

According to Sandra Savignon of the University of Illinois, “Learning to speak another's language means taking one's place in the human community. It means reaching out to others across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Language is far more than a system to be explained. It is our most important link to the world around us. Language is culture in motion. It is people interacting with people (Curtain and Dahlberg 429).” If language learning is as important as Savignon claims, it would seem clear that a second language curriculum should be implemented as early as elementary school. However, this is most often not the case. Based on the most recent survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2008, only 15% of U.S. public elementary schools offer foreign language instruction (Rhodes and Pufahl 2). Even more surprising is that of the elementary schools that did have foreign language instruction, over 31% reported that the foreign language teachers were not even certified (4).

It is important that more elementary schools start offering foreign language instruction. Research has found that children have the highest ability to learn a new language before the age of six. After that point, their ability begins to decline (Curtain and Dahlberg 426). Students who begin learning a second language at an earlier age are more likely to develop native-like pronunciation and intonation (Abbott). Knowing this, it seems negligent on the part of the public school system to not begin foreign language instruction until the middle school or high school level. By that age, the growth of the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition slows down, and language learning becomes more difficult (Robin).

Not only is elementary school the most critical time for students to learn a language, but research has also shown that studying a second language helps students in other academic areas. According to research by the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages, second language study reinforces subjects such as reading, literacy, social studies, and math (“The Benefits of Second Language Study” 2). Even though it may seem contradictory, studying a second language can actually boost a student’s English language skills. A 1979 study found that students who had studied a second language in elementary school scored higher on English reading and language art tests than their peers who did not (3). This data is consistent with the idea that studying a second language “enhances children’s understanding of how language itself works and their ability to manipulate language in the service of thinking and problem solving (4).”

While it is clear that the research and data shows there are significant academic and cognitive benefits to teaching elementary students a second language, there are many personal benefits as well. In an increasingly multicultural world, second language acquisition will be an invaluable resource for young students. Not only will it make them more marketable in their future careers, but they will have greater insight into other cultures, other people, and their own global responsibility. Students must learn that they are a part of a world that is wonderfully vast and diverse.

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