

The Home/School Connection:
Collaborating to Promote Best Practice in World Language Education, PreK-8
Issue 6

What Language Should my Child Learn?

Dear Parents,

NNELL receives many inquiries from parents concerned about language selection. We will explore this topic in this issue of Home/School Connection.

Should my Child Learn a “Critical Language”?

You may have heard the term “critical languages” and wonder what that means. Does it mean that your child should be learning one of those languages? After all, they are deemed “critical”....

The term “critical languages” was coined in the late 1980’s by the United States Department of Education but came into extensive use after 9/11/01 to refer to languages that had not been traditionally taught in American schools and that were deemed “critical” to help our country in its fight against global terrorism. The term has also long been applied to non-traditionally taught languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and other Asian languages that are tied to our nation’s increased economic interests.

While the effort to bring non-traditionally-taught languages to the classroom setting is commendable, categorizing languages in terms of their

“critical” or “non-critical status” based on their strategic or monetary value is controversial. Unfortunately, the ball has started to roll and some schools have rushed to cut well-established programs and replace them with new programs focusing on these “critical” languages. Federal funding is tied to the categories of language groupings, and this has created an even deeper gap and polarization of some in the profession of second language teaching.

At the same time, the Peace Corp is having a hard time recruiting American volunteers with French speaking skills who want to do humanitarian work in Africa. French has fallen in terms of its public appreciation as a consequence of political rhetoric, but many people are not aware that many countries in Africa have French as an official or national language. The obvious question is: can we consider Africa a non-critical area? And continuing on the same track, are Native Americans out of luck because their languages are only spoken by indigenous peoples? What about Spanish? Is that a “critical language” or not? Certainly, in terms of the needs of the vast majority of legal immigrants to the United States, it is.

NNELL believes that all languages are worth learning, and that language learning is a personal affair. Therefore, we recommend that you choose the language that appeals to you. If you are a family of a certain linguistic and cultural heritage, you may want to teach your children your heritage language. You may also want to study other languages because of country proximity, community connections, working relationships, or friendships. These are all wonderful reasons to pursue the availability of instructional resources in the language of your choice.

NNELL believes that it is “critical” that all children begin learning a second language from an early age in order to develop the linguistic and cultural sensitivities that will allow them to become fully participatory members of the global society in which they live.

Should I Enroll my Child in Several Languages at the Same Time?

Early language learning is becoming fashionable, but there is wisdom in avoiding the “fast food” approach to learning many different new languages at the same time, in short-term fashion. While young children have aural and oral advantages (they can recognize foreign sounds easily than older learners and are more willing to try speaking new languages), young children are not computers, and they should not be subjected to a myriad of formal language learning experiences simply because they

seem to have a talent for learning new things.

NNELL recommends that you concentrate your efforts on a language that will have an instructional continuity from early to higher education. The fact that a child learns a few sounds and words in many different languages may be helpful to early phonological awareness, but if those first steps toward second language fluency are not systematically developed during a long sequence of time, your child will have gained little in terms of true proficiency in the second language. Learning to communicate in meaningful ways in a new language is much more than learning a few words.

So, how many languages should one child attempt to learn at once? That depends on the situation. If your family is bilingual or trilingual, you have a clear opportunity to help your child learn those languages in meaningful ways over a long sequence of time. If your family is monolingual, then it would make sense to venture into one new language at a time. Language learning is very rewarding, but it takes effort!

My Child Has Been Taking a Language in School for X Years and Now He/She Wants to Switch to Another Language. Is That Good?

Absolutely! If your child has a serious interest in learning another language, let him or her do it. Motivation is the most

powerful driving force behind successful second language learning.

Rest assured that the language-learning skills your child has acquired thus far in the language he or she learned in school will be transferred to the new language learning situation. If the languages are in the same language “family” (e.g. French and Spanish), your child will recognize linguistic similarities between the two languages and be able to advance quite fast in the new language. If the languages do not belong to the same language family, the thinking skills acquired through the “problem-solving” activities required to learn the current language will still be a valuable asset for the learner, and help him/her progress toward developing proficiency in the new language.

Whether your child undertakes the study of a “familiar” language or a “brand-new” language, s/he will develop better thinking and problem-solving skills as a result!

My Child Has Been Taking a Language for X Years and Now He/She Wants to Add Another Language. Is That Good?

That is fabulous! As mentioned above, language learning skills are transferable, and so are linguistic abilities if the languages are in close linguistic proximity. Not surprisingly, a child that has learned one language has an easier time at learning others. Applaud your child’s interest and pat yourself in the back: your parental support is taking roots, and your child is sure to blossom in time!

NNELL can assist teachers, parents and administrators with learning and advocacy efforts. Contact your State Representative today. We would love to hear from you!

This issue of Home/School Connection was written by Ana Lomba. It is full of tips and resources that can be found at www.nnell.org. Teachers may reproduce it and send it home in their students’ backpacks. Send suggestions/comments to Tammy Dann, NNELL’s Early Language Advocate: trdann@q.com