultural awareness and competency;
 - enhances career opportunities;
 - and benefits understanding and security in community and society
- (NEA Research)

Citations and Critical Resources

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