

Questions and Answers on Pre-school Second Language Learning

Children growing up in multicultural societies in the world naturally develop communicative ability and cultural awareness beyond the home environment. More and more parents in the US understand the value of knowing other languages and of the cultural awareness developed with that (see: <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0313park.html>) and they want their children to learn to communicate in a second or third language before they enter school. These insights apply also when English is not the home language (see: <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/nrcrds04.html> and <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/nissan01.html> also: <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/earlychild.html>).

This page condenses research and experience into introductory suggestions. Much additional information is available from Nanduti (see: <http://www.cal.org/earlylang/>), the National Network for Early Language Learning (see NNELL <http://nnell.org/aboutnnell.htm>), and the language-specific foreign language teacher associations (see: <http://nnell.org/nnellresources.htm>).

What can I do to help my child grow up with two or more languages?

The answer has two parts,

1. to build the language experience along the lines of the communication that naturally accompanies a child's activities and
2. to facilitate use of the additional language when the child interacts with a particular person or two.

This means that in an English dominant household, the foreign grandparent or care giver is the ideal teacher without even formalizing the experience beyond normal childhood stories, songs and games. In an immigrant or heritage language household, a friendly neighbor or visitor along with English dominant play mates would fulfill this role for English. When none of these opportunities exist, parallel situations can be designed. By strictly limiting one language to interaction with one person, particularly with very young children, confusion is avoided. Research has found that a child's "language mixing" happens essentially to the extent that it is modeled.

When each parent speaks a different language with the child, much language is learned initially. In the long run, though, this approach seems to develop mostly receptive skills because it soon becomes difficult to pretend that the parent knows no other language and the child falls into a pattern preferring to speak the more dominant of the two languages.

What should I expect if my child grows up with two languages?

A child who grows up with two or more languages that are maintained and developed later in life, gains many educational benefits (see: <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0007bredekamp.html>). At a minimum--even if the other language remains undeveloped--such a child becomes a very deliberate user of the dominant language. This happens because of brain development (see:

<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0012brain.html>). Research has now documented in detail that such a child greatly differentiates the parts of the brain where language functions are processed. Along with vocabulary a subconscious “grammar” of these functions is produced and constantly strengthened through practice. Once developed the ease of learning other languages remains for life. The predisposition to differentiate this part of the brain, however, disappears rapidly after age 9.

How can I organize a foreign language play group for pre-school children?

A small play group needs to be organized around age-appropriate activities. Several opportunities exist.

1. If young children who are fluent speakers of the targeted language are available, these children, with a mother or a language competent helper can create an excellent teaching situation by gradually drawing the learner(s) into their own play;
2. Teaching of a monolingual group requires more planning. Age-appropriate, culturally authentic songs, games, toys and crafts need to be very deliberately sequenced because the goal must be to communicate always and entirely in the target language. To teach the language patterns used for group instructions in a planned sequence can be a challenging part of planning.
3. In all cases, repetition is of the essence. If the planned activities are made to be fun and are varied over time, children will be delighted to repeat them again and again, thereby internalizing the texts and melodies and reacting naturally to the accompanying instructions. Variation results from the weather, the seasons, and repetitive celebrations. They will also delight in performing what they know for visitors or newcomers.

Such sequential learning is also a good gauge for parents who want to judge the quality of such a play group. A fairly simple pattern for a productive challenge is expansion over time of the annual cycle of seasonal. In mixed-ability groups for example, children—such as multi-year participants—who have command of the basics will happily participate with newer classmates in the basic learning if they can have a little role in teaching and a few minutes of instruction when phrases and vocabulary are expanded.

How can my child continue learning in two languages after starting school?

School leaders may need to be convinced that continuing the language is an educational benefit. For materials on justifying and organizing grade school foreign language instruction, see: <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0007bredekamp.html>. For planning of incorporated sequences, see:

http://isbe.net/ils/foreignlanguage/fl_resources.htm

There too parents may need to check that the learning is sequential and not merely repetitive.

<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/rosenb01.html> and
<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0211gilzow.html> and
<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0011planning.html>

In addition to the resources above, the large number of references on dual language, or two-way instruction, though usually designed for Spanish, can guide planning for all teaching of additional languages see: <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/>.