



# Spanish Schoolhouse

## *FAQ on Foreign Language Learning*

### ***What are the benefits of learning a foreign language?***

#### Physical Differences

- Scientific studies provide evidence that brain matter in bilingual people is actually **denser** than that of monolingual people. In one particular study, there was a significant difference in the brain's left side-- the area of the brain that controls language and communication skills.
- Furthermore, the right hemisphere also showed an **increase in brain matter**. The study shows the effect of bilingualism on brain matter was strongest in those who had learned a second language before the age of five (Mechelli, 2004).

#### Cognitive Effects

- In addition to the physical effects on the brain, there are many cognitive benefits of learning a foreign language. Numerous studies have shown that children who study a foreign language tend to demonstrate greater **cognitive development, creativity, and divergent thinking** than monolingual children.
- Also, when children have adequate exposure to two languages at a young age, they are more **flexible and creative** (Bamford and Mizokawa, 1991), and they reach higher levels of cognitive development at an earlier age than their monolingual peers (Hamayan, 1986).
- Other studies show that people who are competent in more than one language outscore monolinguals on **tests of verbal and nonverbal intelligence** (Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker, 1974; Hakuta, 1986; Weatherford, 1986).

It's clear that learning a second language can only be an asset, especially in today's increasingly global community!

### ***Why learn a foreign language in the preschool years?***

Studies throughout the years have shown that there are many positive aspects of learning a foreign language as early as infancy.

- Emotionally, children are usually less inhibited than adolescents or adults. This lowers what language acquisition experts call the “affective filter” (Krashen, 1985), making them more likely to try out and use a foreign language.
- In addition, neurological studies have shown that the neurons of a newborn’s mind are “unprogrammed” and full of potential, providing an ideal opportunity for second language learning (Begley, S.)
- There have been numerous studies supporting what is called the “critical period”, a “biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire” (Brown). Most experts agree that this important period ends between the ages of ten and twelve, reinforcing the importance of learning a second language at a young age.
- Furthermore, “Most adults never master a foreign language, especially the phonology, giving rise to what we call a ‘foreign accent’. Their development often fossilizes into permanent error patterns that no teaching or correction can undo” (Pinker). Hence, so many adolescents and adults find it so difficult to become fluent in a foreign language!

### ***When can I expect my child to start using the new language?***

All children are different, as witnessed by variation in acquisition of a child’s first language.

- Most children will go through a “silent period”, when “the child is building up competence in the second language via listening, by understanding the language around him” (Krashen, 1982).
- A child’s personality also has a lot to do with when he/she will begin to speak in the new language.
- The key is to provide your child with opportunities to use the new language, other than just “performing” for others.

### ***Will my child be confused?***

“Children are incredibly sensitive to the different ways people speak.

- Even when they only hear one language, they learn very quickly about differences between the way men and women talk, the difference between polite and impolite ways of talking, and so on...” (Sorace and Ladd).

- This can also be applied to bilingualism. Ask any parent who is raising their child bilingually, and they will tell you that their children quickly figure out who speaks which language, and they use the appropriate language accordingly.

### ***How do I help my child learn a second language?***

“The most important things in language development are **exposure** and **need**.

- If children are **exposed** to a language (in a variety of circumstances with many different people) from the time they are born, and if they feel they **need** the language to interact with the world around them, they will learn it” (Sorace and Ladd).
- The Spanish Schoolhouse preschool program is an **immersion program**, fulfilling both aspects of exposure and need.
- In addition, at home you can provide music, videos, and books in the new language.
- Also, go to cultural events and places where the language is used. Make friends with native speakers!

Remember: **Exposure** and **Need**.

### ***Sources:***

Begley, S. 1996, February 19. “Your Child’s Brain”. Newsweek, 55-59.

Brown, H.D. 1987. Principles of Language Learning and Teaching. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Krashen, Stephen. 1982. Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Krashen, Stephen. 1985. The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications. London: Longman.

Mechelli, A. October 2004. Nature. Vol. 431, p. 751.

Pinker, Steven. 1994. The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.

Sorace, Antonella and Ladd, Bob. May 2004. Raising Bilingual Children. Linguistic Society of America.

## ***Further reading:***

### ***(Websites)***

[www.byu.edu/~bilinqua/](http://www.byu.edu/~bilinqua/) Bilingual Parenting in a foreign language—intended for parents who do not speak the language they are trying to teach their children

[www.nethelp.no/cindy/biling-fam.html](http://www.nethelp.no/cindy/biling-fam.html) Bilingual Families Web page—lots of great resources for parents who want their children to be bilingual

[www.earlychildhood.com](http://www.earlychildhood.com) early childhood information, including articles on second language acquisition

[www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org) Center for Applied Linguistics—very specific studies on all aspects of language acquisition

[www.newbeginnings.com](http://www.newbeginnings.com) foreign language materials for young children; articles on benefits of learning another language

### ***(Books)***

Baker, Colin. 1995. A Parent's and Teacher's Guide to Bilingualism. Multilingual Matters. *Question/answer format guide; great source of information*

Harding-Esch, Edith and Philip Riley. 2003. The Bilingual Family: A Handbook for Parents. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn. Cambridge University Press.

Spanish Schoolhouse is proud to support community family and children's organizations, such as:

Girl Scouts of Northeast Texas

Ronald McDonald House