

Where the pigs say “rof-rof”...

At **Judit Horvath's** nursery, foreign language learning – and the considerable early educational benefits it can provide – are but a magic carpet ride away...

Jessica was only three years-old at the time. She belonged to my key group and displayed a great amount of interest in my origins from the first time we met. Having built my teaching approach on what I learnt about child development at university, I believe that the more children know about the world around them, the better their opportunities will be when they grow up. So I introduced the children to my origins and the history of my life through stories, maps, songs and pictures, including some words from my native country, Hungary.

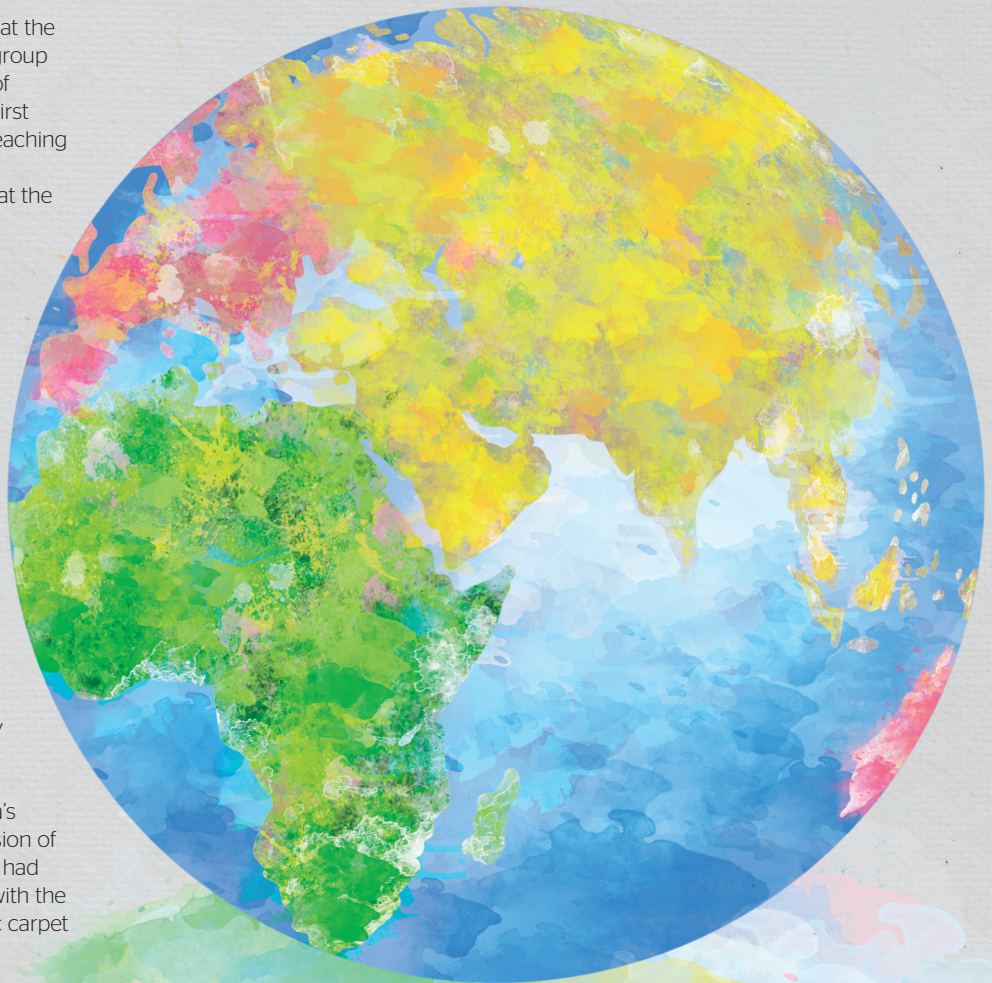
One day, Jessica's mum asked me to talk to her in private; she informed me that due to some serious medical problems, Jessica would be spending a lot of time in hospital in the near future, and they therefore wanted to organise the party of her dreams for her upcoming birthday. However, the only thing Jessica had asked for was to go on holiday to where the pigs say “rof-rof”. When asked what this meant exactly, Jessica answered, “It's magic”. Overcoming my surprise, I told Jessica's mum that this was the Hungarian version of “oink-oink”, and explained how Jessica had learnt this. I described how I pretend with the children that we are sitting on a magic carpet

that can take us anywhere, and which lands when the children point to a place on the map. We then learn about the country the magic carpet has taken us to, including some words from the language of the country if we know them.

A couple of weeks later, Jessica's mum informed me that they had visited Budapest and Jessica had had the time of her life – although she was a little unsure of what the pigs really said, as “it sounded a lot like ‘oink-oink’”...

Like magic...

Commenting on my conversation with Jessica's mum, a parent of a bilingual child once said, “It works almost like magic for them. They switch from one language to another automatically. They don't always seem to know what they say and why, but they can say it.” Parents, practitioners and theorists have mixed views about what the optimal age to begin learning another language is. For a long time it was globally accepted that foreign language learning interferes with language development.





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Today, the majority of research shows that far from interfering with development, learning other languages actually stimulates the learners across their entire learning curve.

The brain plasticity theory of William James states that the brain has the lifelong ability to reorganise neural pathways based on new experiences. As we learn, we acquire new knowledge and skills through instruction or experience. In order to learn or memorise facts or skills, there must be constant functional changes in the brain, which represent the new knowledge. The ability of the brain to change with learning is what is known as neuroplasticity. The theory suggests that a young child's brain has a cellular receptivity to language acquisition that is controlled by a biological clock, which reduces the capacity to learn a language with age. Contemporary theorist Dr Geoffrey S. Koby (Associate Professor of German Translation at Kent University) says that

children have language acquisition devices, which allow them to easily learn sounds, patterns and accents that carry information.

The human biological predisposition to seek social contact indicates that young children, because of their genetic make-up, are more prone to the development of certain skills. The theory states that all human organisms are born with a unique capacity to learn a language, but the theory does not explain the differences in people's development later in life. Some researchers say that Konrad Lorenz's Imprinting theory gives the explanation: imprinting is the primary formation of social bonds and is also considered to be a special type of learning. Lorenz made the following discovery when observing newly hatched ducklings: he found that they behaved in a particular way if they were exposed to abnormal environments during the few critical hours after hatching. The newly hatched ducklings followed and became socially bonded to the first moving object they encountered. Even at maturity, these animals tried to court and attempted to mate with humans if these were 'imprinted' to them. Lorenz was impressed by the fact that a young bird does not instinctively recognise adult members of its own species but requires this special type of learning. Assuming there is a 'critical period' in the early years of children's development when imprinting occurs for language acquisition, the children's superior neuroplasticity enables them to adapt to anything through innate behaviours.

those children who are bilingual develop the concept of object permanence more quickly, as they understand that an object remains the same even though it has a different name in another language.

At the end of a national five-year project in England and Wales, the Centre of Information on Language Teaching and Research listed the main benefits of learning a foreign language at an early age. The teachers of the participating children said that the linguistic and social development and cultural awareness of these children was enormous.

Linguistic, speech & conceptual development

Children learn languages for a very simple reason: they want to express themselves. Their instinct for mimicking and copying helps them to learn and understand language structures very quickly. As they learn, they revisit their learning journey, repeat the concepts and by using the known contexts for discovering new ones, they create their individual pathways. Through repetition, they also create new opportunities to practise using language as a basic skill. Practising this skill in another language means that the children become more sophisticated in understanding their own learning, which helps them as maturing young people. Close imitation and listening becomes more attractive in a different language where the 'boring' routine of practising articulation or recounting information is transformed into exploring something new.

RESOURCE TROLLEY

LEARNING SUPPORT

La Jolie Ronde has been at the forefront of language learning since 1983, and is a leading provider of French & Spanish resources for children aged 0-12, through the delivery of high-quality language classes and resources to early years settings and schools across the UK and Ireland. Visit lajolieronde.co.uk or email info@lajolieronde.co.uk



The benefits

Building on classic theories, a large group of researchers have focused their work on finding out more about the benefits of learning another language. Ellen Bialystok (whose work can be read about in more detail at baycrest.org) at the Centre of Excellence For Early Childhood Development conducted a research study with 137 bilingual and monolingual four- and five-year-olds, and realised that the understanding of and ability to recognise the symbolic relation between letters and sounds is much more highly developed in bilingual children, who therefore master reading more quickly.

A research study carried out by the Canadian National Network for Early Language Learning has also shown that

Social development & cultural awareness

Interaction with others is the essence, as well as a method, of communication. Since it entails communicating in a completely new way, learning a foreign language almost presents the children with the gift of a new personality, which aids the children's imaginative play. Through learning another language children will learn about other countries, cultures and even work through physical limitations. Learning about other people creates the wonderful experience of opening horizons regardless of the children's immediate environment. Through the awareness of other cultures children will realise that things differ from place to place, and so too can their lives change and be different. They will become part of the whole



about the author

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world, and being 'global citizens' provides them with the ability to make informed choices and make the most of opportunities when they decide about their future career later in life.

The invention of EYFS boosts the efforts of those who decide to teach foreign languages in early years. In the EYFS it is a necessary requirement for settings to educate children about other cultures, languages and countries. Each of the four themes – A Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments, Learning and Development – has a principle, or, attached to the principle, a commitment related to learning about other people, respecting each person for who they are and learning to communicate in different ways. The principles state that children are especially interested in other people and in communicating with them using different methods to have 'conversations'. The EYFS also highlights that children are sociable and curious, exploring the world through relationships with others and through all their senses, and that they develop their competence in communicating through having frequent, enjoyable interactions with other people in contexts which they understand.

Every setting, being part of its wider community, may contain many different racial, cultural or religious groups. Even if it does not, those using the setting will be children and adults of various ages with different views, beliefs and backgrounds. When the setting values the local community, it can encourage the different community groups to work together for the benefit of all. Fulfilling the requirements of

EYFS, a nursery has to provide all children with the opportunity to enjoy a full life in conditions that will help them take part in society and develop as an individual, with their own cultural and spiritual beliefs. Good EYFS practitioners ensure that their own knowledge about different cultural groups is up-to-date and consider their own attitudes to people who are different from themselves. The EYFS gives all practitioners the confidence to teach foreign languages to very young children and, being a requirement for all settings, the benefits can be demonstrated to any sceptical parents.

In my practice I often organise encounters with foreign languages for the children – my native Hungarian mainly, my colleague's Filipino and basic French and German. Throughout my early years career in the UK I have met only supportive parents and children who show total interest.

Language learning in practice

You cannot buy the magic carpet, you have to create your own by using anything you already have. And, of course, you can only take the children on the magic carpet if they are interested in going. Some parents will probably express their concern that learning another language may confuse the children and influence the development of their native language knowledge. While practitioners always need to ask parents' permission before starting, they can use the results of academic research to show

parents the real effects of learning foreign languages.

People often confuse the effects of learning a second language with being bilingual. It is true that children who are bilingual tend to have a smaller vocabulary in both languages, but at the same time they understand the patterns of grammar much more readily. And starting to learn a foreign language at the time children can already speak their first, at around age four, does not have the same effects anyway.

Which language you choose to teach is not the main part of this education – the important thing is experiencing another language and being able to make connections between the objects, the meanings of words and the understanding that print carries meaning. Local libraries offer a wide variety of children's bilingual books with an audio resource (CD, DVD). Children's DVDs almost all have an option to change the language. The BBC's *Muzzy* is a language course developed specially for children, with a large variety of stories and games. Many channels offer TV programmes with different languages (for example, *Dora the Explorer* or *Barney the Friendly Dinosaur*). There are a number of websites that provide classic nursery rhymes with the lyrics translated into a foreign language. The language and the teaching methods employed are really of secondary importance – you just need to start and to focus on regular practice.

The most important element of all, however, is to trust the capacity of the young mind, as it is almost unlimited.