Acquiring a Second Language Begins Early and Takes Practice!

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We are proud to say that University School is on the cutting edge in World Language opportunities for our students as we prepare them for a global workplace. In addition to the traditional options of French and Spanish, students are able to engage in formal instruction in Chinese starting in 6th grade. All students can continue to possibly earn high school graduation credit in the language of their choice.

You may be wondering how children learn a foreign language and what you can do to help them. Research has shown that young children have a much greater capacity to develop and acquire many languages simultaneously in comparison to adults. Noam Chomsky, a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology indicates that there is a critical period of human maturation during which the individual can more readily learn another language with the proper training techniques and considerable practice.

Our language courses meet every day for approximately 50 minutes. Sixth grade languages concentrate heavily on the vocabulary and culture of the target language with Chinese having the added complexity of students learning how to write Chinese characters. Total language immersion soon becomes an emphasis, with the amount of classroom time spent speaking in the target language increasing dramatically as students move from year to year.

The world language department at University School Middle School offers students a multicultural experience through authentic language learning. Whether they are taking French, Chinese, or Spanish, students are engaged in hands-on activities that help them increase their communication skills. Students learn and practice real-world language as they visit traditional restaurants, are exposed to multimedia in the target language, and engage in dialogue with their peers. Students learn about and experience the food, the dress, the arts, and the history of various countries.

As students are exposed to the target language and culture, they are able to communicate with family members and with the larger community as they travel abroad with their families and as they take part in cross-school competitions. French students attend Le Congrès de la Culture Française en Floride annually and have won several Supérieur ratings. Our Chinese language students also take part in the Florida Statewide Competition where they have received several superior ratings as well. These students have also competed in the Florida International Chinese Speech and Skit Contest where they have competed against other middle school, high school, and college students and have placed in the top three in many categories. Some of our Chinese language students have also had the opportunity to participate in a summer intensive program, Star Talk, at the University of South Florida. This year, we have started an in-house competition for our sixth grade Spanish students and hope to expand the competition next year to include other grades and other schools.

Language learning is a highly cumulative process. It is like making a tower out of blocks: you keep building on top of what you did the day before. If you don't keep at the job steadily, pretty soon you're trying to put new blocks on top of empty space. This is why it is important to
Here are some helpful hints from the Texas Women’s University in Dallas for studying a foreign language:

The four major parts to language learning are listening, speaking, reading, and writing:

**LISTENING AND PRONUNCIATION**
1. The basis of all language is sound. Become familiar with the pronunciation of the words in the language and learn what to listen for when the language is spoken.
2. Proper pronunciation takes a great deal of practice. Begin early learning the new lip and tongue movements correctly.
3. Improve your pronunciation by listening to the language (from people, records, tapes, or movies) and pronouncing the words yourself until they sound correct. Listen with the aim of accurately reproducing what you have heard.
4. Listen to yourself on tape and practice the sounds by repeating them over and over until you feel comfortable with them. You might let another person also judge your pronunciation.
5. Focus on the meaning of what is being spoken as well as on pronunciation.

**SPEAKING**
1. Do not be concerned with speed, but rather, with accuracy.
2. Practice in speaking should be constant. When reading the language, read aloud if possible. Meet with other classmates at a designated time and converse with each other exclusively in the language.
3. Learn sentence structure. It is one thing to know the meanings of foreign words and quite another to be able to put them together correctly to form a meaningful sentence.

**READING**
1. Know English grammar terms. Keeping a grammar book or dictionary handy is a help. Also learn new grammatical terms used in the language you are studying.
2. When you read, do so with a focus on the total meaning of a sentence or passage and avoid looking up unknown words but, rather, attempt to determine their meanings based on the context of the sentence.
3. Always study notes which accompany a passage which is to be read or translated.
4. Try reading the passage to be translated three times. Read it initially, without translating, in order to get a feel for the language and how the words fit together. Read it a second time and translate the passage. Then reread the passage a third time for meaning. This will help you begin to think in the language. When reading, try reading by phrases or whole sentences and read aloud.

**VOCABULARY**
1. There are several things that can be done to aid in learning vocabulary. Memorization is important and good knowledge of the rules of grammar in the language studied will aid this process.
2. Master all of the vocabulary for each lesson. You may want to make flash cards for yourself to aid in this process. Take a 3 x 5” card and write the word on one side with its English equivalent on the other. Try going over them at least once a day and keep the number of words you are working with small. When you have learned the word on a card remove that card from the others. Phrases may also be put on flash cards. If you prefer to make digital flashcards, there are many applications available.
3. Try learning the names of the everyday things around you. Pick, for example, four new things a day to learn.

4. Try these four steps in learning a new word: (1) pronounce and spell it; (2) study its meaning; (3) use it in a sentence of your own; (4) write it and its meaning three times.

**WRITING**

1. Study all textbook material before you begin to write.
2. While you are writing, pay attention to spelling irregularities, and word order.
3. Be aware of sentence structure and grammar.