

Essential Information for Education Policy

Foreign Language Instruction Increasing the Learning Base

From preschool parents to Pentagon chiefs, people are calling for more foreign language instruction.¹ Factors driving the demand include China's economic growth, which has prompted the College Board to add Chinese to its list of Advanced Placement tests.

The implication of the research is not so much that one should start language teaching early — say, age 6 — and expect spectacular results, but rather that the

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First, recognize that simply starting early does not guarantee that a language will be learned.

Second, support age-appropriate foreign language teaching — a total immersion program for young children, moving toward a more explicit focus on structure for adolescents and adults.

Third, be realistic with students and parents about how much foreign language skill a few hours a week of instruction can generate, especially for preschool and elementary school learners. Such limited instruction will not lead to mastery, but it may build motivation and a “taste” for language learning.

Fourth, recognize that for almost everyone, high proficiency in a foreign language will develop outside the classroom, through conversations with native speakers made possible by the skills acquired in the classroom.

1) Spear, P. (2005). “Tots Take on Foreign Words,” *Chicago Tribune* (July 6). Jan, T. (2005). “Along with ABCs, Some Learn Chinese,” *Boston Globe* (June 8). U.S. Department of Defense (2005). *Defense Language Transformation Roadmap* (January).

2) Johnson, J.S., Newport, E.L. (1989). “Critical Period Effects in Second Language Learning: The Influence of Maturational State on the Acquisition of English as a Second Language,” *Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 21, pp. 60–99.

3) DeKeyser, R.M., Larson-Hall, J. (2005). “What Does the Critical Period Really Mean?” In J.F. Kroll and A.M.B. de Groot (Eds.) *Handbook of Bilingualism: Psycholinguistic Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 89–108.

4) Muñoz, C. (2003). “Variation in Oral Skills Development and Age of Onset.” In M.P. García Mayo and M.L. García Lecumberri (Eds.) *Age and the Acquisition of English as a Foreign Language*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Mat-