



RESEARCH REPORT

New Keys to Language Acquisition

AS DEMOGRAPHICS CONTINUE to shift across the country, more schools are serving the needs of English-language learners. New research from the University of Houston (UH) suggests that educators should rethink how new languages are taught and learned.

The study observed monolingual and bilingual participants learning a new language. Those who spoke English or Spanish, or both, were taught a completely new language: Hungarian. Hungarian is different enough from both languages to create a level playing field.

The results show that half of the language learners could learn the new sounds, and half could not.

Essentially, being fluent in two languages did not guarantee an advantage in learning a third.

One of the study's authors, Arturo Hernandez, professor and director of the Developmental Psychology Program at UH, acknowledges that recent research shows that bilingual students are indeed better at learning new vocabulary. However, when presented with new sound systems, language acquisition remained the same. Instead, the study found that there are merely "good perceivers" and "bad receivers" of brand new languages.

"In our study, we found people that seem to be intuitive about the sounds, independently of how many languages they speak," Hernandez said. "That could serve as a predictor of whether someone could learn another language more easily or not. That was an eye opener for me because I feel like now we are starting to find different factors that predict the ability to learn different things. Now, the question is how we put this together."

This research presents new ideas that could impact how language is taught in schools, especially to second-language learners. Being able to assess a student's innate ability to perceive new sounds from a language could prove to be a more significant factor in language acquisition.

"I would hope the results of this research would allow us to dramatically change the time at which we introduce a second language and the

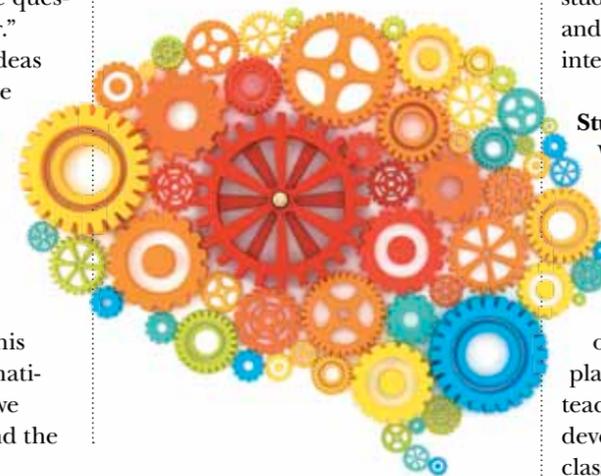
method that we use, such as a stronger emphasis on learning the sounds of a language rather than learning vocabulary and memorizing it for a test."

Read more about this research in the February 2013 issue of the journal, *NeuroImage*.

Buzzword: Brain Plasticity

What it Means: Brain plasticity, or *neuroplasticity*, describes how brains organize neural connections, and how these connections are strengthened or severed. Essentially, receiving information or performing a task will affect your brain's actual structure.

Why it Matters: Instead of viewing the brain as a fixed structure in which information should simply be deposited, neuroplasticity shows that brains are much more flexible, and can be dramatically improved with proper practice.



How it Affects Teaching: When both teachers and students are more aware of this flexibility, much more can be taught and learned. Teachers make less assumptions about student ability, and students feel they have a much greater capacity to learn.

Member Spotlight: Janiene V. Marlow Giving Power Back to Students through Assessments

Position: Principal, Horseshoe Trails Elementary School, Phoenix, Arizona



School Vision: Creating "a school where all students would exceed our expectations and learn to be citizens of honor and integrity."

Student Assessment Best Practice:

With help from author and educator Lee Jenkins, Marlow has created a unique system for tracking academic progress that encourages teachers and students alike to focus on growth. End-of-year student placement cards offer the next year's teacher data and observations to help develop class lessons. What's more, classroom tools ensure that students are engaged with tracking their own progress.

"All students are given control of learning through the use of gifted strategies in the classroom, i.e. choice boards, tic-tac-toe boards, hop scotch-ing and menus," says Marlow. "Students are able to monitor their own growth through independent L to J graphs and many teachers use graphs for tracking fluency and comprehension growth."

MYTWCENTS

What's the best resource you've found to further your own professional development?

Without a doubt, Twitter! Hearing things directly from the experts makes it real time and relevant. My Twitter feed is my morning newspaper.

—Peter Carpenter, *via Facebook*

I learn the most by doing. I have grown the most professionally when given the opportunity to work collaboratively with other principals to develop best practices around topics like RTI and formative assessment. The conversations are the best when they are grounded in text.

—Don Cowart II, *via Facebook*

Books, books, books! *The Art of Possibilities* is my favorite. It teaches us to view every situation, challenge, or celebration with hope. It allows leaders to lead student centered change while considering amazing possibilities to success, versus roadblocks.

—Gabe Simon, *Via Facebook*

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