

Not-so-foreign words

Tots can learn two languages

BY PAULINE M. MILLARD
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Alexandra Sowanick is only 22 months old but she already knows that "rouge" means red, in French and "pomme" means apple.

She began her two-tongue education in January at The Language Workshop for Children in New York City, a school that offers French and Spanish classes to children as young as 6 months old.

"I majored in French in college and I felt it was important for her to learn," says Alexandra's mother, Nina Wainwright.

Early start

Alexandra is getting an early but important start on becoming bilingual, as experts say early childhood is the perfect time to introduce new languages. The young brain is just beginning to develop verbal skills, whether they are in English or French or Japanese.

The Language Workshop for Children has schools that offer weekly sessions throughout the tri-state area, including some 200 students in New Jersey at sites in Summit, Upper Montclair and Ridgewood, all for French, by popular demand. Spanish classes are taught at the workshop's Manhattan location.

Each teacher at all locations is personally selected and trained by Francois Thibaut, director of the school and creator of the Thibaut Technique.

Back and forth

"A lot of people think that a child would get confused learning two languages at once, but that's not the case," says Robert Weisskirch, a lecturer in child and adolescent studies at the California State University at Fullerton. He says that children don't get confused because they have the ability to switch back and forth between the two languages almost without thinking about it.

It's a process academics call "code switching."

"It's actually a sign of proficiency," Weisskirch says. "When teaching languages, it's what you strive



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Students at The Language Workshop for Children respond to the lessons because they are fun. First they might be singing and moving around the room, and, minutes later, be sitting and identifying cards and toys in French or Spanish.



Alexandra Sowanick, 22 months old, gets some help from her mother, Nina Wainwright, during a French lesson.

for."

But getting a child to pay attention long enough and really absorb the new language is the trick, especially in easily distracted toddlers. Experts agree

that making the lessons entertaining — almost disguising them as a game — is the best way for young students to learn.

Mari-Noel Dupuis is one of the teachers at The Lan-

The Language Workshop for Children

WHEN AND WHERE: Wednesdays, Central Presbyterian Church, 70 Maple St., Summit; Tuesdays, St. James Episcopal Church, 581 Valley Road, Upper Montclair; Mondays, Christ Episcopal Church, Franklin Avenue and Cottage Place, Ridgewood.

SUMMER SESSIONS: Start in July.

COST: \$423 for weekly 45-minute lessons for 12 weeks, including home study materials.

CLASSES: Divided by age group — 6 to 20 months; 20 months to 3 years; 3 to 6 years; 5 to 8 years.

CALL: (800) 609-5484 and ask for French for Tots and French for Children.

guage Workshop for Children. She says even though the students are young, they respond to the lessons because they are fun.

"To them it seems like a play group, so they want to learn," she says. "After about a month or so they really get into it and start progressing very quickly from there."

There's a world of difference between teaching young children a language with methods designed specifically and exclusively for them, such as the Thibaut Technique, which employs both sides of the brain, and teaching them with methods adapted from lessons for adults. Sugar-coating adult programs for children doesn't work, Thibaut says.

"When they are young they do a lot of absorbing," he explains. "They may not say a lot at first but it is all sinking in. The vocabulary is growing inside

them. You don't really teach them a language. You expose them to a language. Since it's only once a week, it's in a way that has to be efficient. Then at home they listen to a CD that covers the sounds they learned that week."

A lot of songs

Thibaut's classes, which use a lot of songs to reinforce grammatical patterns, switch modes every 10 minutes to keep the children interested. First the children might be singing and moving around the room, and, minutes later, be sitting and identifying cards and toys in French or Spanish.

But just taking a child to a class once a week is not necessarily going to make him or her fluent. Reinforcement of the language at home is key to making it stick.

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Language

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That's where the CDs come in. Thibaut's New Jersey French for Tots and French for Children CD is professionally composed and recorded in Paris.

An ideal situation is when the child can speak one language with one parent exclusively and another language with the other parent, says Laura Perlmann, who runs the French nursery school Teddy Bear Club in Chestnut Hill, Mass. "That way the brain can easily categorize which language corresponds with which parent," she explains.

But Thibaut said he has polyglot students whose parents can only speak English. They use the workshop sessions as their exclusive avenue to practice a second, or third, or fourth language. Sometimes a neighbor or maid who speaks a foreign language can serve as a key aid for a child whose parents speak only one language.

Classes and materials

Some languages, such as French and Spanish, are easy to find classes and materials for. Others are not.

Selina Yoon speaks Korean; her husband speaks Chinese. When Yoon decided to try to teach her English-speaking children the languages at home, she had a difficult time locating books and tapes from her Cincinnati home.

"It was very frustrating because their father speaks Chinese, so this language was part

of their culture," Yoon says. "It was important for them to learn."

She ended up starting her own business, called Asia for Kids. It's a catalog that sells and distributes hundreds of teaching materials from various publishers aimed specifically at the Asian market.

Yoon was successful in teaching Michael, 10, and Vivian, 8, both Chinese and Korean. However, she doesn't pressure them to use their new skills all the time.

Satellite television

She buys them foreign-language books and recently subscribed to a satellite television service so they can watch foreign shows but doesn't bog them down with constant lessons.

"Sometimes I'll take them to a local Korean grocery store and we'll read packaging," she says. "I also give a lot of positive feedback. It's just basic parenting."

Since schools in the United States typically start teaching second languages later than their Asian and European counterparts, it's up to parents to give kids a jump-start.

"The American system of starting languages at the middle school level is a little late," Perlmann says. "At that age there is less chance they will learn to speak without an accent."

"Everyone has the capability to learn a language," Yoon says, but waiting is like a "ticking time-bomb" in their language development.

"The best age to learn a language is between 0 and 3," says



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Francois Thibaut, director of the Language Workshop for Children and creator of the Thibaut Technique, works with student Alexandra Sowanick, while her mother, Nina Wainwright, watches.

Thibaut, who speaks with a French accent because he learned English after age 3.

"For a newborn, Chinese is as much a foreign language as English. By the time the child is 9 months he can discriminate between the sounds he heard at birth and the sounds he hasn't heard yet.

"Japanese children beyond the age of 3 cannot discriminate between 'r' and 'l' because they have never heard those sounds, but Japanese babies can," he adds. "For the first three years, children are like computers without printers." But the window for such super learning is limited. There is not much of a difference,

Multi-lingual children tend

to absorb math and science as if they, too, were different languages, which, in a way, they are, he says. It is easier for polyglot children to enter new ways of thinking, even as adults, whatever discipline they are exploring.

Part of the problem with teaching children different languages in the United States is American xenophobia, Weisskirch says.

Simple geography has caused many Americans, who essentially live isolated from other nations and cultures, to doubt the need to speak other languages, he says. Conversely, in Europe, it is expected to speak more than just one.

And in U.S. border communities such as Texas and the northernmost points near Canada, it is common to find people who can switch back and forth between English and either Spanish or French.

Forward thinking

"If the U.S. were more forward thinking there would be more of an emphasis on teaching children different languages," Weisskirch says. "But with the new Census results coming out, I think we are seeing that this country is a lot more diverse than we realized, and these languages skills are key."

The latest figures from the Census Bureau indicate that one student in five in U.S. schools has at least one foreign-born parent, and 5 percent of students were born abroad.

Daily Record staff writer Lorraine Ash contributed to this story.