

learning languages

Why learn a second language?

It is widely accepted that children who have mastered a second or even third language will improve their career opportunities in later life and at the same time develop a deeper understanding of their own and other cultures. However, there is now evidence to support the theory that the benefits may be more far reaching. A study carried out by researchers from University College London (UCL) has shown that bilingual people have more advanced grey matter (the area of the brain used to process information) than those who have never studied a foreign language. Thus, it would seem that not only does language acquisition have obvious benefits but it may also make us smarter.

Why start young?

While the research carried out by UCL showed that second language learners had the edge on the monolingual among us it also indicated that children who had been exposed to a second language before the age of five had an advantage over those who had learned between 10 and 15 years old and as a result had further advance grey matter in their brains.

Not only were these younger learners more creative and better at solving complex problems but they also had the ability to achieve complete fluency in that language, a skill that becomes more elusive the older a language learner becomes.



WE WOULD ALL LOVE TO BE MULTILINGUAL BUT FEW OF US ARE PREPARED TO PUT IN THE TIME IT TAKES TO ACHIEVE IT. LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CAN BE A REWARDING EXPERIENCE AND FOR CHILDREN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION CAN BE DOUBLY BENEFICIAL.



A COMPUTER IS A GREAT ASSET IN LANGUAGE LEARNING ALLOWING CHILDREN TO PLAY AUDIO AND VIDEO FILES AND LISTEN TO THE LANGUAGE THEY ARE LEARNING SPOKEN BY NATIVE SPEAKERS

Overseas summer programmes and camps allowing for international exchange and total immersion, while mostly suitable for older children, can be valuable in presenting children with an opportunity to practice the language they are studying with native speakers and to expose them to the culture of that country. Younger children can experience total immersion at Hong Kong-based camps that are run on a daily basis.

ESF Educational Services offer total immersion camps in Canada and the United Kingdom for children aged nine to 16 and day-long Hong Kong-based English and sports camps. In addition, they have just introduced Hong Kong-based foreign language camps in Mandarin, Spanish, German and French for children aged five years and over.

The Hong Kong Institute of Languages also offer Hong Kong-based immersion language programmes for children from three-years-old and overseas summer immersion camps to China, France, Canada, England and Switzerland for children aged seven to 18. Director, Dominique Chasset, offers the following advice to parents when selecting an overseas summer camp for their children:

Be very careful about whom you choose as your camp organiser, make sure that they are recognised as professionals, have a long established successful track-record in providing such a service, and that they are able to provide answers to all of your questions/concerns.

If you feel uncertain about a camp provider, find out more about their history; ask other parents if they know of this particular summer camp provider or of any child having attended their summer camp before.

Check the programmes in detail; take time to think about it and to compare, not only prices but quality, facilities, services and benefits. Parents should also check the class sizes, staff: child ratio and the nationality ratio within the camp. You owe it to your child to exercise caution in your final choice!

The effect of a second language on a child's native tongue

Many parents are concerned that learning a second language can be a confusing experience for a child and that it might detract from their understanding of their own tongue. In most cases, learning a second language strengthens a child's overall comprehension of language. Language skills are transferable from one language to another.

However, experts stress that when children are learning two languages at the same time it is easier for them if the languages are kept separate. This could take the form of speaking one language at home and another at school or in the community or, in the case of parents who are not native speakers of the same language, each parent should speak to the child in their own language. So for example, a Chinese mother should ALWAYS speak to her child in her native Chinese and the French father should ALWAYS speak in French, his native language. This is very important as mixing languages can result in children learning a hybrid tongue, unable to attribute vocabulary and grammar to a specific language. Children will not get confused, but should become fluent in both languages, if the parents stick to the rule. An interesting point made by Dominique Chasset is that the child's strongest language will most usually be the medium in which he is taught at school, no matter what languages are spoken at home.

What parents can do to help

Young children are natural learners absorbing information from what they see, hear and experience. How you and other people react to your child affects their feelings of self-worth and as a result self-confidence. Confident children will make friends, cope with problems and become good learners, so it is important to be supportive.

Children need to develop communication skills for thinking and learning. Talking with children and encouraging them to take part in conversations is a great way to help develop these skills. Ask open-ended questions to encourage children to express themselves and remember to listen to what they say without interruption.

It is important to let your children have time to play, whether it is alone, with an adult or another child. Many parents are concerned that kindergartens and camps are not academic enough but play is an integral part of the development process. Play allows children to practise skills in their own time and develop ideas at their own pace.

Creating a bi or multilingual household

Many Hong Kong families already have a bilingual home, created by parents of different nationalities or by the language of the home differing from that of the community or their child's school. Even if parents do not speak the language their child is learning there is still a lot they can do to help the learning process. It is important for children to be engaged and stimulated for effective use of language acquisition through music, games and books explains Claire Glover from ESF Educational services. With this in mind, parents can create a bi-lingual or even multilingual household for their child by following a few simple steps:

- Use books and games in the second language to support learning.
- Play audio and video materials in the second language to familiarise the child with the rhythm and vocabulary.
- Attend cultural events relating to the second language; exposure to music, art and food will help to inspire interest.
- Find out about online resources. Many websites have articles, music and audio files that can be used as interactive learning materials.

Computer assisted language learning

A computer can be a valuable and versatile learning tool for a child giving them opportunities to solve problems, make decisions and practise skills learned in play. Used correctly a computer can afford parents an opportunity to take an active role in their child's learning and allow children to learn at their own pace.

A computer is a great asset in language learning allowing children to play audio and video files and listen to the language they are learning spoken by native speakers. Interactive CDs are a great way to engage young learners, allowing them to learn through play and to work at their own pace. However, it is essential to choose CDs that offer a structured approach to learning. A good CD-based learning programme should set specific tasks for students and have attainable goals.

The internet is a great source of information for young language learners. The HK Institute of Languages, the BBC, Berlitz, Alliance Francaise and the Goethe Institute all have

websites filled with information and ideas while ESF Educational Services has created an online learning programme designed for secondary-aged learners. This programme, called e-interactive, lets students take on the role of a reporter as they navigate through a virtual world looking for information to complete a series of assignments. Students work at their own pace and receive support from ESF Educational Services in the form of access to an online reference library and the option to attend tutorials.

It is important for parents to take an interest in their child's computer-based learning. Encourage your child to explain what they are doing and why. Look for ways to apply what they have learned on the computer in everyday life, create opportunities for children to make decisions and above all have fun.

useful websites

- www.edservices.org.hk
- www.yahooligans.com
- www.askforkids.com
- www.pathfinder.com/TFK
- www.storiesfromtheweb.org
- www.berlitz.com
- www.hklanguages.com
- www.cac.edu.hk
- www.bbc.co.uk/languages
- www.bbc.co.uk/learning
- www.alliancefr.org
- www.goethe.de
- www.spanish-chamber.com.hk
- www.kidsource.com
- www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/grownups/children_learn/language/foreignlanguage

Cultural Events

Exposure to music, art and food can help to inspire interest in the country your child is learning about. While overseas visits are a great way to gain exposure to the culture of a particular country they may be prohibitively expensive or inconvenient for some families. Attending cultural events in Hong Kong relating to the language your child is learning is a great way to have fun and also to involve the whole family in the learning process. **PI**