

Spanish, Chinese, French

Programs for Teaching Young Children a Foreign Language

By Chrissa Harley Ventrelle

A dozen toddlers and their caregivers form a circle on the floor in ¡Viva el Español!'s colorful Lafayette classroom. Toddlers to middle school students meet at this little converted house for 50 minutes a few times each week to sing and converse entirely in Spanish. Though these kids have yet to know the world, research shows that they are ripe to learn a foreign language.

The payoff is evident at ¡Viva el Español! When teacher Melissa Rivera, who is originally from Puerto Rico, asks the children to name the color of a bucket she is holding, young Zachary quickly answers “amarillo,” or yellow, and his mother beams with pride.

¡Viva el Español! founder Margaret Grover-Roos says that two types of parents are interested in language programs like hers: parents who want their ethnic heritage passed down to their children and those who view fluency in multiple languages as an essential, lifelong skill. Parent Amy Williams says, “we wanted to give our daughters a skill that would take them into adulthood. Knowing a second language will enrich them for the rest of their lives.”

Language and Learning

The earlier a child is frequently introduced to a language, the more quickly she will learn it. “My daughters’ accents are really good already,” says Williams, who has two daughters



Ryn McWhirter, 10, proudly displays the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) sugar skull that she decorated. Día de los Muertos is a Mexican holiday that honors loved ones that are no longer with us. PHOTO COURTESY ¡VIVA EL ESPAÑOL!

attending ¡Viva el Español! classes. “It just seems effortless for them to learn because they are so young.”

Research suggests that there is a special “window of opportunity” for second language learning beginning at one age. Dr. Patricia Kuhl, a speech scientist at the University of Washington in Seattle, says people are born with the ability to form the sounds required by every language – think of all the varying noises in baby babble. That’s why young children are able to effortlessly sound like a native speaker.

By puberty, however, a child’s jaw and mouth structure

become less pliable, making it more difficult to pronounce unfamiliar sounds. As we mature, the unused synapses (connections) in our brains rapidly decline, leaving us less able to recognize phonetic distinctions. Age also inhibits learning, as we grow more self-conscious about mispronouncing words.

Some parents may be concerned that introducing a second language so early will impede a child's ability to learn his native language. According to the 2005 *Encyclopedia of Children's Health*, a young toddler who is acquiring two languages simultaneously may be somewhat slower in mastering each language than a monolingual child. But a 2002 Dartmouth College study is one of several recent studies to find little evidence of a long-term delay in primary language development in children learning a foreign language. Grover-Roos, whose three children are tri-lingual, says her experience does not support the idea of even short-term language delays. "I've never seen that with my own children or with students at ¡Viva el Español!" she says.

Additionally, in *Languages and Children: Making the Match*, authors Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg say that when children learn about the structure of other languages, it actually helps them to better understand their native language. And according to the College Board, results from the SAT show that students who studied a foreign language for four or more years outscored other students on the test.

Lay of the Foreign Language Land

The bulk of language immersion programs in the East Bay are located in Berkeley, Oakland and the Walnut Creek area. Most public schools are not equipped to incorporate foreign language learning into the daily fold. A smattering of schools in Oakland, Richmond and Pleasanton offer special language immersion classes, but the waiting lists are often long and enrollment limited by district boundaries. A few public schools, like Danville's Sycamore School, offer Spanish classes before or after school for an extra fee.

Foreign language courses for children fall into two main categories: full-day immersion schools or extracurricular programs. One example of a full-day language immersion school is Pacific Rim International School (PRINTS) with campuses in Emeryville and San Mateo. Owner Christina Cheung opened the Montessori school in 1989 to offer students dual immersion in Mandarin and Japanese. While most PRINTS students have at least one parent of Asian decent, Cheung says that about 20 percent come from families where the parents speak neither Mandarin nor Japanese.

Cheung, whose native tongue is Cantonese, says, "in the Montessori tradition, it is our responsibility to prepare children for the future." She founded PRINTS because she wants more schools to educate children for a global world where people speak multiple languages. With two-thirds of the population in Asia speaking Mandarin or Japanese, Cheung decided to teach both. A few students at PRINTS are also learning English as a second language.

To meet the demand for Spanish immersion, Escuela Bilingüe Internacional opens this month at the former site of

At-Home Language Learning

Here are some tips for boosting bilingualism outside of class time.

- If you speak a language other than English, use it with your children.
- Children love to be teachers. Encourage them to teach you a song or some words in the language they are studying.
- Attend cultural events that feature music, dance or food from various countries.
- Check out age-appropriate foreign language books and videos from the library.
- Consider being a host family for a foreign exchange student or hiring a babysitter who speaks a foreign language.
- When considering foreign language classes, look for programs that offer as much immersion as possible. Make a long-term commitment to attend frequently.

St. Augustine's Catholic School in Oakland. Principal Graciela Lopez calls the school "a dream come true due to the pioneering spirit of parents who want their children to learn a second language." The school will open with 90 students in Pre-K through first grade. Eventually it plans to offer grades Pre K-8. Younger students will be taught entirely in Spanish, but by third grade, half of the day will be taught in English and the other half in Spanish.

Teachers plan to initially rely on body language and visuals to help children understand. While every child progresses at a different rate, Lopez expects that students will be conversing in Spanish by the end of the school year. "Young children are like sponges," she says. "They will just listen for a while and soon they will speak Spanish naturally."

A handful of full-immersion preschools exist as well. Teachers at Kids Into Speaking Spanish Preschool in Walnut Creek all come from Spanish-speaking countries and speak to their students almost exclusively in Spanish as they engage in typical preschool activities like art, story time and recess.

Options and Costs

Many bilingual programs are available outside of school time. The key to success with these programs is frequent and consistent attendance. ¡Viva el Español!'s Grover-Roos designed her program to accommodate busy family schedules. Elementary and middle school students can attend class up to five times per week at a variety of times; they pay one monthly fee of \$149. She recommends that students attend a minimum of two days a week. Modeled after the martial arts system, students are grouped by skill level and promoted to the next level after demonstrating mastery.

Additionally, The East Bay German School in Oakland offers Saturday programs as do a variety of Hebrew, Chinese and Russian schools in the area (See Resources, p. 34).

Fees for full-immersion programs, part-time or full-time, can run into the thousands annually. Some programs, like

Escuela Bilingüe, offer scholarships so be certain to ask.

Future of Immersion

Cheung says that she anticipates greater demand for Mandarin classes as China's economy expands. For most Bay Area parents, however, Spanish is still the language of choice. As Williams says, "with our close proximity to so many Spanish-speaking countries, we want to give our children a language that they can use for the rest of their lives."

For Mary Cardoza, it has always been a priority for her 11-year-old twin daughters, Meghan and Kathryn, to speak Spanish. A Spanish-speaking nanny taught them the language



Nikki Roos, 8, Kathryn and Meghan Hill, 11, and Alex Grover, 12, in the recording studio singing various selections for the newly-released Viva el Español CD *Baile y Canto*.

PHOTO COURTESY ¡VIVA EL ESPAÑOL!

from their toddler years, but last year, Cardoza started them at ¡Viva el Español! to fine tune their skills. They attend about three times a week and recently read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in Spanish.

Whatever language parents choose, immersion programs help prepare children to be members of a global community. During a trip to Mexico last spring, Cardoza noticed a definite improvement in her daughters' fluency. "Unlike other trips, this time the girls initiated conversations," she explains. "They were translating in a way that showed me they understand the nuances of the language." ♦

Chrissa Harley Ventrelle is a freelance writer in Lafayette. She has two children, ages 2 and 8.

RESOURCES

Books

• *Languages and Children – Making the Match: New Languages for Young Learners, Grades K-8*, Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg, MyLabSchool Edition, 2004.

Organizations

Chinese:

• Association of Northern California Chinese Schools – www.anccs.org. P.O. Box 2428, Cupertino.

• Pacific Rim International School – www.pacificriminternationalschool.org; 510-601-1500. 5521 Doyle St., Emeryville.

French:

• Ecole Bilingue de Berkeley – www.ebfas.org; 510-549-3867. 1009 Heinz Ave., Berkeley.

French for Fun –

www.frenchforfun.com; 925-283-9822. 3470 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Suite A115, Lafayette.

• 1 Worldly Wise Language and Culture – www.1worldlc.org; 925-285-3000. Classes held in Piedmont and Lafayette. 125 Hardy Circle, Pleasant Hill.

German:

• Bay Area Kinderstube – www.kinderstube.org; 510-525-3105. 842 Key Route Blvd., Albany.

• German School of the East Bay – www.gseb-school.org. Altemheim/German-American Cultural Center, 1699 Excelsior Blvd., Oakland.

Japanese:

• Pacific Rim International School – www.pacificriminternationalschool.org; 510-601-1500. 5521 Doyle St., Emeryville.

Spanish:

• El Nuevo Mundo – 510-233-2329. 1707 Pennsylvania Ave., Richmond.

• Escuela Bilingüe Internacional – www.ebinternacional.org; 510-455-4347. 410 Alcatraz Ave., Oakland.

• Kids Into Speaking Spanish – www.kissprogram.com; 925-952-9903. 2780 Camino Diablo, Walnut Creek.

• La Casita Bilingue Montessori – www.la-casita.org; 510-724-1724. 592 Tennent Ave., Pinole.

• 1 Worldly Wise Language and Culture – www.1worldlc.org; 925-285-3000. Classes held in Piedmont and Lafayette. 125 Hardy Circle, Pleasant Hill.

• ¡Viva el Español! – www.lamorindaspanish.org; 925-962-9177. 3451 Golden Gate Way, Lafayette.



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