

IS IT POSSIBLE TO LEARN FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT ANY AGES?
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Abstract: while our focus here has been on language development, it is also important to recognize that early childhood is also a time of profound emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development. Bilingualism will be a priority or even a necessity for some families. Other families might choose to focus on other aspects of development. In some cases, where families are not fluent in a second language, early bilingualism might be unrealistic. Here, it is important to keep two things in mind: 1) bilingualism is only one way to promote successful early development, and 2) second language learning is possible at any age. Language—any language—is a window to the world. It is better for parents to provide plenty of input and interaction in a language they are comfortable in, than to hold back because they are not fluent or comfortable in the language. When it comes to raising bilingual children, myths and misunderstandings are common, but facts are hard to come by.

Keywords: familiar, bilingualism, maturational, multicultural, immersion, second language.

МОЖНО ЛИ ИЗУЧАТЬ ИНОСТРАННЫЕ ЯЗЫКИ В ЛЮБОМ ВОЗРАСТЕ?
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Аннотация: в то время как наше внимание было сосредоточено на развитии языка, важно также признать, что раннее детство также является временем глубокого, эмоционального, социального, физического и когнитивного развития. Двуязычие будет приоритетом или даже необходимостью для некоторых семей. Другие семьи могут решить сосредоточиться на других аспектах развития. В некоторых случаях, когда семьи не владеют вторым языком, раннее двуязычие может быть нереальным. Здесь важно помнить о двух вещах: 1) двуязычие является лишь одним из способов содействия успешному раннему развитию и 2) изучение второго языка возможно в любом возрасте. Язык – любой язык – это окно в мир. Для родителей лучше обеспечить достаточный вклад и взаимодействие на языке, на котором им удобно, чем сдерживаться, потому что они не владеют и не чувствуют себя комфортно в языке. Когда дело доходит до воспитания двуязычных детей, мифы и недоразумения распространены, но факты трудно найти.

Ключевые слова: знакомый, билингвизм, созревание, мультикультурное, погружение, второй язык.

Many people are familiar with the concept of a “critical period” for language acquisition: the idea that humans are not capable of mastering a new language after reaching a certain age. Researchers disagree about whether a critical period exists at all, and they disagree about when this critical period may occur—proposals range from age 5 to 15 [1]. Disagreement aside, research on bilingualism and second language learning converges robustly on a simple take-home point: earlier is better. There may not be a sharp turn for the worse at any point in development, but there is an incremental decline in language learning abilities with age [2].

This point is best understood as an interaction between biological and environmental factors. Researchers have argued that biological change during the first two decades of life results in a reduced capacity for learning and retaining the subtleties of language [3]. In other words, our brains may be more receptive to language earlier in life. But importantly, our environment is also more conducive to language learning earlier in life. In many cultures and in many families, young children experience a very rich language environment during the first years of life. They hear language in attention-grabbing, digestible bundles that are targeted skillfully at their developmental level [4]. Caregivers typically speak in ways that are neither too simple nor too complex, and children receive hours and hours of practice with language every day. This high-quality and high-quantity experience with language—a special feature of how people communicate with young children—often results in

successful language learning. It gives children rich, diverse, and engaging opportunities to learn about the sounds, syllables, words, phrases, and sentences that comprise their native language. But beyond the first years of life, second language learning often happens very differently. Older children and adults do not usually have the same amount of time to devote to language learning, and they do not usually experience the advantage of fun, constant, one-on-one interaction with native speakers. Instead, they often find themselves in a classroom, where they get a small fraction of the language practice that infants and toddlers get [5]. In classrooms, words are defined for them and grammar is described to them. Defining and describing can be effective, but they are not as powerful as discovering language from the ground up.

Applied to bilingualism, these maturational and environmental differences between younger and older learners indicate that it is most advantageous to learn two languages early on in life. Bilinguals who learn two languages from birth are referred to as simultaneous bilinguals, and those who learn a first language followed by a second language—whether as toddlers or as adults—are referred to as sequential bilinguals. The evidence points to fairly robust advantages for simultaneous bilinguals relative to sequential bilinguals. They tend to have better accents, more diversified vocabulary, higher grammatical proficiency, and greater skill in real-time language processing. For example, children and adults who learn Spanish as a second language typically struggle to master Spanish grammatical gender (e.g., “is it or ?”), while people who learn Spanish and English from birth show reliable and impressive ease in using grammatical gender [6].

However, parents should not lose hope if they have not exposed their children to each language from birth. Infants’ brains and learning environments—special and

non-recreatable, but there are many other ways to foster bilingual development. Here we overview two possibilities. First, some parents (particularly those who can afford childcare) choose to hire bilingual nannies or send children to bilingual preschools, in order to maximize their children’s exposure to another language. This can certainly result in increased bilingual proficiency, but it is essential to provide continued opportunities to practice language once the child is older. Parental expectations should be quite low if children do not have opportunities to continue learning and using a language throughout development. However, keep in mind that bilingual exposure does not necessarily translate to being a bilingual who is able to understand and speak a language fluently. Researchers generally consider a child to be bilingual if he or she receives at least 10-25% of exposure to each language [7], but this level of exposure by no means guarantees functional bilingualism [8].

Second, there are language immersion programs in elementary schools in many of the world’s countries, including the U.S. and Canada. Their goal is to promote bilingualism, biliteracy, and multicultural proficiency among both language-majority and language-minority students. In the U.S., hundreds of immersion programs have been established in the last four decades in such languages as Spanish, French, Korean, Cantonese, Japanese, Mandarin, Navajo, and Hebrew. There are currently 434 or more immersion programs in 31 U.S. states. French immersion programs are available in all 10 Canadian provinces, with enrolment ranging from 2-32% of students depending on the province [9]. Immersion programs confer advantages over other formats of language instruction that are typical in high school and college classrooms. In immersion programs, the second language is not necessarily a topic of instruction, but a vehicle for instruction of other curriculum subjects. In terms of the quantity of language exposure, immersion classrooms do not rival infants’ language environments. However, they often foster functional bilingualism, and equip children with language skills that help them in later educational and professional contexts.

The take-home messages about bilingual language exposure are clear: more is better, and earlier is better. If you are 75 years old and you have always wanted to learn Japanese, start now. Language learning becomes more challenging with time, for both maturational and environmental reasons, but for those who are motivated [10], it is never too late to learn a new language.

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