



Infant Industry: Mandarin for Babies?

How to make your child multi-lingual (ixnay *ora-Day*).

by Kristin Gangwer

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My most vivid memory of preschool Spanish class is of standing in a classroom, in front of my teachers, being tested on how high I could count. While I can still count in Spanish, most everything else I learned now evades me.

Francois Thibaut, founder of The Language Workshop for Children, says that's just because the teaching methods weren't correct. Thibaut has spent his life developing his own series of children's classes (the Language Workshop for Children), teaching methods (the Thibaut Technique) and educational materials (the Professor Toto Language Education Series). Now in its thirty-fifth year, the Language Workshop for Children offers classes in French, Spanish, Italian and Chinese to children ages six months to ten years, in Manhattan, Long Island, New Jersey, Boston and Kansas City. While Thibaut no longer teaches the classes himself, he still loves to talk about language. — *Kristin Gangwer*

What prompted you to start, thirty-five years ago, developing language programs for young children?

I grew up in Paris, and I went to a boarding school at an early age. We had people from all over the world — Chinese, Vietnamese, North African, Spanish, Portuguese — and the children were speaking French during the week. Then when the parents would come to pick them up on Saturdays, they would start speaking another language, sometimes translating for their parents. I thought that there was something magical about that.

And that's possible even for tiny babies?

Yes — absolutely. We start at six months. When you think about it, at nine months, a child can already discriminate between the sounds that he has heard since birth and the sounds that are new. So, to an American newborn, Chinese is no different from English, Hebrew or any other language. But by age three, you can no longer say Chinese is as easy as English. A newborn who spends part of the time with his mother who only speaks English, part of the time with his father who only speaks Chinese, and part of the time with a babysitter who only speaks Portuguese, will end up speaking all these languages — without any class, without any lessons.

I've heard anecdotes about children getting confused about which language they're speaking and mixing words up, especially after watching *Dora the Explorer*.

Yes. From what I understand, *Dora is in English, but they throw in some Spanish words. Professor Toto is entirely in the target language. We are against mixing languages. We don't think that it's a good idea to speak with a child in English and throw in some Spanish words from time to time. By mixing two languages, the child is not going to benefit from it as much. He or she may remember a few words, but will not really end up speaking as well as if he were totally immersed.*

How did you develop the Professor Toto line?

When I started, I thought that just reading books in another language helps children learn. But I realized that that's not the case, because their parents are American parents. So reading books in another language is probably great for children whose parents speak the target language with the proper accent. But it's detrimental to the American child who is being read the story with the improper accent. That's why I developed specific books and CDs to reinforce at home what they learn in class. Our books for the very young children don't actually have any words. They have pictures, and then the children listen to the CDs, so they have no way to mispronounce a word, because it is not read to them, they are just listening to it.

Can you describe a typical class?

Children learn if they are emotionally engaged. In my experience, the little details are going to make the difference between the child who learns something and retains it for life, and the child who forgets everything in just a few weeks. The teacher is going to play for a few minutes with some puppets, and then they are up and they are moving, and your conclusion would be that the teacher is just playing with the kids and improvising. Except that if you open the door of another classroom, another language, you would see that it's nearly identical.

Why do you think parents decide to enroll their children in language classes?

I think that more and more parents realize that today we are living in a global world. It is extremely important to be able to speak at least two languages, preferably three or more. And neurolinguists have shown that the brain of the child is extremely malleable within the first few years, like warm wax that can be imprinted with the sounds of any language. But that wax, little by little, becomes colder and harder, and what you can imprint in the brain within the first few years is more difficult to do later in life. Young children are like computers without printers. They may not be able to speak yet, but it doesn't mean that they don't understand. It does not mean that they don't absorb. They just aren't verbal yet. That's the same way as in your own language. When you were three months, you were not speaking. Were you?

I don't think so.

Let's say that you started to speak at thirteen or eighteen months. That doesn't mean that you really learned the words that you were producing exactly at that time. You learned the words long, long before. But you were able to produce them when you became verbal.

A lot of funny things must happen in your work with children.

Years ago, we had somebody who had just started to learn French. He was about three-and-a-half or four years old. He took classes for only three or four weeks, once a week — not a lot — so his French was extremely limited. He went to Paris, and he was in a restaurant with his parents, and the parents said, "I would like to order strawberries. Do you know how to say that?" Of course, he didn't know, but his answer was *strawberries* — with a very French accent. So at least, in three or four classes, he got the accent!