

People

Babies “have the strongest neurological capacity to absorb language,” says Thibaut (with pupils and parents in a Manhattan class).

Small Talk

François Thibaut shows tots can learn foreign languages even before they can speak

“Bonjour! Bonjour!” an ebullient François Thibaut exclaims to six pupils in his 9:30 a.m. French class. No “hellos” back, though: These scholars are just 6 to 18 months old. That’s fine with Thibaut, who begins serenading the babies, perched on parents’ laps, with “Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques.” As founder of the 26-year-old Language Workshop for Children—

which offers French and Spanish classes to thousands of New York City-area kids, 800 of whom are aged 3 or younger—the Paris-born teacher helped pioneer the notion that the tiniest tots benefit from language instruction. “Even if the child doesn’t continue in the language, learning so young clearly stimulates brain activity,” says Thibaut, 51, who studied literature at the Sorbonne before moving to the U.S. in 1972. Recent research confirming such claims has helped his toddler tutorials—at \$485 for 14 sessions—take off. Correspondent Bob Meadows talked with Thibaut, who employs 10 teachers at seven locations, in his Manhattan home.

Why do you teach such young kids?

As a tutor, I noticed that the younger the child, the easier time he had learning to speak French. So I decided to focus on children aged 3 to 6. I then wondered: Since a 3-year-old could learn another language, why not someone even younger? People thought I was crazy. But I tried it, and it worked.

But babies can’t even speak yet.

Children absorb words before they are ready to use them. Studies show they recognize language as early as 4 months. At 6 to 9 months, they begin comprehending. You can tell my students who are that age to do something in French or Spanish, and they will do it. By the 12th month, they start repeating words they’ve heard. My students’ parents tell me that one day they hear their 1-year-old, all of a sudden, sing a song in French.

Can't learning a second language confuse kids?

People used to say that. But think of all the children who grow up bilingual because their parents speak two languages. They don't get confused. Their brains are ready to learn as many languages as they're exposed to. Research now shows that learning a second language at a young age not only doesn't hinder children; it helps them do better in their native language and in other academic subjects. The first three years are critical to developing the intellectual potential a youngster carries for life.

What is the best age to start learning a language?

From birth to 3 years is prime time. For toddlers, learning one language is no more difficult than learning another. They can reproduce any sound without an accent. For exam-



Thibaut teaches vocabulary with art that "makes the child laugh."

ple, in Japan, the sounds *r* and *l* do not exist, so a Japanese adult learning English would have a hard time making those sounds. But a Japanese baby will have no problem making them. He or she hasn't been conditioned to do otherwise.

What happens with older kids?

After age 7 or so, learning a second language is not so natural anymore. Those children can, of course,

still learn, but it will be by translation, by learning grammar, by reading. And they will have an accent. I learned English in high school, which is much too late. Everyone tells me I have a charming accent. I wish I didn't!

How do your classes work?

We balance moving, listening and looking. Repetition and humor are important. For example, we sing traditional songs, and we sing funny songs that are written just for the children. I had a musician write a song that repeats "*Je suis malade*" ("I am sick") as the children say their arm hurts, their stomach hurts, their head hurts. They love it. It's fun, and later on the words will be there when they need them.

If the language isn't reinforced at home, won't the child lose it?

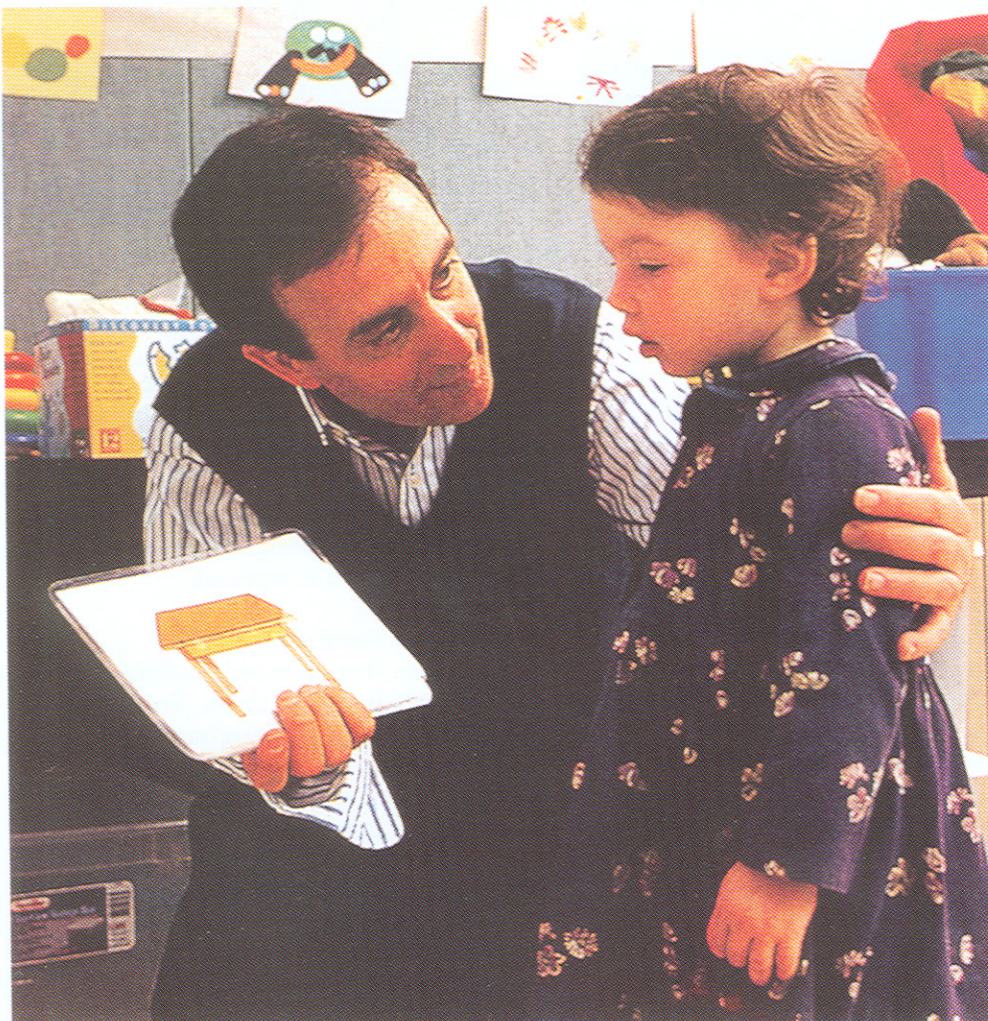
Yes. But when he is older, he'll be able to master it much more easily than an adult learning it for the first time. I have had former students call me up to tell me that they didn't speak French again until taking a class years later. But then they were able to speak it without an accent.

What if parents don't want to pay for a special language class?

If you speak another language, read to your children in that language. You can also buy audiotapes of children's songs or videotapes of cartoons in another language from educational toy stores or catalogs. Your children will develop an ear for the way words are pronounced, which will make it easier if they take formal lessons later. Parents can also lobby their school districts to offer language classes for kindergartners. Most American elementary schools still don't offer foreign languages, but more of them are starting to.

What's the point of learning more than one language?

Foreign languages used to be seen as a luxury. Not anymore. Americans are beginning to realize that we live in a global world. ●



To teach tots, "you have to have a lot of energy," says Thibaut (with student Zoe Schein, 2).