

Learning a Foreign Language in Kindergarten? – Yes, Please.

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Introducing a foreign language at an early age enhances the capacity of the brain, which in turn brings life-long benefits, improves your memory and cognitive performance. So why not start in kindergarten when the children are most receptive, fresh, eager to learn, highly motivated, curious and ready to absorb knowledge like a sponge? Here are my experiences in the area.

»The sooner the better« echoes in my mind and it is truly the early age that is the most suitable for learning a foreign language. The children's brains are open to new concepts, to new sounds and patterns. They are dynamic, constantly active and busy. They are intrinsically better language learners, and will therefore become more proficient more quickly. The children are able to soak in a foreign language at an impressive rate. Moreover, their thirst for knowledge is ever present.

They react in a spontaneous way, their inner motivation and their relaxed attitude contribute to a faster learning process. They are able to learn to speak the language perfectly and without an accent. They are the masters of mimicking new sounds and adopting pronunciation. Repetition is never boring for it is presented through various activities and with the help of different teaching techniques. Their sensitive ears help them pick up on and duplicate the tricky sounds easily. Learning rhythmic characteristics of the language, then recognizing and slowly segmenting the words from fluent speech is the way to go.

What's more, their speech organs are flexible and the children are able to imitate the rhythm, intonation and melody perfectly, it looks as if they have an ear for languages. The kindergarten teachers help to create a rich and stimulating learning environment and offer the children a lot of fun activities in English. If they manage to introduce the language at around the ages of 3 or 4, the child will probably accept, grasp and use it in a similar way as their mother tongue. This additional language does not present difficulties and does not cause confusion. It also encourages the children's creativity, imagination, it strengthens their intellectual abilities and is in itself cross-curricular.

We live in Slovenia and my child started learning English in kindergarten (as a special subject that was included in everyday routine) at the age of 4 and I followed the progress with great interest. Being a primary school English teacher myself, I supported the idea and helped her to acquire the foreign language in the afternoons as well – in our home environment, with the help of fun games, stories, songs, chants and the like. The results were impressive and my daughter developed her love of languages right there and then.

Needless to say that the teaching strategies used were child-friendly and lots of fun. The teachers used activities based on repetition in the form of movement and action songs, rhymes, chants, nursery rhymes, songs, plays, circle games, dance, puppets, which all catch the imagination of the children with captivating and colorful language. Children's language development was fast and it also included physical development when used in conjunction with dance and mime. Visual, auditory and kinesthetic

activities were used to apply to different learning styles, thus achieving optimal results.

Repetition and imitation really play an important role in early language learning. The teacher's use of clear, articulate and fluent English is of key importance. Supported by facial expressions, gestures and mime it is quite easy to stimulate the children and get their attention. The input received by the students should always be comprehensible and the curriculum should include topics that are of interest to the young learners and their world.

It is always important to give positive feedback and praise the student's progress. Encouraging and supporting their efforts means the world to them and keeps them motivated. They are satisfied with their accomplishments, they seek activities, and they are eager to acquire knowledge and learn more.

The strategies used have a big impact on language learning as well. Offering an immersion experience helps the students to connect the language learning with real-life situations in order to practise the language naturally and in context. Words, word phrases and simple sentences are taken from everyday life and are simulations of concrete examples, kids play real roles, they answer simple questions, demands, they follow simple instructions and react accordingly. In such a way the language lives the way it actually is and the students acquire it intuitively by imitating, repetition and by using it in different situations. It is essential for the lessons to be well-prepared and structured, but at the same time fun and dynamic at all times.

Storytelling as an efficient teaching tool often finds its way in foreign language learning at an early stage. Be it stories that children know in their mother tongue or new ones they come across in their English lessons. Through them we boost cross-cultural understanding and provide a view into cultural traditions. By working with stories students learn about other customs, values, beliefs and history. Children's stories and books are wonderful resources for helping the children develop their own sense of identity as well as learn tolerance. Not only linguistic, but also cognitive, personal and social development of a child is taken care of.

As mentioned before, without the element of fun, learning is almost impossible. Learning is easier if it is made fun or emotional, and if it makes sense. In general, games help children acquire language in a natural way like the native speakers do. The language is used as a means to an end. Moreover, games teach about team play and social skills like cooperation and obeying the rules. Kinesthetic learners love them a lot because they are physically involved in the process. Playful activities, learning the target language because of their active involvement, e.g. singing, running, playing, talking and the like bring about a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction after the completed task and expressing their foreign language knowledge becomes much easier.

Both, visual and auditory inputs are used excessively. Using mime, puppets, realia, illustrations, flashcards, pictures, videos and songs gives young students a chance to understand, process and memorize the material efficiently and more effectively. My daughter loved learning English with the help of songs, rhymes, chants and role play. I saw that a friendly and supportive atmosphere was important to her, as well as a

stimulating environment and a feeling of security and comfort. A positive and relaxing classroom has a huge impact on the children's motivation and it increases the speed and level of acquisition.

Young students are actively involved in the lessons, they co-create the language experience itself. In kindergarten everyday topics are dealt with, children have time to learn through play-like activities and they pick up language by taking part in an activity shared with an adult. First, there may be the so-called silent period before they actually speak any English words. The children need some time to acquire the language, memorise and use it. Slowly, they begin to say single words, phrases, then simple sentences. The stage continues for some time and should not be rushed. Gradually children build up phrases and more complex sentences, their communicative skills grow and expand.

They need continual encouragement as well as praise for their effort, progress and good performance, as any success motivates. You will notice that step by step their knowledge of a foreign language will grow. It is of vital importance that the children are eager to experience new knowledge, they have the necessary energy, drive and excitement. Children's brains are developmentally ready to accept and learn a foreign language, and fluency comes fairly easily, rapidly and without accent. Learning English in kindergarten therefore presents a great opportunity and the teachers help to develop an enthusiasm for learning languages, they touch the lives of children and co-create lifelong learners. Critical thinking skills are increased, creativity and flexibility of the mind in young children is promoted and memory is enhanced, which is a great starting point, isn't it?

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