

You Don't Have to Take Our Word For How Good This Program Is

Excerpts from articles from the last 35 years

The New York Times

Education Life

A Petite Class in French



THE EIGHT children, some of them barely out of diapers, watched with varying degrees of concentration. "Mains sur la tête!" shouted François Thibaut. His students, accompanied by their mothers, are enrolled in French for Tots, Mr. Thibaut's program, based in a private school in New York City. The class is one of only a handful of formal language schools in this country for very young chil-

dren, but it signals a growing phenomenon in preschool language education. Other schools with similar approaches are in Washington and Chicago.

"Everyone just assumes that because the child cannot speak he cannot learn other languages," said Mr. Thibaut, a Parisian who has taught French in the United States since 1972 and founded the French Workshop for Children, also in New York City, in 1973. "You cannot

explain grammar to a child. You cannot use a blackboard."

But in three years of teaching the course, he has found the opposite to be true. Mr. Thibaut argues that everything from accent to vocabulary to comprehension suffers when training starts later. "The best age to start is before you're verbal," said Mr. Thibaut, who honed his approach while teaching French to children ages 4 and up on a local public radio station.

His method, which combines short intervals of games, songs and activities, is based on the principle that listening and understanding — not speaking — are the building blocks of language. His youngest students are about a year old and the oldest are three.

"Everything is presented to the child as a game," Mr. Thibaut said. Through short songs and games, the children, accompanied by their parents, learn the French names of colors, fruits, vegetables and animals, and simple verbs like sleep, eat and drink.

NEW YORK

BEST BETS

Small Talk

"Kids think they come here to play," says François Thibaut, founder of the French Workshop for Children. "But they leave each session with a grasp of fundamentals." And, judging by a recent visit, they leave with a working vocabulary and an accent parents will envy. Thibaut uses action games so that youngsters (four to fourteen) learn to take direction in French, skits to sharpen communications skills, plus workbooks and tapes.

Teaching Jr. Languages

Undoubtedly, age is not a limiting factor at The French Workshop for Children. Opened in 1973, it has the distinction of being the first language school in the country for babies. "Today it's very important to know another language," said founder and director François Thibaut. "You don't start learning language when you become verbal. In actuality, you begin when you are a baby. So the younger the child, the easier it is to learn. Exposure to a second language at an early age can help a child excel in the comprehension and writing skills of their native language as well."

AmericanWay

Baby Talk

Experts say that the best time to teach children foreign languages is in infancy — at the same time they're learning the mother tongue

At the French Workshop for Children in Manhattan, tots as young as 3 can be heard playing games and singing songs in French. The founder and director of the program, François Thibaut, and his native French teachers use original tapes and workbooks to emphasize speaking with a proper accent. Although English is allowed in the first few classes if a child is uncomfortable, the goal is to have classes

taught totally in French. Thibaut observes that the younger children learn even faster than the older ones:

"The problem we have with the young children is that they have so much fun that they think they are here to play rather than learn. So when class is over, they sometimes cry about having to go home."

Thibaut sums up his philosophy by saying, "They have a lot of energy, so

instead of letting them spend it in negative ways, we use action games related to the visual materials."

Each child has tapes and picture books to take home, and students who attend classes once a week are expected to do homework for about 10 minutes a day. Thibaut says that parents often are rewarded for their efforts by gaining a helpful young guide for vacation trips to France. He frequently hears from parents that a young child was the one who ordered café meals or asked for directions on the Paris metro.

“
We use visual aids and
action games and
various ways to make
learning a language
educational
and fun.”

François Thibaut

The New York Times, 1988