

There are many scholars that are in support of the argument that children should be introduced to foreign languages early enough in life as opposed to later when they are much older. The learning of a foreign language by children positively impacts them in a variety of ways such as helping in the improvement of a child's linguistic skills as well as aspects of thought and perception.¹

Vygotsky describes language as

“...the most powerful tool in the development of any human being. It is undeniably the greatest asset we possess. A good grasp of language is synonymous with a sound ability to think. In other words language and thought are inseparable.”²

This basically means that language plays a vital role with regards to a child's identity formation process as well as helping acquaint them to their rightful place in society. It is, therefore, clear that language not only contributes towards a child's cognitive development but also their social development as well.

Children learn and acquire their language skills through their various interactions with both adults and their fellow children.³ This article looks into the benefits derived from learning a foreign language early in life. Specifically, it deals with the acquisition of foreign language by children during their pre-school education.

¹ Commission of the European Communities, (2003). Promoting Language learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006. Available at: www.eu.int/comm/education/doc/official/keydoc/actlang/act_lang_en.pdf

² Vygotsky, L., (1986). Thought and Language. Cambridge, MIT Press, MA, USA.

³ Bloom, B.S. (1964). Stability and Change in Human Characteristics. New York: Wiley.

Numerous discussions and debates have been held with regards to the importance of learning language early enough in life. According to studies conducted by Loup, it was stated that due to their ability to depend on intuition, children are able to learn language faster, especially during their early years, as opposed to adults.⁴

Benefits of learning a foreign language early in life are numerous. First and foremost, studies suggest that learning a second language helps to improve the performance in other subjects as well. As a matter of fact, Curtin and Dahlberg's studies stated that, when children learn a second language, it has a way of helping them improve on their English structure and language.⁵ There have been several observations of children who have taken up foreign languages performing better than those taking only one language.⁶

A second advantage of studying foreign languages during a child's early years is that it reduces the differences in academic success between students.⁷ This academic success is regardless of the children's race, gender or academic level.⁸

Thirdly, enabling children to study a foreign language during their early years is an added advantage to the child's basic skills development. Children who learn foreign languages tend to have greater listening skills compared to other students. This also tends to sharpen their

⁴ Loup, G., (2005). Age in second language development. In: E. Hinkel (ed) Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 419-435.

⁵ Curtin, H. & Dahlberg A. C. (2004). Languages and Children: Making the Match: New Languages for Young Learners, Grades K-8. Third Edition. New York: Longman.

⁶ Dumas, L.S. (1999). "Learning a Second Language: Exposing Your Child to a new World of Words Boosts Her Brainpower, Vocabulary and Self-Esteem." Child, February 72, 74: 76-77.

⁷ Supra note 5 above

⁸ Supra note 6 above

memories, thereby making them more attune than their counterparts who acquired only one language.⁹

Learning a second language helps in the promotion of cultural awareness and competency in children. This goes a long way in helping children understand each other and accept other people as they are, regardless of their race, gender or background.

Additionally, students who acquire foreign languages tend to have improved chances of being accepted into college compared to their fellow counterparts who learned only one language. This also applies in their quest for a job as well. The acquisition of foreign languages enhances career prospects for children in their later years, exacerbated by the globalization of our world societal, geopolitical, and business relationships.

It is therefore clear that students who learn a second or multiple foreign languages tend to have an added advantage over the rest of students due to the advantages that come with the acquisition of a foreign language.

⁹ Lapkin, S., Merrill S. and Stanley M. S., (1990). "French Immersion Agenda for the 90s." Canadian Modern Language Review, 46: 638-674.

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