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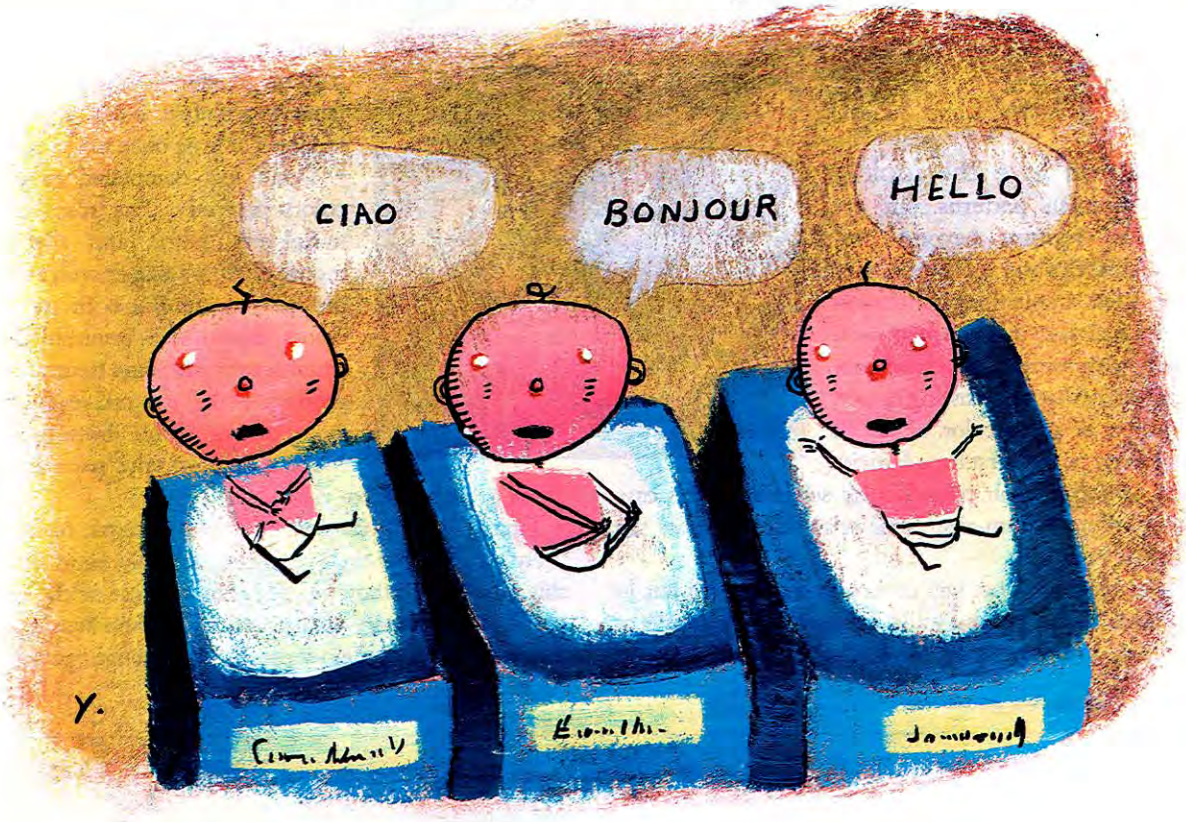
Learning a Language



by Jennifer Reid Holman

Four-year-old Alexandra Demers talks to her toy animals in Japanese. At snack time, she spontaneously shifts to French, *"Jus de pomme, s'il vous plaît"* ("apple juice, please"). Lindsay Swan at age 8 shows an ability to carry on a basic conversation in French without the slightest English accent. Both have been students since the age of 2 at the Language Workshop for Children in New York. They are part of a growing number of children—many barely out of their toddler years—enrolled in language schools and programs across the country.

"From the latest research, we now know that the better learner of a foreign language is one who starts early—at least before age 10."

Sound like parents pushing their kids toward overachievement? Not entirely, say educators and child development researchers. "In the past decade or so, we've learned a tremendous amount about the best way to teach foreign languages so kids develop a real proficiency for using them," says Christine Brown, director of foreign languages for the Glastonbury, Connecticut, public schools and chairperson of the National Standards Task Force on Foreign Language Education. "From both a practical teaching standpoint as well as the latest research, we now know that the better learner is one who starts early—at least before age 10."

Even public schools are embracing the trend toward earlier foreign language education. In the not-so-distant past, most offered foreign language as an elective, generally starting in junior or senior high school.

Thanks to the Goals 2000 education initiative and the input of thousands of teachers, Brown's task force recommended that all children have the opportunity to study foreign languages in elementary school, ideally starting in kindergarten or first grade. Heeding that call, 24 states report teaching foreign languages in public elementary schools with enrollment in these programs up 18 percent from 1990 to 1994, according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

"In terms of benefits, the research is pretty conclusive that students exposed to foreign languages in the elementary and preschool years have a much higher level of success in other studies," says Eileen Glisan, a Spanish and

continued on page 42

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Learning a Language

continued from page 40

foreign language education professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. "They develop greater problem-solving skills, perform better in their native language, and become more open to other cultures."

Brain waiting to be programmed

Some of this insight into the benefits of language training has come from brain and linguistics researchers who have recently identified a "window of opportunity" during which learning a language comes easiest.

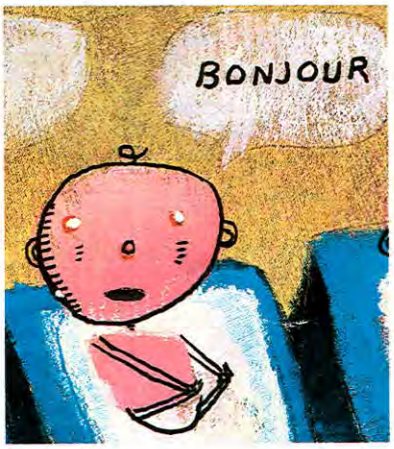
According to neurobiologists, a newborn's brain is like a new computer waiting to be programmed. Some of the brain's basic functions, such as breathing and heart beat, are fixed in place while baby is still in the womb. But trillions of other connections in the brain are just waiting to be made, or programmed in, during the first years of life. Some of these early connections govern such skills as the ability to see and distinguish faces and objects, to master basic motor skills, and to learn languages. These early childhood experiences also represent the skills most likely to stick with us for life. As a result, say some researchers, an immature brain may offer certain advantages for acquiring a second or third language.

"The power to learn language is so great in the young child that it doesn't seem to matter how many languages you throw their way. They can learn as many as you allow them to hear systematically and regularly at the same time," says Susan Curtiss, linguistics professor at the University of California, Los Angeles.

After a certain period, however, which most researchers say is about age 9 or 10, some basic connections can no longer be made in the brain. In essence, the window of opportunity to easily acquire multiple languages gradually shuts. In fact, children who have never learned even a first language by this age, due to hearing problems for instance, will generally never be able to speak their native language well.

"What seems to happen is that during the course of childhood the brain becomes slowly less plastic," says Curtiss. "And by the time the child reaches puberty, the brain has become significantly less plastic and is not able to restructure itself.

"Consequently," Curtiss says, "the mind as well as the brain in essence become rigid and cannot develop



"The power to learn language is so great in the young child that it doesn't seem to matter how many languages you throw their way."

richly and normally any real cognitive system, including language."

This doesn't mean you can't learn a second language as a teenager or adult. Motivation and necessity are also powerful learning forces, say educators. "But your likelihood of mastering a new language with as much ease at that point or of ever speaking it like a native are almost nil," says Francois Thibaut, director of the Language Workshop for Children in New York, who has taught foreign language to children and adults for 25 years.

That, in part, explains the recent rush of some parents to enroll infants as young as six months in foreign language workshops. Yet, the notion that an early start is the magic bullet to mastering a foreign language remains controversial.

Devote ample time to learning

"When we're talking about learning a language at a school as opposed to learning it in a multilingual home or play environment, the emphasis on starting very early is not as important as some might think," says Patsy Lightbown, professor of applied linguistics at Concordia University in Montreal. "Another important ingredient is devoting enough time to it. Twenty minutes, three times per week is not a very effective way to acquire a language, no matter when you start."

Public school teachers are also embracing this theory. Last year, Brown's national education task force developed standards that completely revamp the teaching of foreign languages. Instead of conjugating verbs and rotely memorizing vocabulary lists a few times per week, as students have done for years, the focus is now on immersing children in actually communicating with the language every day.

Students may listen to stories on tape, learn songs, or watch movies and newscasts in the language they are studying. Spanish students, for instance, may be guided through a science project or play a math game in that language. With a little experience, French students may be asked to use the Internet to correspond with students in France or to write and act out a play in French.

"The idea here is not just to teach them about the rules of the language but to get students actively involved in using it right from the beginning," says Brown. "Kids soak up language by osmosis, and it's a very effective approach—particularly when it's taught through a variety of activities. After all, that's the way we learn our own language."