

Kid Talk

Genevieve Laprade

From the day we begin school, common subjects such as Math, English, Science, and History are pounded into our brains. If we can understand these topics from a young age, why can't foreign languages be presented at the same time? Picture a generation that has the ability to communicate with at least a million additional people because they can speak more than just their native tongue. The power to speak another language goes hand in hand with the power to change the world.

It is a common misconception that foreign language education is not important for the average American student's life. Some Americans do not support this subject because English is spoken internationally and because they think that foreign languages do not benefit every student academically (McMahon and Wright). On the contrary, Rhode Island school systems should begin teaching foreign languages in their elementary schools because it provides long term benefits for the students. The younger that a person is, the easier it is for them to become fluent in a second language, as demonstrated by the number of multilingual citizens in Europe.

Children benefit from fluency in a second language. As a student, it can improve their intellectual flexibility and learning ability. These traits are what makes great writers great. For example: Alexander Hamilton, one of the most influential writers in American history, was fluent in French (Rosenberg). This skill most likely provided a base for his remarkable linguistic abilities that helped lay the foundations of America. A bilingual person can become familiar with new cultures through learning a new language (Benefits of Being). Since immigration rates in the United States are increasing, this could be one of a student's greatest assets. Communication in a

common tongue with these new settlers will ease prejudicial tensions, making life easier for both parties. A knowledge of other cultures is more crucial than ever as globalization occurs. A person who can communicate with people of other countries is valuable. There is also a social aspect in this skill. Foreign travel becomes easier if a tourist is familiar with the common language in an area. Languages can also expand a student's career options in the future. According to the Harding University Careers page, knowing a foreign language opens up more job opportunities than only being fluent in the language one grew up speaking. These can include, but are not limited to, business careers, government positions, and overseas medical functions (Careers). The Department of Labor predicts that, "[r]oughly 25,000 jobs are expected to open up for interpreters ... and translators ... between 2010 and 2020" (Kurtz). This demonstrates that bilingual children will have more flexibility in their future careers because they are less likely to encounter language barriers that prevent proper communication. As these children grow older, their improved thinking and communication skills will aid them and allow them to make numerous contributions to society.

The earlier a child is taught a language, the easier it is for them to become proficient in that language. Early research shows that there are two brain areas used for language learning. In younger children, or "early bilinguals" both brain areas are used together to learn a foreign language. In "later bilinguals", or older teens and adults, the areas of the brain are used separately. This connection in younger children's brains gives them the ability to comprehend new language concepts (Phillips) such as grammar rules or sentence structure. A more recent study proves that as humans get older, it becomes harder to learn new concepts. It is easier and faster to learn a new language as a child than it is as an adult. Adults are also more likely to make simple grammatical errors in their new language (Schmid). When a child begins a language at

age seven or earlier, the pronunciations of the language sound more authentic and less forced (How Children Learn). Although it is known that elementary age children are better at learning new languages than adults, they do not receive any language education until several years later when their learning capacity has diminished. Children are at the prime age for this subject at the first grade level. They would also have additional years in school to learn a language if they began during this early age period. Starting language education in elementary school is more sensible overall than starting it in high school as Rhode Island does.

In all European countries, with the exception of Scotland and Ireland, children are required to study at least one foreign language. They may begin their education as young as three years old (in Belgium) and as old as eleven years old (in the United Kingdom). However, most countries begin their foreign language education between the ages of six and nine (Delvin). As a result, 54% of Europeans are bilingual, 25% are trilingual, and 10% can speak four languages as of 2014. This is a total of 89% of European citizens who are at least proficient in a language other than the one they grew up speaking. The United Kingdom does not begin language education until age eleven and, consequently, only 40% of English and Irish people can speak a foreign language (Nardelli). The students do not have as much time to obtain the full breadth of their knowledge. Most Rhode Island school systems do not begin teaching a foreign language until middle or high school. This lack of proper teaching across the country results in only 25% of Americans being proficient in a language other than the one they grew up with. Not only is that less than half of Europe's count, but only 7% of these people learned their language through world language programs in their schools (Delvin). According to the Rhode Island Department of Education, foreign language is not a graduation requirement in Rhode Island (The Rhode Island). The lack of a graduation requirement removes some of the motivation to become

multilingual despite how beneficial the skill is. If Rhode Island education systems resembled those of Europe's, then it is likely that the state's bilingual rates will eventually increase.

Foreign languages will open up the door to many opportunities in life for anyone. My father's side of the family is French Canadian. Whenever we visit them, my relatives have conversations in French. It always sounded like gibberish to me because I only understood a few basic phrases in the language. But after I took French I during my freshman year of high school, the balderdash no longer sounded like balderdash. I was able to detect certain words and phrases that I learned in class and that helped me understand what my relatives were discussing. If this occurred after only one school year of basic education, imagine what life for children would be like if they spent a few more years learning a language; the possibilities are endless. Children have a simpler time comprehending new languages if they begin at the elementary school level. Rhode Island middle and high schools already teach foreign languages which signifies that a shift in the grade level at which the education begins is not too far out of reach. If we adopt this European-like way of introducing foreign languages to children, then the number of multilingual Americans is likely to increase.

Languages and fluency can shape the leaders of tomorrow's generation. Early foreign language education in elementary schools is an event that could be happening in Rhode Island right now. We have the power to change the world by integrating foreign languages into Rhode Island elementary school curricula and setting an example for the remainder of America.

Works Cited

- “Benefits of Being Bilingual.” *Ñandutí*. Ñandutí, 30 Jun. 2009. Web. 8 Nov. 2016.
- “Careers.” *Harding*. Harding, n.d. Web. 8 Nov. 2016.
- Delvin, Kat. “Learning a foreign language a ‘must’ in Europe, not so in America.” Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, 13 Jul. 2015. Web. 8 Nov. 2016.
- "How Children Learn a Second Language." *The New Nation* [Dhaka] 15 Mar. 2016: n. pag. Access World News [NewsBank]. Web. 8 Nov. 2016.
- Kurtz, Annalyn. “The hottest job skill is...” *CNN Money*. Cable News Network, 30 Oct. 2013. Web. 8 Nov. 2016.
- McMahon, Maureen, and George Wright. "Counterpoint: Foreign Language Education Is a Low Priority." *Points of View Reference Center*. EBSCO Industries, 1 Mar. 2016. Web. 12 Nov. 2016.
- Nardelli, Alberto. “Most Europeans can speak multiple languages. UK and Ireland not so much.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 26 Sept. 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2016.
- Phillips, Melissa Lee. "Neuroscience for Kids - Second Language." *University of Washington*. N.p., 19 Aug. 2002. Web. 08 Nov. 2016.
- Rosenberg, John. “Alexander Hamilton.” Biography Reference Center. EBSCO Industries, Inc., 31 Jan. 2000. Web. 28 Dec. 2016
- Schmid, Monika. “The best age to learn a second language.” *Independent*. Independent, 8 Feb. 2016. Web. 12 Nov. 2016.
- "The Rhode Island Diploma System." *Rhode Island Department of Education*. Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 17 May 2019. Web. 12 Nov. 2016.