

Copyright, July 28, 1986, U.S. News & World Report

More preschoolers learn foreign languages as parents realize benefits.

Bilingualism: The Accent is on Youth

By Stacy Wells

Like most 3-year-olds, Brian Hwang can't read, can't add up the money in his mother's wallet and can't say what is in the soup he's having for dinner. But the Ithaca, N.Y., child giggles at the stories read to him in Mandarin, counts out 20 \$1 bills in English and says his soup is hot in Taiwanese.

The number of American preschoolers like Brian who are learning to speak two and three languages is the rise because many experts and parents find that learning foreign tongues stimulates a child's mental development. Research has shown that bilingual youngsters are more imaginative, better with abstract notions and more flexible in their thinking than one-language children.

Today, there are at least 1,200 language programs nationwide for children under 6 years old, according to the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. Yet that doesn't come close to satisfying the demand for preschool foreign-language instruction.

In Milwaukee, three schools offer classes for 4-year-olds in French, German and Spanish -- and each class has a waiting list of 50 children. In Washington, applications have doubled in the past year for the International School's nursery and kindergarten classes taught in Spanish or French.

Linguists say that four years ago there were no books instructing parents on how to teach children bilingually; now there are more than 20.

Shrinking world

Günther Brandt, headmaster of the Washington International School, says the most common reason he hears from parents wanting bilingual courses for children is that "the world is getting smaller, and the U.S. is realizing it can't isolate itself any more."

Some parents say they regret not having learned a second language themselves. Others want to share part of their family heritage with their children. Yet many are enrolling their children in classes that have no connection with family roots. In San Francisco, nearly half the 0 preschoolers in the Nihonmachi program are non-Japanese, and more than a fourth of the youngsters at the Chinese-American International School are non-Oriental. The mother of the one black child in the program says she wants her son to be able "to communicate with the largest nationality in the world."

Preschoolers who can speak two languages learn to read more quickly than their monolingual peers, reports Kenji Hakuta, psychology professor at Yale and author of *The Mirror of Language: The Debate on Bilingualism* (Basic Books, 1986). Hakuta says that reading involves the same skills as speaking two dialects. Learning that two sounds are symbols for the same object makes it easier for the child to understand that a printed word is a symbol also.

For years, many parents worried that their children would be confused by absorbing two languages at the same time. However, researchers are finding that those raised in a bilingual home begin to talk a little later but that, once they talk, they show a better understanding of the way language works than other children do.

Bilingual children often mix their languages -- something once viewed as a sign of confusion. But studies now show they are using words from one tongue to support and emphasize the other. "They are taking advantage of the richness of the languages," says Hakuta.

Although educators encourage teaching children a second language, they warn parents not to expect their youngsters to learn

it without much time or trouble. Research is proving that children are not linguistic sponges.

Catherine Snow, associate professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, studied English-speaking adults and children learning Dutch and determined that if an adult and a child have equal exposure to a second language, the adult will learn it faster. Adults, she says, understand how languages work and have strategies for remembering words and grammar that are more developed than children's.

Peer pressure

Teachers say youngsters have two advantages: They are not inhibited by making new, strange sounds that come along with language training, and if they are exposed to these lessons early enough, children will develop a native accent. Puberty is the generally accepted cutoff point for mastering the subtleties of an accent.

The only drawbacks that experts see in raising a child bilingually are that some might be teased because they're speaking a different language or, if placed in a class with native speakers, might be intimidated by the fluency of the others.

When Paúl Duston Muñoz of Silver Spring, Md., was 3, he decided to stop speaking Spanish. He told his mother that he didn't want to be different. Although his mother says that the only time he uses Spanish is when he is sick or thirsty at night or to say words that aren't polite in English.

Even if children reject the second tongue, say the experts, early training makes it easier to pick up the same language or begin a new one later.

Nothing in a bilingual education is ever lost, asserts McGill University psychology Prof. Wally Lambert. "It's as though the language is put on ice."



[Continue the English tour](#) | [Return to list of readings](#)

[Home](#) | [Email the Lycée](#) | [Tour the School](#) | [News from the Lycée](#)