

# Catching them young

## The value of teaching a second language early

To celebrate the European Year of Languages Valerie Nicholls tells us that the best time to introduce a foreign language is when children are curious about sounds and words – that is, when they are as young as three years old.



Let me dispel some myths – trust me, I'm a teacher!

- 1 foreign languages are *not* difficult
- 2 foreign languages are fun
- 3 foreign languages are exciting
- 4 foreign languages are *not* confusing

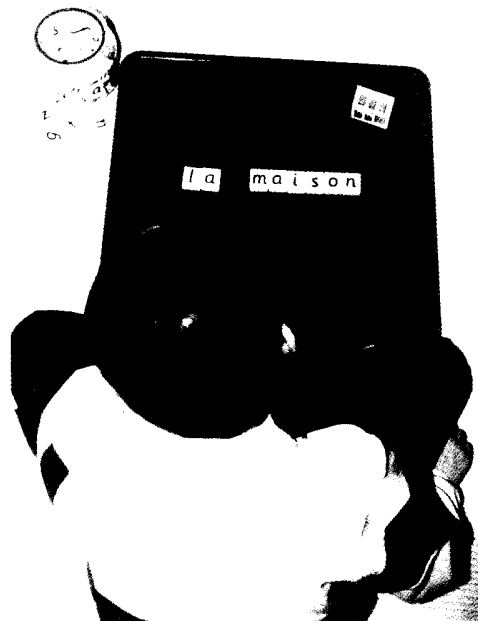
...when you are three years old!

Everything is easy when you are small – from dinosaur names to working out the video player. Learning a language is hardly going to be a problem for a child who can say Tyrannosaurus Rex.

When Maria Montessori talked about the sensitive periods for languages, she didn't exclude the notion of foreign languages. What matters is not the language, but the timing of the learning. I have found that the best time to introduce a foreign language is when children are curious about sounds and words.

Children do not usually get confused when learning a foreign language. They know perfectly well what a foreign language sounds like, and often hear foreign languages at a very young age. For example, when my daughter was two, she heard a foreign voice on the news. She ran to the television, convinced it was her French grandfather talking. She had worked out straight away it sounded French. Children will accept that there are two words for cat, and two words for ice cream.

The brain is flexible. The more stimulation it receives from the outside environment, the better it gets. The area responsible for a mother tongue is in one specific part of the brain but second and subsequent languages are developed in and stimulate other areas of the brain.



When Maria Montessori talked about the sensitive periods for languages, she didn't exclude the notion of foreign languages.

Learning languages also develops a child's curiosity. When a child knows that there are two words for ice cream, one day this child will ask if there is a third word for ice cream – then you are in trouble! This is an ideal time to look it up, showing your child how to use a dictionary. The child will want to know where people speak French, and Spanish, and German and so on, and they will want to look at the map of the world. This is just the start. Eventually, foreign languages make you question your own language and it certainly gives you a better understanding of it. Studies have shown that children who learn languages do better in English than the children who do not.

Difficulty and confusion are relative concepts. I know many people who are confused about languages and find them difficult – they are all adults.

To start teaching a foreign language in your nursery or school, or at home, you will need:

- a good picture dictionary.

- to make a syllabus for the weeks ahead, based on what the children are interested in, for example, mini-beasts, the earth, colours and so on.
- a good tape of songs. You can also easily adapt English rhymes. Rhymes are easier than songs because of the lack of tune. Try using easy words such as greetings and family members with finger puppets to make more visual impact.
- to find the best loved stories and see which words you can introduce in the foreign language as you read them: Who is in the house? *Maman!* Who is behind the door? *Le chat!*
- to get some bilingual stories. The ones with a tape are good, to give you a clear authentic sound to imitate. You will see that very soon, the children will recognise some words and pretend to read in the foreign language, giving good sounds and odd words now and again.
- to adapt the best-loved games from the nursery. Play with the coloured hoops (shout a colour and rush to it).

### Which method works best?

The wisdom of Maria Montessori is timeless and I have adapted her principles with sensorial material to learning languages. This works very well. Use feely bags, scent bottles for likes and dislikes; make use of sounds in games; use plenty of movement, rhymes, and songs. The children will learn even better when they are physically involved. Mary Poppins said 'find the fun' to Jane and Michael when they tidied up the nursery; this is the first thing to do. Find a rhyme, a book or a game the children really enjoy and ask yourself which foreign word you can introduce with it. They will see the fun of the activity; you will see the language content of the activity. ♣

Valerie Nicholls runs Am Stram Gram, teaching French to young children based on the Montessori method. e-mail [valerie@amstramgram.co.uk](mailto:valerie@amstramgram.co.uk)