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¿Usted habla español?

BY ASHLEY DRIGGS

It's the second most spoken language in America, and one that's becoming more and more popular in the classroom. What are the benefits of Spanish immersion programs? What is the best way to learn the language? Local experts and some "immersed" kids weigh-in on the topic.



Last February, local grandmother, Janet Davies, took her 9-year-old granddaughter, Lillie, to Honduras to meet Cindy Carolina Maria José Murta, a little girl Davies sponsors at the Our Little Roses children's home. Lillie, who'd had several years of weekly Spanish classes in school, ironically had a difficult time conversing with little Cindy. "Being in Honduras visiting her 'little sister' was a great incentive to learn more Spanish," says Davies.

Upon their return, Lillie, her mother Connally and grandmother Davies signed up for the fifth annual MTSU Summer Language Institute, a program for accelerated language acquisition founded by Shelley Thomas, Ph.D., associate professor of French in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Middle Tennessee State University. Davies took the advanced beginner teen/adult Spanish class, Connally the beginner teen/adult Spanish class and Lillie the children's class. The goal? To be fluent enough

to carry on a conversation with their little Honduran friend the next time they visited.

The Importance of a Second Language

Experts agree that Lillie is at a great advantage by learning a second language at such a young age. Though in the beginning stages of her learning, Lillie can communicate with Spanish-speaking people quite well. She is receiving the training that some say will put her miles ahead of the pack when it comes to later success in life.

Statistically, the addition or study of a second language helps all areas of the curriculum. "Research has shown that critical thinking skills, listening and even creativity improve in association with foreign language study," says Janice Rodriguez, executive director of the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute. Beckie Gibson, the coordinator of foreign languages for Metro Nashville Public Schools, agrees, pointing out that when learning a language, you use the whole brain: the left brain

— the logical and factual side — as well as the creative parts of the right brain. "It helps students learn their other subjects faster," Gibson says. "Last year, Glendale Spanish Immersion Elementary School (Nashville's only Spanish immersion school) had one of the highest TCAP scores in the city, so it's proven it works."

The importance of language learning also reaches beyond the classroom. As more and more Spanish-speaking citizens move to the United States, the ability of Americans to speak Spanish becomes a social advantage as well. Jane Hardy, a Nashville mother of two, found the value in learning a second language from the time her two boys were very young. "When they were little, I started taking them to anything having to do with foreign languages, especially Spanish," says Hardy, who also volunteers for MTSU's Summer Language Institute. She and her boys became regulars at the Scarritt-Bennett Center's Celebration of Cultures and Cheekwood's Day of

(please turn the page)



the Dead Celebration, and she even hired Hispanic nannies and babysitters. For Hardy, it was a social justice issue. "I wanted them to be of assistance to people who may not be able to connect with all of the services and people that are available to them."

Raising Global Citizens

"We feel that learning a second language increases your chances of becoming a global citizen and a life-long learner," says Sue Clark, principal of Glendale Elementary. Less than a month into its fourth year, the school's waiting list already tops 100. "We have people moving into our zone so they can be guaranteed a spot at our school," says Clark.

Glendale is a partial immersion school, meaning that by law, it can only teach 51 percent or more of the day in English and 49 percent or less in Spanish. At Glendale, math and science are taught in Spanish, and Spanish is also taught as a language. Reading and language arts are taught in English.

"When our children come in kindergarten," says Clark, "they know no Spanish." Four years later, when they move on to middle school, the students are "developing Spanish speakers," a term Clark uses meaning that while the students can speak, read and write Spanish, they are not yet fluent. "The grammar study doesn't come until the fifth and sixth grades," she says. "Ours is more conversational Spanish. We study the culture and the history. We try to put a Latin flavor on things."

Vanderbilt University's Spanish and Iberian Studies department has unofficially adopted Glendale, sharing its resources with the elementary school. "They work closely with our teachers," says Clark. "When they bring in speakers, dancers, authors and painters, they always share those people with our school."

This summer, Clark and seven others traveled to Spain as an exploratory trip. While there, Clark discovered that in Spain, ceramics are a popular choice of artistic expression. Her plan is to start ceramics and outdoor sculpture classes for her students. In an effort to continue the positive experiences of Glendale students, Metro has decided to continue the immersion program by carrying it over from Glendale into its feed school, John Trotwood Moore Middle School. For the students coming out of Glendale, "There is a fifth grade teacher from Spain who will be teaching fifth grade math and science in Spanish," says Gibson.

Immersion. Learning. Acquisition ... What's the Difference?

In the Spanish-as-a-second-language community, there's a difference of opinion on what true Spanish immersion is. Is it more language learning? Or is

it language acquisition? What is true language immersion? According to Thomas, "Learning is what typically happens in the traditional second-language classroom. Acquisition, on the other hand, is an unconscious process that occurs when the person hears enough of the language in a meaningful context and then correctly reproduces the new language because it sounds right." In order for acquisition to take place, the learner must understand the new language that is being used.

With a child who is first learning to speak, parents use lots of sensory cues. If a child picks up a ball, the parent may point to it and say, "ball," in an effort to get the child to say the word. The same is true when a child is immersed in a second language. Lots of sensory cues are used to emphasize the words being spoken. When adults are learning a second language, it's less likely that sensory cues are used as much. This makes it appear that children pick up foreign languages much easier than adults, when, in fact, that is not the case. "Without any contextual cues, it doesn't matter how many times a phrase is repeated. It will not be comprehensible to the listener," says Thomas, in explanation.

In regard to immersion, many believe that a basic ability to speak Spanish is needed in order for immersion to be successful. "Spanish immersion is appropriate once a certain level of fluency is attained," says Hardy. Gibson agrees, "But just a little bit of a base, because the kids pick it up so quickly."

A Novel Approach Out of MTSU: TPR and TPRS

MTSU's Summer Language Institute, offered each summer, took place for the first time in Nashville. The institute's teachers, who are commissioned from all areas of the world, use immersion methods called Total



From left to right: Connally Penley, Lillie Penley and Janet Davies, all of whom participated in the MTSU Summer Language Institute at University School of Nashville.



A teacher's diagram from the MTSU Summer Language Institute's TPR program.

Physical Response (TPR) and TPR Storytelling (TPRS) to teach the students. TPR, developed by James J. Asher in the 1960s, works on the understanding that children learn in the earliest times of their lives by physical response. "A parent might tell the child, 'Take the cookie,' and then hand the object to the child," explains Thomas. "The child responds physically by taking the object."

"Incorporating a physical response serves as a great reinforcement," agrees Rodriguez. "Using the target language to communicate and teach is essential, and if there is no practical application in the world of the child, retention is less likely."

Taking TPR a step further, Blaine Ray, a California Spanish teacher, developed TPRS, which adds the element of storytelling to capitalize on TPR's effectiveness. "When you're laughing and you're doing the stories, you forget you're learning, and the retention rate is higher because your brain isn't stressing," says Hardy. "It's relaxed and you're having fun, so it receives the information in a whole different way."

Hardy's son, Tom Hardy Kochitzky, age 11, took part in the summer program, and he agrees. "TPRS is a fun way of learning Spanish or Chinese or whatever language," he says. "There's no repeat-after-me stuff. They make a story out of it, and they tell you to make an action."

Because of the methods' proven effectiveness, TPR and TPRS are now used in Tennessee's Departments of Social Services to teach Spanish to the case workers.

Other Options

There are plenty of other Spanish options available in Middle Tennessee. The Spanish Language and Learning Center (SLLC) in Hendersonville offers a

full immersion program in which the entire class is conducted in the target language. "In our classes, vocabulary is introduced through activities, visuals, song and dance," says Program Coordinator Suzy Heaton. "This forces the children to make direct connections from the foreign words to their meanings." It's that direct connection that creates stronger memory and builds critical thinking skills.

Heaton says research indicates that 80 percent of all neural pathways are formed by the age of 10, stressing the importance of teaching a second language in early childhood. The SLLC programs are for ages 2-and-a-half through 8 years because that's the window of time that children are in a stage of intense language learning. "Their brains are physically geared toward language acquisition, which is why our program for the youngest students is full immersion," says Heaton. "They learn effortlessly as a result of their own physiology." While Heaton acknowledges that her program may not teach Spanish fluency overnight, she insists that it will come in time. "We spend many years learning our native language, to which we are constantly exposed."



Jane Hardy and son, Tom Hardy Kochitzky

Spanish is Here to Stay

It's a fact that Spanish remains the second most spoken language in America. It's a language that will continue to increase in use among our population. Metro schools' approach is to separate language from the immigration debate and equip students with a second language. Parents are enrolling their children in Spanish programs during the summer and throughout the school year. The world is becoming a smaller place, and children who globetrot and can speak to other nations will no doubt be head-and-shoulders above the rest. And, that's something every parent should hope for. Por ahora es suficiente. (Enough said.) ☺

Ashley Driggs is managing editor for this publication and the mother of three boys ages 6, 4 and 2.

handy links

Get online and explore the area's different Spanish immersion options.

Glendale Spanish Immersion Elementary School
glendalees.mnps.org

MTSU Department of Foreign Languages and Literature
www.forlang.mtsu.edu
(includes information on the Summer Language Institute)

Spanish Language and Learning Center
spanishllc.net

Tennessee Foreign Languages Institute
foreignlanguages.org

Total Physical Response (TPR)
tpr-world.com

Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS)
tprstorytelling.com

immersion at home

Jane Rodriguez of the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute notes that many children's DVDs offer a Spanish track. She encourages watching movies in both English and Spanish. "Use what you have available. Technology is our ally in this endeavor."

Whistlefritz.com, a Web site that sells Spanish immersion DVDs for ages 2 - 6, agrees. Says company president Heidi Stock, "Children are taught Spanish by hearing and speaking only Spanish. Words are not translated from or into English." The company stands by the notion that kids can become immersed in Spanish even if it is on DVD. Available titles include *Los Animales* (Animals), which recently won the National Parenting Center's 2007 Seal of Approval, and *Vamos a Jugar* (Let's Play). Both DVDs are beginner's level and cost \$19.99 each at whistlefritz.com.

Heralded by many as the leader in Spanish-teaching software, **Rosetta Stone** utilizes the Dynamic Immersion technique. Learning on your computer, you skip any translation or memorization and dive right in matching pictures with words and even getting rated on your pronunciation by the program's voiceprint technology. The latest volume, called *Version Three*, can be purchased for online use at rosetta.com or as software at Barnes and Noble or amazon.com. Prices start at \$109.95.