

Language Learning Starts Early: Making the Most of the Opportunities

By Leanne Leak

I wanted to get to know Irlene. She didn't speak English, and although my Spanish left much to be desired, it was the only way we were going to have a conversation. For five months, I lived in a community that had a mix of English and Spanish speakers. Since I could understand more Spanish than I could express, and because there were plenty of English speakers around, I had little need and even less motivation to improve my Spanish. But I wanted to get to know Irlene. She was part of our small community, and friendship was a powerful motivator to help me overcome my fear of looking foolish as I struggled with an unfamiliar language.



Designed for Language

There are a few advantages to being three years old. One is that you are rarely troubled with feelings of self-consciousness when trying to learn a second language. Another is that you have a God-designed capacity for

language learning—a capacity that diminishes as you become an adult. Although a baby has the ability to distinguish between all the sounds that make up the world's languages, at an early age the infant becomes attuned to those sounds unique to the language that surrounds him (Cowley 1997). Consequently, those who learn a new language when they are young are likely to sound like native speakers.

Beyond the simple gift of possessing a second language, secondary benefits accrue to children. Exposing children to the sounds of a new language leads to greater phonological awareness, which is an important component of literacy. Bilingual children were found to have greater print awareness than children who spoke only one language (Bialystok 1997). Clearly, early childhood is a strategic time to be exposed to a second language. In addition, speaking more than one language is a valuable skill in a global economy, so helping children learn a second language is a reasonable way to prepare them for the future.



Second Language Learning in the Preschool Setting

Many early education programs offer enrichment activities exposing children to a second language. A more intensive approach to second-language development is

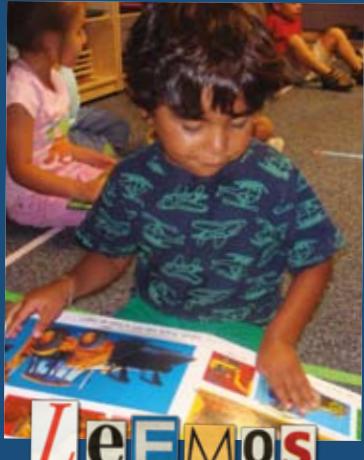
found in bilingual and immersion programs. First Discoveries Christian Preschool in San Jose, California, provides a bilingual (English and Spanish) program in the morning, followed by a Spanish-immersion program in the afternoon. In the morning program, English is used when the teacher is presenting an activity, and both English and Spanish are used conversationally. During the afternoon immersion program, all the activities are presented in Spanish.

The children are encouraged

to use Spanish, with teachers offering gentle prompts and supplying words as needed. The blend of bilingual in the morning and immersion in the afternoon reflects a desire to offer children the best of both approaches.

First Discoveries was founded in 2007 by Terry Beckett and Rose Gemmell, who is Terry's mother. Spanish-language learning is just one facet of First Discoveries' program, in which learning occurs in a beautiful environment permeated with a strong Christian emphasis. Some children enter the program speaking only English or only Spanish, but they pick up the new language quickly because so many words and phrases are repeated in the course of a day.

Terry Beckett explains to the parents that the children won't become fluent in Spanish but will become comfortable with a second language. The teachers in the program are nurturing and sensitive to children's emotional well-being. As children transition into the program, Terry assures, "if they don't understand something, then we'll say it in English. Or if it's something new, then we'll say it in both English and Spanish, so they still feel comfortable. When they talk to us, they know we understand everything they're saying, so they don't feel like they're helpless."



The Value of a Multilingual Education

In addition to giving children the developmental benefits that come from being exposed to more than one language, Terry wants to teach them that "the world has many different kinds of people, many different languages, but you can always praise and glorify God, and it's all the same. God can understand your praise in whatever language it is. We pray in English and Spanish. We praise in English and Spanish. And the children know [that] God knows what they're saying." Terry is pleased that First Discoveries' program also teaches children acceptance of cultural diversity and awareness of how customs vary around the world. For example, Terry and Rose, who are from Guatemala, use a different word for glue than the teachers who come from Mexico do. Terry notes, "The children learn that even amongst us teachers, we have different ways to say things, but in the end it's all glue."

Learning a second language is a worthwhile investment. Even small attempts can yield precious results. I remember the satisfaction of taking a long walk with Irlene toward the end of our time together. It was just us two, with no other friends along to translate. I don't remember what we talked about, and it probably wasn't much, but despite my language limitations, my life was enriched by our interaction. Worlds and friendships open up through language. We might even discover there are many ways to say *glue*. ☺

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