

Argumentative Performance Task: Second Language Learning

Student Directions

Task:

Your class is studying about the role of second language learning in American schools and how most schools in Europe require all students to learn two languages. You are given four sources (two research articles, a compilation of letters to the editor, and an interview) that provide information about the pros and cons of foreign language studies and discuss at what age it is best to learn a foreign language.

Read the sources carefully to ***write an argumentative essay*** in which you establish an argumentative claim for or against the inclusion of second language instruction in local elementary schools. Make sure to address potential counterarguments in your essay and support your claim with information from the sources you have examined.

Sources for Performance Task:

Source #1

Information for “The Best Time to Learn a Language” is based on the following sources:

<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/RaiseBilingChild.html>

<http://www.multilingualliving.com/2010/05/31/does-bilingualism-multilingualism-cause-language-delay/>.

The Best Time to Learn a Language

by E. B. Perkins

Is earlier really better when it comes to learning to speak a second language? Many parents, educators, and policymakers are now coming to that conclusion. With increasingly sophisticated technology making our world smaller, there is a greater need for people to speak more than one language. A question that remains, however, is when that second language should be learned. Should a child be exposed to that second language from birth? In order to speak like a native speaker, an early start is important. But many parents worry that their children will be confused by hearing two different languages, and that they will not learn to speak either language as early as they might otherwise.

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, “A bilingual home environment may cause a temporary delay in the onset of both languages. The bilingual child’s comprehension of the two languages is normal for a child of the same age, however, and the child usually becomes proficient in both languages before the age of five years.” (American Academy of Family Physicians, 1999)

But the conclusion is different in a report by Center for Applied Linguistics (2006). “Although many parents believe that bilingualism results in language delay, research suggests that monolingual and bilingual children meet major language developmental milestones at similar times.”

One thing that they both agree on is the fact that children end up at similar levels of language learning. But the bilingual child knows two languages!

It may be that it helps children to have more experience in life before learning a second language. Knowing what an orange is in one language may make it easier to know that *naranja* is the same thing—in Spanish. Children who start

learning a second language a little later have already figured out how to use words in their first language. Many researchers believe this makes it easier to learn the second language.

Also, if a child already knows how to read in one language, he can use many of those same reading skills while learning a second language. Learning two languages while also learning how to read, though, is a much bigger challenge.

Another aspect of language is producing the sounds like a native speaker. While it is true that children may learn how to speak like a native speaker more easily than adults, adolescents and adults can also learn to speak without an accent. Older speakers are able to concentrate on learning for longer periods of time.

Children are often more open and curious with new languages, but older learners bring discipline to learning. Children learn better through games and activities, while adults tend to rely more on structure and rules. Whatever program is being used for learning a second language, the age of the learner should be taken into account.

There are definitely two ways to look at the question of when a second language should be learned. But there is no question about whether a second language should be learned. People who speak two languages are able to communicate to more people in better ways than those who only speak one.

Source #2

Information for “The Importance of Language Education” is based on the following sources:

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/dec/26/us-must-strengthen-foreign-language-education/#ixzz2HdKgJv6a>

<http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/education-and-language-gap-secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-foreign-language-summit>.

The Importance of Language Education

by S. E. Renata Nelson

Nelson Mandela has said, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.” Now is the time for the United States to better educate its students by teaching foreign languages at all levels. When Education Secretary Arne Duncan spoke at the Foreign Language Summit in 2010, he said, “We have to educate our way to a better economy, just as our competitors are doing.”

Currently, the U.S. is a long way from being a multilingual¹¹ society. It is up to the K-12 schools and higher education institutions to become part of the solution to the problem. The United States may be the only nation in the world where it is possible to graduate from high school and college without any foreign language study.

“Just 18 percent of Americans report speaking a language other than English. That’s far short of Europe, where 53 percent of citizens speak more than one language,” Duncan points out, “and some researchers predict that China will soon have the world’s largest English-speaking population.” It is estimated that 200 million school-aged children in China study English, according to a 2006 Education Department report. Compare this number to the 24,000 U.S. children who are studying Chinese languages. The gap is significant.

In 2008, one-quarter of the elementary schools in the United States offered some type of foreign language instruction. Eleven years earlier, though, it was one-third. Today, only 10 states require foreign language credits for high school graduation.

Even if schools wanted to provide second language instruction, though, there may not be enough qualified instructors. According to Secretary of Education Duncan, “In 2007-08, only 136 bachelor’s degrees, 188 master’s degrees, and 14 doctorates were awarded in foreign language teacher education in the United States. And in 2002, colleges in the United States awarded just six bachelor degrees in Arabic language and literature. Six years later, that number increased to 57. It’s an increase, to be sure, but clearly we’re still far short of what’s needed.”

The issue of foreign language learning is affecting many businesses in the United States. Companies have to use new and different strategies in order to compete with countries like India, which are offering quality products and services at a much lower rate. “In a more competitive market where products are increasing in quality we need to be able to compete on relationships and service, (and) languages are an important factor,” said David Gray, former Labor Department Acting Assistant Secretary for Policy. According to Gray, we have to be able to communicate with people whose language is not English if we are going to compete.

In his speech at the Foreign Language Summit in 2010, Secretary Duncan described plans for programs that would enable second language learning instruction. Duncan also added that, “Our country needs to create a future in which all Americans understand that by speaking more than one language, they are enabling our country to compete successfully and work collaboratively with partners across the globe. So this is our challenge: To expand and improve language instruction at a time when financial resources are tight and the international economic competition is greater than ever. We need to embrace this challenge with all of our collective will and courage—the stakes are too high for the future of our children and our country to ignore it.”

¹multilingual: speaking multiple languages

Source #3

Information in “Upton Daily Gazette” is based on the following sources:

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/collegeprose/2012/08/27/americas-foreign-language-deficit/>

http://www.adfl.org/resources/knowning_other_languages.htm

<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/Curriculum/>

Curriculum_Root_Web_Folder/BenefitsofSecondLanguage.pdf.

Read the following letters expressing the writers’ opinions on the subject of second language learning.

Upton Daily Gazette Letters to the Editor

The Gazette received a large number of responses to our recent editorial on the need for more foreign-language teaching in the United States. We will publish a selection of those letters over the next several days. -Ed-Ed.

Every time I look up, someone is demanding that something be added to our school: a music program, a gym, computer classes, iPads, and now foreign language. Like all the other demands I hear, your arguments about the supposed need for Americans to learn languages omit any mention of the costs, both in time and money. There are only so many hours in the school day and dollars in the school budget.

Language teachers don’t come cheap; they require salaries and benefits amounting to about \$60,000 per teacher per year. Given the size of our school, I would need to hire at least four of them. And that doesn’t include the cost of

textbooks and software required to do the job well. Our school is already underfunded. Last year, we spent \$300,000 more than we had. Our budget can barely support core subjects like math and reading.

And unless we lengthen the school day, what should the foreign language classes replace? Science? P.E.? Their arts classes? Less math or reading (when that's what our test scores depend on)? I can assure you that the students are not wasting any time during a packed school day. It is not enough to argue that foreign language instruction is important; you also have to tell us what is less important.

Extras such as foreign languages should be offered after school and paid for by the parents.

William Harris

Principal of Upton Elementary School

If employers have a need for workers who can speak a second language, they should offer on-the-job training. That way, they can focus on the languages that relate to their particular line of work. After all, what good is an employee who knows Spanish if a company is doing business in Russia or China?

Letisha Brown

Plainfield

For three years in high school, I was forced to take a foreign language. (In those days, that meant French, Spanish, or German.) I struggled in my French classes for two key reasons. One, I was not interested, and two, I was just not very good at learning French.

Later, when making plans to visit relatives in Brazil, I decided it would be a good idea to learn a little Portuguese. It's amazing how much easier it was when I had a real reason for learning.

Jared Lopez

Centerville

As a middle school student, I feel that students have enough pressure without having to learn foreign languages. Maybe it makes sense to teach a second language to little kids. They can learn it easily and don't have as many demands on their daily lives. But kids my age and older already have a hard time trying to fit in all the work for our main subjects, plus music lessons, sports, and other activities, plus family responsibilities. On top of that, many older kids have jobs as well.

Another pressure most students face is keeping up good grades. If we're forced to take a foreign language we're not interested in, we won't do very well. Our grades will suffer, which will make our parents unhappy, which will bring more pressure.

A lot of students do want to learn a second language. I think schools should support that. They just shouldn't require it.

Cathy Rosenbaum

North Upton

Source #4

Interview

HOST: Good morning! I'm Sarah O'Neal, your host of "Civil Attitudes," the show where we talk to community members *about* community issues. My guest today is Nelson Abadir, who teaches Spanish and Latin at the high school. Mr. Abadir, thank you for being with us this morning.

N. ABADIRN: It's my pleasure to be here.

HOST: How long have you been teaching foreign languages?

N. ABADIRN: This will be my 17th year.

HOST: How are things shaping up for the new school year?

N. ABADIR: I can't wait to get started. I'm going to be trying out some new teaching methods I learned about over the summer, which I think the kids will enjoy. Plus, I really look forward to seeing my students. They're the greatest—very committed and enthusiastic. Since a foreign language is not required, they're all in my class because they want to be there.

HOST: It seems like the teaching of foreign languages is always a hot topic in education. Why is that?

N. ABADIR: Learning a foreign language is an important part of a good education, but it is an area that goes in and out of popularity. Periods of support for language teaching have often been linked to national security concerns. For example, when the space race started in the late 1950s, there was a push to teach Russian. Since the Gulf Wars and 9/11, there's been a demand for Arabic. Business and social interests can also create support for foreign-language learning. There is currently a great need for people who can speak Chinese or Spanish.

HOST: So knowing a foreign language may be a path to a future job.

N. ABADIR: That's definitely true.

HOST: You teach Latin, which doesn't seem very relevant for employment or other practical uses. What's the value in learning a so-called "dead" language?

N. ABADIR: It's been well established by researchers that second language learning improves learning in other areas as well. Sometimes the relationship is fairly obvious. Analyzing the grammar of the second language makes you more aware of language structure and usage in general. That can improve your writing and communication in your native language. But students who learn a second language also tend to perform better and have higher test scores in subjects like math, science, and social studies. In ways we don't fully understand, language learning helps with creativity and problem-solving. I like to think that Latin does even more good because it's not an easy language to learn. It exercises your brain more—plus people think you're really smart if you know Latin! [Laughs.]

HOST [laughing]: I know in my school we always believed the kids taking Latin were the real brains. When is the best time to learn a second language?

N. ABADIR: The earlier you can get started on learning a new language the better. Young children, in general, are able to pick up languages very quickly with no teaching at all. In contrast, most adults are never able to completely master a

second language. The ability to acquire new languages without an accent decreases fairly sharply around the early middle school years. Scientists aren't sure why this is—possibly something to do with physical changes in the brain. Still, if you haven't started learning a language by this “critical period,” don't think you've missed the boat. Some aspects of language learning—grammar and writing for example—happen faster and more efficiently during adolescence than at younger ages.¹

HOST: Now let me ask, if foreign languages are so useful, why are language classes disappearing from so many schools?

N. ABADIR: The usual reason is budget. In hard economic times, schools have to find ways to cut expenses. Foreign-language classes are sort of an easy target. They're not seen as basic subjects like the three R's—Reading, “wRiting,” and “aRithmetic.” Large segments of the public may not have considered their potential usefulness. They view them as luxuries. In addition, many districts—including ours—do not require foreign-language credits for high school graduation.

HOST: Our time is about up. Anything else you'd like to say to our listeners?

N. ABADIR: I would encourage everyone to consider learning a second language. There are lots of resources, like classes at the community center, DVDs at the public library, and programs on TV. You're never too young or too old to start.

HOST: And since kids pick up languages faster than adults, learning alongside your children or grandchildren will give them a chance to feel smarter than you! That's all for today. Thank you to our guest, high school foreign-language teacher Nelson Abadir, and thanks to our audience for tuning in to this segment of “Civil Attitudes.”

¹¹“Adolescence, Brain Development, and Bilingualism,” by Amado M. Padilla, Stanford University, Graduate School of Education.