



Lost in Translation

Speaking a foreign language will give your child an edge in the job market. But with few grade schools teaching one, how can you give her the early start she needs? *by* MARISA COHEN

I was half-listening as my daughters did their homework one day. Bellamy, 9, was making odd sounds—*shí yī, shí èr, shí sān*—and Molly, 7, was copying her. At first I thought they were goofing off, but then I realized: They were practicing their counting in Mandarin. I don't expect my girls to become fluent from the one 40-minute class per week their public school added last year, but I'm very grateful that they're being introduced to a language spoken by nearly a billion people—and hopeful that these early lessons will give them a leg up when they study it more extensively in middle school.

Kids who know a second language will go far in our increasingly global economy, even if they wind up staying close to home. In a recent *Parents* poll, 57 percent of readers thought that speaking a foreign language was the most critical skill for their child to develop for the future, more than double the number who said that learning a sport (23 percent) or playing an instrument (20 percent) were key.

When I was growing up, my friends and I assumed that wherever we traveled in the world, there would be someone who spoke English. "That haughty attitude may have been okay in the past, but it's naive today," says Martha Abbott, executive director of education for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, a nonprofit organization in Alexandria, Virginia. "In many cultures, business doesn't get done in the conference room—it happens at social events, and in these settings you can't always rely on an interpreter being there." In other words, if you want to be successful dealing with other cultures, you need to speak their language.

However, only 15 percent of public elementary schools teach a foreign language—a drop from 24 percent a decade ago, according to the Center for Applied Linguistics, a nonprofit bilingual language education group in Washington, D.C. Middle schools have seen a similar decline (58 percent now offer it, down from 75 percent), while nine out of ten high schools have maintained their program. The reasons behind this negative trend are depressingly familiar: Budgets are strapped, and federal funding for education is tied to test scores in math and reading, which has made foreign-language programs seem expendable.

Schools that do teach languages have shifted their focus. Mainstays such as French, German, and Latin are fading in popularity while Spanish has become the most popular, which makes sense because there are more than 35 million people who speak it here. Yet, Mandarin is booming: During the past decade, the number of public and private grade schools that teach it has expanded from 300 to around 1,600. Arabic is also on the rise, in part due to a federal push to prepare Americans to fill crucial national-security jobs.

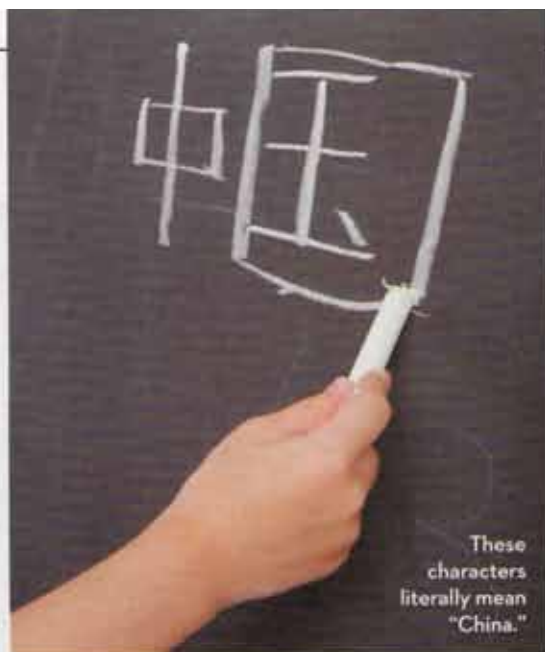
"Foreign-language patterns tend to change based on economic and strategic needs," says Abbott. For instance, Russian lessons spiked

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during the Cold War, while Japanese became popular in the 1980s as Japan became a global business leader. Now Mandarin is becoming the must-learn foreign language, a nod to the fact that experts predict China will become the world's number-one economy by the time our preschoolers finish college.

brain training

Although it's smart to plan for your child's future, there's an even better reason for having him study a second language now. A Canadian study published in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* found that 24-month-olds from families that spoke both French and English had developed superior "executive function" skills—an ability to maintain focus on one task when distracted by another. Another study conducted among third- through fifth-graders at Louisiana State University linked foreign-language study to higher scores on standardized tests, while research at the University of British Columbia has linked bilingualism to a boost in early-reading skills. "When a bilingual person speaks, she always makes a subconscious decision about which word or phrase to use in which language," says Barbara Zurer-Pearson, Ph.D., author of *Raising a Bilingual Child*. "This constant mental exercise helps keep the brain sharp."



These characters literally mean "China."

You probably know that learning a new language is easier for kids. But you might not be aware of *how* important it is to begin the process early. While experts have long theorized that the ability to hear and produce the sounds of a foreign tongue slows down around age 7, research by Patricia Kuhl, Ph.D., codirector of the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences, in Seattle, shows that the drop-off begins in infancy. She found that 8-month-old Japanese babies recognize the sounds *ra* and *la* (which are not used in Japanese), but that by 10 months, as their brain attunes to the words their parents speak, they start to lose the ability to distinguish the unfamiliar sounds.

No one is suggesting that it's impossible for a sixth-grader or even for a high-schooler to learn a second language from scratch. But it's a fact that preschoolers and grade-schoolers are more adept at absorbing the nuances of a language, such as sound and intonations. They also have two things going for them that many tweens and teens lack: enthusiasm for doing homework and time. By the upper grades, learning a language must compete for a child's attention with socializing, sports, extracurricular activities, and hours of homework in other subjects. Little kids, though, have fewer distractions. "It's amazing to see very young students studying

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Mandarin," says Olga Livanis, Ph.D., the principal of my daughters' school, New Explorations into Science, Technology, and Math, in New York City. "Their minds are completely open to it."

language lessons

If you speak only English, helping your child master a second language is a challenge. Reading *Bonsoir Lune* (*Goodnight Moon* in French), watching *Dora the Explorer*, and taking mommy-and-me Mandarin classes can introduce your child to foreign words, but she probably won't retain them unless she learns to actually converse in a foreign language.

The surest way to make that happen is to enroll your child in a partial-immersion school (where half of the instruction is in English and half in a second language) or a total-immersion school (in which the entire day is taught in the foreign tongue). There are more than 500 such public and private U.S. elementary programs, nearly double the number from 15 years ago.

One noteworthy example is the French-English program at P.S. 58, in Brooklyn, New York. Its kindergartners and first-graders each have one teacher who speaks French half the time and English for the remainder. In second grade, a student's day is divided between two classrooms—one where the teaching, books, and posters are all in French, and another where everything's in English. Since its launch four years ago, the pilot program's enrollment has grown from 24 kids to 250, and there's a long waiting list.

While this intensive approach to French is an exception to the Spanish and Mandarin trend, the cognitive advantage of early bilingualism remains strong. "The kids are asked to constantly think, read, and write in another language," points out

The Bilingual Home

If you speak a language other than English, your child will have a huge advantage. Follow these tips to help ensure that your mother tongue is passed on to the next generation.

★ **Start early.** Many bilingual parents are afraid that if they speak a different language to their baby, it will delay his English development. But there's no evidence that a child's speaking skills are delayed when he learns two languages at once, says Dr. Barbara Zurer-Pearson.

★ **Expose him to native speakers.** The more people who talk to your child in her second language, the better. Consider using a bilingual sitter. If Grandma lives far away, chat via Skype.

★ **Add reading to your routine.** Pick up copies of his favorite books in the native language to help cement the words and accents in his brain.

Marie Bouteillon, the founder of P.S. 58's dual-language program. "And the analytical skills they develop transfer well to other academic areas."

A full-immersion program is a bit like moving to another country. The kids have no choice but to speak the new language in order to communicate. Rather than memorizing vocabulary lists or conjugating verbs, the youngest students learn organically by playing games, listening to stories, and asking to go to *el baño* or *cé suo* (the bathroom).

"In the younger grades, kids often respond in English," says Maria Abad, principal of The International School, in Portland, Oregon, which has Japanese, Chinese, and Spanish immersion programs for kids ages 3 through 11. "But by the second grade, they're fully conversant in the second language." Even in these tight times, the private school—with an annual tuition of around \$13,000—saw a 13 percent increase in enrollment last year. (To search for immersion

programs, call your local school district or check out www.ca.org/resources/immersion, the website for the Center for Applied Linguistics, which lists public, private, and charter schools.)

If there are no public programs offered in your area and private school isn't an option, there are still steps you can take to give your child a head start on becoming bilingual. If your elementary school doesn't have a language program, lobby your principal to begin one, even if it necessitates hiring a part-time teacher. "I've seen a number of parent groups make it happen," says Abbott.

You can also look for a Spanish or Mandarin playgroup for your preschooler or an after-school class for your older child. "These activities will train your child's ears for proper pronunciation, which gets tougher with age," says Dr. Zurer-Pearson. And they're a good way to meet other families who share a similar interest in the language and culture he's studying.

Most experts say you shouldn't waste your time (and money) on foreign-language DVDs for babies or toddlers. Dr. Kuhl's research showed that 9- and 10-month-olds picked up new phonemes and words from listening to people speak to them live but didn't retain ones they heard from televised or audio-recorded voices.

Of course, if you truly want to encourage your child to become bilingual, the best approach is to study it at the same time he does. Singing songs, having simple conversations, and reading books together in the language will not only reinforce his lessons at school but also give you a great way to bond. Sure, it may be more difficult to figure out how to pronounce *ni hao* or *el perro* in your 20s or 30s. But if you ask nicely, your 5-year-old will be more than happy to help you out. ☺