

Learning a Second Language: When & Why

Essentials on education data and research analysis from Edvantia

By:

District Administration

District Administration, Nov 2006

Can studying a second language in elementary school boost student achievement in other academic areas? Numerous studies suggest that this may be the case. Yet even though NCLB identifies foreign language as a core subject, only about a fourth of U.S. public elementary schools report teaching foreign languages, and most of these schools provide only introductory courses. Fewer than half of all U.S. high school students are studying a foreign language. Meanwhile, administration of a National Assessment for Educational Progress test for foreign language has been put on hold.

In short, "much of the decision-making regarding foreign language study is made at the local level," reports the National Association of State Boards of Education. As districts review their foreign language policies, they may wish to consider research indicating the multiple benefits of learning a second language-and starting in the early grades.

Benefits of an early start. In the U.S., most students who study a foreign language begin at age 14 or later. But linguistic studies show that children who begin learning a second language before adolescence exhibit more native-like pronunciation and are more likely to become fluent speakers.

On examining the research in 2005, education research analyst Janice Stewart found that foreign language study, "especially when introduced in the early elementary school years," is associated with three additional benefits of "increased cognitive skills, higher achievement in other academic areas, and higher standardized test scores." For example:

Cognitive gains. Wilburn Robinson (1992) reviewed 144 research studies conducted over three decades on the relationship between early second language learning and cognitive ability. He concluded that early experience with two language systems seems to leave children with "a mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, and a more diversified set of mental abilities."

Stay Informed American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages www.actfl.org National Security Language Initiative www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2006/01/01052006.html Teacher-to-Teacher Initiative www.ed.gov/teachers/how/tools/initiative/factsheet.html

Achievement in other academic areas. A study by Armstrong and Rogers (1997) examined the relationship between foreign language education and the basic skills of elementary school students. A group of third-grade students given three 30-minute Spanish language lessons per week performed as well as or better than a control group (given no second-language instruction)

on academic achievement tests and "showed statistically significant gains in their Metropolitan Achievement Test scores in the areas of math and language after only one semester of study."

Higher standardized test scores. When Thomas Cooper examined data from 23 high schools in the Southeast in 1987, he found that students who took a foreign language in high school scored significantly higher on the verbal scale of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who studied a foreign language performed "basically just as well as their more fortunate peers."

Closing arguments. Additional reasons for foreign language study include global economic competition and national security. "While only 44 percent of our high school students are studying any foreign language, learning a second or even a third foreign language is compulsory for students in the European Union, China, Thailand, and many other countries," Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings remarked in January 2006.

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that most U.S. high school students enrolled in a foreign language are studying Spanish (69 percent) or French (18 percent). Less than 1 percent is studying Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean-languages the U.S. government classifies as critical to national security.



www.edvantia.org, 800-624-9120