

FEATURE STORY



Illustrations by Gregory Baldwin

Fiona Mueller believes that children benefit from studying other tongues from an early age through to adulthood.

Lifted By LANGUAGES

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” This beautiful statement, attributed to the 20th Century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, is relevant to all parents who hope to prepare their children for a rewarding life in a world that is multilingual, multiracial, competitive and challenging. As a mother, language teacher and small-business owner, I am convinced

teachers at a boys' school. Each year, as part of their subject choices for Year 8, we introduced the Year 7 students, who were already learning French, to Latin, German and Mandarin. During these brief sessions, which taught the boys some basic phrases and sociocultural or historical information, it was always fascinating to see how different students were drawn to different languages. We enjoyed asking them about their choices, because they loved to talk about experiences they'd had, people they had met, a film they had seen or the sound or shape of the words. Others had ambitions to travel to a particular part of the world. Of course, some would say they didn't like the sound of a language, or felt that learning a new alphabet would be too hard, or that their parents did not believe that language study was important. However the majority were receptive, and I believe that enrolments in language courses at that school are among the highest in Australia, thanks to the sound provision of language classes from Year 3 right through to Year 12.

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require a sophisticated approach to organising one's thoughts and expressing one's ideas. From a humanitarian point of view, choosing to learn another language also demonstrates clearly to non-native English speakers that the learner is open-minded, genuinely interested in other parts of the world, and willing to apply the same commitment to this task as is required to master a musical instrument or to become a capable athlete.

For children, learning another language is an ideal way to enhance overall literacy skills. It helps them to understand that languages work as systems, just as happens, for example, in mathematics. Also, in my opinion, foreign-language teachers are the only people who really emphasise grammar and punctuation.

Language is a problem-solving activity of the highest order because it demands lightning-fast comprehension, processing and selection of data. Every time a child reads or hears a word or a phrase, decodes it, thinks of and delivers a response, and then receives a reaction to that communication, a whole lot of intellectual effort is expended. Step by step, with the right encouragement, the acquisition of a foreign language complements and reinforces the learning that is taking place in the child's first language. This is because all learners instinctively attempt to retrieve vocabulary that is known, to sort it and to switch between languages. Children are especially good at this because they tend to be more flexible thinkers and are often much more willing to experiment than older learners.

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It is puzzling, therefore, to consider some of the statistics about language learning in Australia. More than 200 foreign languages are used in the Australian community, and half of the top 10 most commonly spoken languages (which, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, are Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Arabic, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Spanish, Tagalog (Filipino), German and Hindi) are among the most widely spoken languages in the world. On top of this, Australia has a reputation for being one of the most harmonious multiracial and multilingual communities on the planet. However, far too many Australians – especially those from English-speaking backgrounds – are resistant to learning languages and reveal attitudes that are frequently based on ignorance. This is a particular problem when children are influenced by adults' negativity. In the 21st Century, knowing how complex and diverse our world is, it seems extraordinary that only about 13 per cent of all Australian students enrolled in Year 12 are studying a foreign language.

Sadly, poor government policy and implementation mean that language programs are available only on an ad hoc basis from preschool to Year 12. The quality and quantity of the language learning our children receive depend utterly on the type and location of their

advisable. Foreign-language schools can be helpful, although I tend to agree with the research that says that more structured learning will only work when the learner is ready, so thought must be given to the timing of these. Having a view to what may happen in primary and secondary school, if you know which schools your child will attend, will also help to inform your decision.

If there are people from other cultural backgrounds in a child's family or friendship circle, a simple experience such as cooking a meal with them or going to a cultural festival might help to gauge the child's interest in and receptiveness to learning a new language. Simple, colourful publications in different languages, as well as CDs and DVDs, can be useful tools. It can also be worthwhile to try a number of different languages over time, as a child may respond positively to a particular one.

As with any aspect of learning, once a child has been successful at communicating in another language, the desire to try again will be very strong. Ideally, this will happen in a foreign country. My son and daughter, whose heritage is Swiss-Australian, have both had unforgettable moments in non-English-speaking places when they have successfully understood another person's conversation, or they have tried a word or phrase and been rewarded with a big smile or a small gift from a shop assistant or train conductor who really appreciated their efforts to communicate.

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schools. In many cases, for example, foreign-language programs are available only because a teacher happens to have skills in that area, or because the school principal is supportive of languages beyond the minimum curriculum requirements. If the teacher leaves, or the program is not supported and promoted by the school executive, there is no guarantee of continuity or quality.

So, what can parents and carers do? First of all, it's wise to be strategic and not try to turn children on to another language in five minutes. They need to become

interested in their own time, for their own reasons, and that does not include a lecture to a six year old on how they could run their own company in China and make lots of money if they learn Mandarin. If a child is still very young, careful thought should be given to which language might be best in the longer term. Factors to consider include the availability of teachers and access to other sociocultural material and opportunities that will reinforce the language learning. Asking around and doing some research into a class or personal tutor is



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Only recently, I received a letter from the mother of a young man I taught a decade ago. She thanked me for persuading her boy, against his initial preferences, to continue with a language through to Year 10. She told me that he is now working in Europe and is kicking himself for not making more of an effort in that subject, as he is surrounded by multilingual people of his own age who are much more skilled and aware of the importance of language dexterity. However, as this mother emphasised to me, he has the advantage of knowing how to learn a language, and he is open to it, and these are the keys to success.

I put as much emphasis as possible on developing my children's ability to speak and write well in English

and in other languages. Both teenagers now, they 'get' how lucky they are to have links with every continent. They know how important it is to respect others, just as they want to be respected for who they are as individuals and as representatives of particular sociocultural traditions. Much of this understanding comes from learning about how languages work and what languages allow people to do and to be. Surely this is the kind of world in which we would like our children to live. ●

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