



YOUR CHILD CAN BE  
EFFORTLESSLY TRILINGUAL.  
YOU JUST NEED TO EXPLOIT  
THE LEARNING 'WINDOW'

# LOOK WHO'S TALKING

by Vivien Santana Hughes

For most of us, our foray into foreign language study began with self-consciously conjugating verbs in junior high school French or Spanish class. The idea was to begin teaching languages only after English had been mastered. But current thought focuses on the other end of the learning spectrum. "The rule is, the earlier the better—no exceptions," says Susan Curtiss, Ph.D., adjunct associate professor of linguistics at UCLA. "The brain is programmed for language acquisition—but the farther away you get from birth, the less programed the brain is." Curtiss explains that there is a developmental window that is open to about 10 years of age—teens and adults are rarely able to learn to speak another tongue with childlike ease or to achieve native competence.

Although Curtiss claims that children can be effortlessly trilingual, she also acknowledges that when learning more than one language simultaneously, the early learning stages take longer and, for a time, proficiency in each language is lower. But evidence shows that eventually (usually around second grade) they reach the same point as monolingual children—even surpass them. A study of Louisiana elementary schoolers found that foreign language students actually outperformed their peers on state tests. The National Network for Early Language Learning reports that, "The results of this study suggest that foreign language study aids, not hinders, the acquisition of English language arts skills."

Since the early Eighties, there has been a movement in this country towards early language learning, according to Nancy Rhodes of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. Her office monitors total immersion programs, where every subject in the early grades is taught in the foreign language, to partial immersion, in which half of the day is in English, to classes that offer language as a smaller part of the curriculum.

In order to be most effective, Rhodes believes any language program must be continuous from elementary through high school and be taught as part of the school day, "not a frill like soccer or band that the child can choose not to attend." She finds that more schools are having success integrating language learning into the curriculum: Instead of language in isolation, they teach social studies and other topics in the foreign tongue to further reinforce learning of all subjects.

Studies show why this has been successful: The United States Department of Education found that children are more flexible and efficient at learning other languages than adolescents or adults, and the National Association of State Boards of Education concurred by finding it more effective to start in elementary rather than secondary school. While North Carolina and Arizona have mandated language study at the elementary level, California has practically no foreign language requirements at all. Classes are available in secondary school, but students can fulfill their high school graduation requirement with one year of drama or visual arts. Students on the college-prep track towards a University of California or California State University must complete four semesters of the same foreign language—but this requirement is for high schoolers who have been shown to be past their initial language-learning prime. Rhodes says that immersion and other language programs are in place in many of California's elementary schools, but it's really up to the district.

You don't have to wait for the school system to catch up: "Children should start learning a second language by 1 1/2 to 2," says Nasrin Behravesh, director of Les Enfants Inc., Languages for Children, in Los Angeles. "By age 5 they can learn two to three." She finds that kids pick up languages very easily, but if you wait until junior high, "it becomes academic—like chemistry." The school offers Mommy-and-Me classes for 6 to 24 month olds and Preschool Experience for ages 2 to 5, which incorporate the songs and activities of a standard American class—only in a different language. After-school lessons for 6 to 12 year olds are also available on a daily to weekly basis. Spanish, French, Italian, Japanese or Farsi is taught through music, math, acting and other subjects. (Call 310/444-7330 for more information.) The Berlitz Jr. program is also "function-based, not grammar-based," according to Margaret Sapir, national director of the children's program.

Children 5 and older are taught by native fluent instructors and learn through usage. Songs, repetition and even tic tac toe let children acquire language naturally. Youngsters can attend class at Berlitz locations in Pasadena, Los Angeles, Woodland Hills, Torrance, Beverly Hills and Santa Monica. Berlitz Jr. also works with public



and private schools to offer language programs in Spanish, French, German and Japanese. (Parents interested in before-, after- or during-school classes can contact Bert Molineri, at 818/999-1870.)

Whatever language activity you choose for your child, Professor Curtiss has a warning: “Kids can’t handle a lot of cognitive complexity at an early age.” Language naturally unfolds, she says, so children just need to be immersed in conversation. “The best language school is most like real life.”

Southern California is so rich in cultural and ethnic diversity, says Curtiss, “it’s a big advantage to learn other languages.”

#### AUDIO

**Teach Me Tapes:** When co-founder Judy Mahoney was searching for children’s songs in French and found nothing but academic language tapes, she and a friend started Teach Me Tapes. Available in French, Spanish, Hebrew, German, Russian and Japanese, the series incorporates narration with well-known kids’ songs translated into the language. Native speakers and professional musicians make it authentic as well as enjoy-

able. A follow-along coloring book lets your 2 to 12 year old actively participate. About \$12 at educational supply stores.

**Berlitz Jr:** Three to 10 year olds can follow Teddy through his day from home to school and to the circus. The French or Spanish tape allows time for kids to repeat the words and perfect their accent. The set includes a hardcover picture book with the English translation below each foreign phrase. Published by Aladdin Books. About \$20 at most book chains.

‘The rule is, the earlier, the better—no exceptions’  
—Susan Curtiss, Ph.D.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For these free booklets—*Foreign Language Learning: An Early Start, A Q. & A.*; *Foreign Language Immersion Programs*; and *Elementary School Foreign Language Programs*—send a self-addressed, stamped envelope with your request to Center for Applied Linguistics, 118 22nd Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037, Attention: ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics.

Also, contact Advocates for Language Learning, P.O. Box 4964, Culver City, CA 90231. (310) 397-2448.

