

The Benefits of Studying a Foreign Language in Young Adults

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Abstract

Are there benefits to learning a foreign language at different developmental levels? It is common knowledge that childhood is the optimal time to learn a language for retention purposes, however, what is unclear is if it is worth a person's time to attempt to study a language after that window of time closes. I would like to use various studies to prove that it is in the best interest of schools to require all students to take a foreign language. My research will focus on the benefits of foreign language study particularly in young adults. Foreign languages have shown to be beneficial for our minds, whether we feel like we are retaining the knowledge or ever plan on using it. By looking at factors including cognitive development, socioeconomic background, and success in the future, I will show that the development of foreign language programming in secondary education is beneficial to all students.

Literary Review

It is well known that elementary age children learn a second language more effectively than those entering adolescence and those who have progressed into adulthood. What is unclear is whether our public schools should bother to teach foreign language past elementary school if a student was never previously exposed to second language learning. Most of the research found on foreign language learning focuses on student's at the elementary school age. While conducting preliminary research, I found that there is a large gap in the research that has been conducted. Most of the articles found were written between the 1950s and 1970s. It seems as though scholars felt as if the foreign language learning research was no longer necessary to look at and they could close that book. I disagree. If one was to look at a foreign language classroom in our region, I suspect he would find unmotivated, unsatisfied students who do not understand the benefits they are gaining by studying their second language choice.

Martha Abbot points out in her research that foreign language learning increases critical thinking skills, boosts creativity, and expands students' minds. She also discusses how foreign language students outscore their peers in verbal and math sections of standardized tests. The research discussed in this article also points out how students who take time away from math to study foreign language continue to outperform in the math sections of standardized tests compared to those students who do not take a foreign language.

Abbot's research correlates well with Thomas Cooper's study where he specifically focuses on SAT scores in the verbal section of the test. This study looks at the difference in SAT scores in students who have taken a foreign language class in high school versus students who did not take foreign language. Those who did study a foreign language class achieved higher test

scores than those who elected not to. The length of time one studied a foreign language also contributed to the overall SAT score. Students who took more years of foreign language received higher test scores. The type of foreign language taken also played a role in achievement in the SAT's verbal section. Those who took German made the highest scores followed by French, Latin, and then Spanish. This study also found that socioeconomic background of those taking a foreign language did not play a key role in achievement.

Leveling the scholastic playing field is important for public school systems. Since the majority of students in the United States are attending public school, it is inevitable that students will be coming from all different walks of life. MJ Pascale conducted a study where he took 40 bilingual Portuguese-Luxemburgish immigrant children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and tested them against 40 monolingual, but equally impoverished, Portuguese students. The tests included visuospatial tests of working memory, abstract reasoning, selective attention, and interference suppression. The study found that the bilinguals outperformed the monolinguals in all of the above tests. It is important to note that language ability and bilingual advantages are not limited to socioeconomic background.

There are several criticisms within the realm of foreign language learning in public schools that need to be addressed. The most pressing criticism is the severe disconnect between each level of schooling. Jeri Hulsizer points out the importance of introducing FLEX (Foreign Language Exploratory Program) into middle school education. Each quarter, students are given the opportunity to explore a different foreign language and to be exposed to the different cultures surrounding the language. This is used to help pique interest in foreign language and helps students transition into high school classrooms with excitement for learning a foreign language.

This type of programming also helps reduce foreign language anxiety as students move forward with their studies. Hulsizer also points out that studying foreign language helps young students grasp communication skills in their native language with greater ease. Dr. Richard Lambert also focuses on disconnect between educational realms, but moves his focus to the university level. Lambert believes there is a disconnect between high school learning and university learning. Both educational levels focus on the basics for the first two years. After that time period, there is a 50% decline in the amount of students continuing their foreign language pursuits. With disconnect between university and high school language learning, it is close to impossible to keep enrollment levels in foreign language high. If second language was required in high school, then more students would be able to focus their language learning at the university at a higher level.

Christine Uber Grosse found that those who had taken a foreign language had better chances at getting hired post college graduation. Grosse conducted her research with a survey given to graduates from The Garvin School of International Management. The survey inquired how the graduates from 1970-2002 benefited from the school's graduation policy of taking a foreign language courses for at least four semesters. Of those who answered the survey, 82% of graduates confirmed that foreign language skills gave them a competitive edge. Even more importantly 89% reported that learning cultural skills in their foreign language classes gave them a competitive edge.

Test scores are not the only important aspects of learning a foreign language as a young adult. The American Educational Research Association sheds light on the fact that young adults who take the time to learn a foreign language measure up almost as well as early learners. The

early learner's most noticeable advantage is having better fluidity when pronouncing words. For young adults, the greatest challenge is skepticism. Many are influenced by the idea that only children can learn a language therefore decreasing motivation in young adults to put forward the effort in learning a foreign language. Young adults who have a desire to truly connect with a culture through language should not worry about language learning. Although easier said than done, many young adults must give up the anxiety and disbelief that comes with learning a second language in order to become proficient.

Robert Preidt points out through his study that bilingualism, even when acquired in adulthood, benefits the aging brain. The study discussed in this article included 835 people born in Scotland in 1936 whose first language was English. They were given mental skills tests at age 11 and again in their early 70s. Of the participants, 262 were able to speak at least two languages and 195 of them learned the second language before the age of eighteen. Those who spoke at least two languages did better on the skills tests when they were older than what their projected intelligence was when they originally took the test.

If there is still hesitation to learning a second language because one does not feel like he or she would ever travel or use his or her foreign language skills, then he or she should at least consider taking on the daunting task to improve their brain health. In his article, *The Benefits of Failing at French*, fifty-seven year old William Alexander explains that he spent one year taking rigorous French courses in his attempt to learn a language. Before embarking on his French journey he took a cognitive assessment called the CNS Vital Signs because he felt as if his memory was slowing down. He scored below average in his age group in most of the categories. What stood out to him the most was he was in the bottom 10th percentile of the composite

memory test and in the lowest 5 percentile on the visual memory test. After one year of struggling to learn French and seeing no improvement on his language retention, Alexander retook the CNS Vital Signs test. His scores “skyrocketed” and placed him above average in seven out of ten categories and average in the remaining three. His verbal memory score leapt to the 88th percentile and his visual memory test went to the 50th percentile. Looking at his experience helps people realize that even if they aren’t consciously “getting” the information, their brain truly is benefiting from the exercises they are putting it through.

Significance

It is important to let high school students, their parents, and educators know that efforts in foreign language learning are not going unnoticed. It is important for young adults to feel as if their education matters. An educated society is a working society.

I want to show people that children are not the only people who can successfully learn a foreign language, and they are not the only ones who are able to reap the benefits of learning the language. There is so much research saying that the perfect window of opportunity for a person to learn a language is elementary school age, but there is hardly any research showing that learning a language as an adolescent is important or worth the time. Generally, there is low motivation for high school students to put forth an effort in their foreign language classes. Considering the only research available it shows young children are the only ones experiencing success, I can understand low motivation and frustration that occurs in the high school foreign language classroom.

My research could benefit students’ minds. Students who actively study foreign language are receiving higher scores on standardized testing in literature and math. My research can also

help with foreign language anxiety in the classroom. If students know that even though they feel as if they aren't "getting it" or fully grasping concepts, simply applying themselves in their foreign language is more helpful than if they decided they aren't able to learn a foreign language. It is recognized that some students have an easier time learning a language, but it is important for them to realize their efforts are not in vain, even if they feel like they aren't retaining the language. Studies show that students who take a foreign language develop better critical thinking skills and creativity. Students also are able to better communicate their ideas. This will help students later in life when they move into the university atmosphere or workforce. Students' parents could benefit from the research by helping them understand why schools should be teaching a foreign language. Some parents see math and science as the most important subjects in school and discourage their children from taking a foreign language. If parents could see the benefits in foreign language study, then they could encourage their students to expand their minds.

School policy can change with this research and make sure that foreign language study is being funded. Many schools' policies are looking to level the playing field between students. If schools were giving each student the chance to study a foreign language it will help improve standardized test scores, despite socioeconomic background.

With this research being published there could be a decrease in anxiety in high school students; it could level the playing field between different socioeconomic groups and could help increase critical thinking and creativity high school students. This research will help change the way students perceive foreign language learning. It is important for students to realize that even if the end goal is not to travel or to work in the country with the target language, cultural barriers can still be broken down. Minds of adolescents are expanding, and if students' studies lead to

travel, then being able to communicate on some level can help us to understand on another better.

This research will include two main other areas of study: education and psychology. Since I am proposing that all high school students should be required to take foreign language classes through high school, it is important for this research to convince education sectors that this is a necessary change. In the field of psychology, better understanding why adolescents have anxiety taking a foreign language, and how classes could help their condition, can change the way classes are run and how we are teaching foreign languages.

If schools are deciding where to distribute their funds, then the research shown here can help them decide to keep or invest in their foreign language programs. My research will show school administrators and states that foreign language study will help increase standardized test scoring despite socioeconomic background.

My research will show that foreign language learning in secondary education is vital to students. Whether or not students feel as if a foreign language is relevant to their daily lives, foreign language will help them succeed in the present and in the future.

Methodology

The first step to looking at the importance of foreign language is proving there is actually correlation between a student's success in school and taking a foreign language. To accomplish this I will look at a variety of different research articles. My initial search was looking only at cognitive development. What I found was that there is a significant amount of research in the field concerning children in elementary school, however, there is not much research on how

foreign language study can benefit young adults. From here, I will look at why there is no research centering on young adults and foreign language learning.

With my research I will look at four main points: cognitive development, standardized test scores, economic background, and post-secondary education. Cognitive development is defined as an increase of being conscious of intellectual activity such as thinking, reasoning, remembering, imagining or learning words. When looking at a student's cognitive development, I will research how those students who are enrolled in foreign language classes are competing with those students who are not enrolled in a foreign language class. Not only will I be looking at their classroom experience, I will also be looking at the standardized test scores. The main question I will be researching is whether or not test scores are only higher if a student began learning their second language at an early age. The question I am posing with economic background will be, "What are the usual educational significances between those of high and low socioeconomic backgrounds, and how do researchers see those diminish with foreign language study?" Finally, with post-secondary education I will look at the benefits of foreign language study to the aging brain and the benefits of students at the university level.

To further my study, I will be looking at Missouri Southern State University students' ACT scoring and transcripts to see if they had taken a foreign language prior to enrolling at the university. By looking at each individual test scores in math, science, reading, and English, I will be able to determine the percentage of students who had to take remedial math and English classes at Missouri Southern. Further, I will be able to find how many of those students in remedial math and English took a foreign language in high school. From this research I will be

able to determine whether there is a correlation between a students' foreign language learning prior to University classes and ACT scores forcing students to take remedial college classes.

When my research is complete, I plan on submitting my research to school districts as a best practices review. If there is a correlation between the foreign language study and remedial class enrollment, this could help show high schools how important foreign language study is. This correlation could also help Missouri Southern State University's student selection process. By reviewing classes taken by incoming freshmen at the secondary level, the university may be able to better determine the needs of the incoming freshman class. By producing new knowledge my research will show how schools, parents, and students can work together towards the students' success.

Timeline

January

- Have preliminary research complete
- Meet with my advisor by the 26th

February- March

- Compile and complete research
- Advisor meeting February 16
- Advisor meeting March 13

April

- Have final draft complete April 10
- April 20-24 make all final adjustments
- April 27 be presentation ready

Evaluation

Presentation: 40%

Final Paper: 40%

Communication: 20%

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