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Why Students Should Begin Foreign Language Class Earlier

Oftentimes, high school students will look at their requirements to graduate and see that they need to take a foreign language class. They take the classes needed, and soon after forget most of what they learned. This seems like it is just a waste of time for students, but that class was there for a reason. These students are missing out on the many benefits of knowing a foreign language. But how can we change that? One solution is to start earlier. Although some people wouldn't think that an additional language in elementary school would be as much of a priority as other classes, starting to learn an additional language in elementary school can increase proficiency and provide earlier access to additional cognitive and occupational benefits that learning an additional language provides.

One benefit of starting to learn a language early is that there is a higher chance of proficiency. First of all, it is much easier to learn a foreign language at a younger age, as children have higher neuroplasticity, which makes it easier to learn new things in general, "They [also] learn implicitly, through interaction, songs and play, listening and imitating sounds like with their native language" (Curran and Baidak). This lets children really internalize the language to speak more like a native speaker. While it is possible to still learn a new language at an older age, it is much harder to become adept with the

language and “is nearly impossible for people to achieve proficiency similar to that of a native speaker unless they start learning a language by the age of 10” (Trafton). If students want to be able to speak a foreign language well, while learning quickly, learning languages in elementary school needs to be a priority to achieve the greatest proficiency.

As well as increasing proficiency, learning a language earlier can bring many benefits to the brain function of younger students. Learning a new language has many cognitive benefits to students. It “enhances listening skills and memory, increases analytical abilities, and builds aptitude in problem solving and working with abstract concepts” and increases “abilities in math and English ..., and creativity” (Ithaca College). Why would we deny these benefits to these younger students? Wouldn't we want our students to be the best learners they can be? And learning a second language not only benefits the learners now, but they will still be reaping the benefits much later in life. Scientists led by the neuropsychologist Tamar Gollan of the University of California found that “individuals with a higher degree of bilingualism ... were more resistant than others to the onset of dementia and other symptoms of Alzheimer's disease”(Bhattacharjee). By starting earlier this will increase the brain health of our future generations.

In addition to giving cognitive benefits, learning a new language exposes children to other cultures. Learning foreign languages “provides opportunities to learn about other cultures and communicate with people from different parts of the world.” This is extremely important in an ever globalizing world and an ever diversifying country (Robinson). If we want to understand the perspective of others, we need to know where

they are coming from, and learning the language of others can help provide these opportunities.

While this can be of great personal benefit to understand where others are coming from, learning a new language can also provide new job opportunities. Knowing a foreign language allows for communication with people around the world and provides the ability to, “compete in their language and offer your product”, giving you “an edge in a very competitive job market” (Robinson). However there is the argument that there are many “employment benefits of knowing multiple languages, but most high school students will never reach the level required to use their foreign language in a professional setting” (Nazareth). This would lead some to the conclusion that we should just remove foreign languages from our curriculums, but there are far too many benefits to altogether remove these subjects. Instead of getting rid of a core part of education, we can make sure that students are able to fully learn the language by improving the effectiveness and efficiency of learning by starting earlier.

For students to actually learn and benefit the most they can, starting in elementary school is a must. The United States is increasingly becoming a monolingual country, and most people miss out on the many benefits that languages give. By changing our language teaching model, we can make sure we reap the benefits of learning a new language.

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