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ENGL 2010-029

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Preparing an Advanced Future

Census results have recorded 120 languages being spoken in the state of Utah. Continuing with Utah, it is the national leader for telecommunications operating services for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing. Many of its citizens have traveled to several countries around the world learning various languages from missionary service. There has been a higher employment rate in Utah despite recent economic crisis, largely in part to this multilingual prowess and interpretation expertise. The United States as a whole can receive benefits such as these by creating greater emphasis on language immersion programs in elementary schools.

The most effective time to begin the path towards bilingualism is at the youngest age possible. The human brain is at its most rapid phase of development during infancy and childhood. Jane Merrill, a writer and mother of two bilingual children quoted Williams Girards in her book “Bringing Up Baby Bilingual.” He, a John Hopkins psychologist said, “Babies and young children are literally language-learning machines” (Merrill, 73). Merrill continued, saying, “the formulative period diminishes but does not seal off until about age 12, when the initially uncommitted part of the brain, which the child could have used for an additional language, has been taken over for other functions (Merrill, 74).” The child is most capable of learning a second language while young, therefore, elementary school immersion programs are ideal.

Adults are able to acquire a second language, as Wendy Baker address in one of her articles, but it is more difficult. She wrote, referring to L2 as a second language, “early childhood represents a time where optimal input and interaction with the L2 can take place (Baker, 317).” While adults are able to learn a second language, the most effective method is to learn it as a child. Language immersion programs will maximize efficacy in becoming bilingual. Many of us have heard the saying, “you can't teach an old dog new tricks,” meaning it's challenging, if not impossible, to learn something new later in life. The ideal time to learn “new tricks” is definitely during childhood, whether before or during elementary school.

There are many benefits for children as they begin this process, those which cannot overlooked. Learning another language helps one to better understand and master his or her own native language. Becoming bilingual leads to improved memory, focus, and performance in school and the home. Plus, as Melanie Metzger wrote in her book *Bilingualism & Identity in Deaf Communities, “*Children in bilingual communities do not only learn two languages but also the social rules regarding when and where the languages may be used (Metzger, 44).” There are social benefits to bilingualism in youth. I recently experienced learning new social rules like she mentioned when I started speaking Tongan, a language and culture foreign to my own. In addition to learning vocabulary and grammar, I learned more of the culture associated with this language. For example, I learned words to say hello and goodbye, but also when to use the more formal addresses, such as when speaking to someone who is your elder. I would not have learned this concept as easily if I did not involve myself with the culture. Plus, I would have gained this understanding more rapidly if I had been engaged with Tongan culture at a younger age. From these, we learn that there are many benefits to involving children with bilingual programs.

In addition to the short-term benefits of bilingualism, there are long term benefits for children involved in language immersion programs. These include, but are not limited to, more job opportunities, greater understanding and acceptance of foreign cultures, higher education pathways, and hate-crime reduction. Most crucial is hate-crime reduction. Hate crimes, terrorist attacks, mass shootings and other traumas have been becoming more frequent in recent years and months. There are preventative measures that we need to take, the most effective being to change attitudes and viewpoints. The more other races, cultures, and religions are seen as negative, the more people we will see as enemies. When one is surrounded by other cultures and viewpoints, he or she can better understand and accept any differences. There may always be fanatics and criminals, but when we can learn foreign cultures, we can gain mutual respect for those cultures and its people. In order to understand these, we start by interacting with others. We start interacting with other cultures and people by speaking, or signing, their language. Exposure at a young age is crucial for this needed paradigm shift, if not done in elementary school, then there will already be even more years of misunderstanding and conflict.

The program for attaining a second or third language has been very limited in school systems. Children and teenagers for the most part didn’t have exposure to different languages and cultures until middle school or junior high school. I had an interest in learning American Sign Language at a young age, but wasn’t able to take classes until high school. In addition to this system, most students don’t begin their language acquisition until the developmental stage of the brain has slowed dramatically. We can recognize the results of this program by simply asking high school graduates how much of their language classes they remember. From my experience, after I graduated, I quickly forgot most of what I learned in three years of Sign Language classes.

In recent times, America in general has not been supporting this need for early bilingual education. Linda Espinosa, of the University of Missouri- Columbia states, “Only a few states provide sufficient funding to implement programs that require highly qualified teachers and assistant teachers, as well as regular program monitoring and program assistance to ensure consistent quality” (Espinosa, 2015). She also references challenges that being in these programs has had for students. New studies and programs have been done to improve these efforts, but support is still needed. Parents and teachers need to be involved with the children as they study new materials and learn other cultures.

Our world is becoming more multilingual and our country needs to do more to meet this demand. Various countries with students outperforming our own have implicated these programs into their standard education; it’s time we do the same. Utah and other states have seen many significant benefits of becoming bi- and multi-lingual. In order for the rest of the states, and ergo the entire nation, to reap these rewards, more needs to be done with education, particularly with elementary language immersion programs. Overall, we will not see improvements without the desire to learn other languages and cultures. By cultivating this desire, we, as a nation, will be preparing a more advanced future by producing and implicating language immersion programs.

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