

The Earlier, the Better?

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Several years ago, our government realized the importance of learning English, and announced a policy that students have to learn English starting at the third grade in elementary school. However, if you ask children when they started learning English, you may get some incredible answers like age 5 or 6, or even earlier. Some parents believe that “earlier equals better”. They don’t want their little sweethearts lose at the “starting line”, so the best way to avoid that is to let their kids learn English before others. Parents send their kids to expensive language schools; some kids even learn English before Chinese. But is it really necessary to learn English at such an early age? I don’t think so, and the following are my reasons.

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First, according to some research done by education psychologists, kids’ attention spans are limited, which means that they can’t receive too much information at once. If kids learn English before they are familiar with their mother tongue, Chinese, they might be confused about these two languages; therefore, it may cause them to have bad Chinese ability, but they can’t speak English well, either. I have seen some real examples before: when a teacher asked some kids how to pronounce the English letter “T”, they pronounced it as the Chinese phonetic symbol “T”, and later, they also confused the letter “X” and the Chinese “X”. It was obvious that they were confused by the two languages. Actually, Taiwan students’ Chinese ability has become worse and worse in recent years, and I think learning English too early is one of the reasons that caused this problem.

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Second, 2 to 6-year-old kids are not mature enough to accept a new language because their brains are not well developed yet; if we teach them English at this age, it

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will take a lot of time; therefore, why don't we save time and familiarize them with Chinese, and teach them English when they are mature enough? A true example is that

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some kids in the first grade spent 40 minutes to learn five animals' names in English, but they forgot them once they stepped out the classroom, but some kids in fourth grade only spent 10 minutes to learn them. Another point is that if they learn English when they are too young, it is easy for them to fail. One of my students told me that

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he hated English because, when he was a child, his mother forced him to study English day and night, but as a 5-year-old kid, he couldn't achieve the goal that his mom set for him. The feeling of failure made him want to give up.

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Third, some parents think that if their kids learn English earlier, they won't have

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a Chinese accent. I can't deny it because according to some studies, it is true that

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learning English earlier lessens the accent. (I imagine this is only true when being taught by a native speaker.) However, I think it is O.K. to have an accent. Actually,

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there are so many countries that speak English in the world, and they all have their own special accent. Even in the U.S, people from the north and south have different accents. It is really unnecessary to learn English earlier only to avoid the accent problem.

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To sum up, I think it is really unnecessary to learn English too earlier. So much evidence shows that earlier doesn't equal better. Maybe you believe that your kids have unknown potential, but don't forget that sometimes stress can kill people.

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