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If the key to learning a language is to start very young, isn't there an obvious solution to the current languages crisis?

Education, education, education! Tony Blair said it three times to underline its importance, but what has changed? Not much.

They say we learn from our mistakes, but in the case of learning itself it seems we do not - otherwise would we still be changing key parts of the educational process every year? How many revisions of the system will it take before we realise that no amount of tinkering with exams, curricula or assessment strategies will solve the fundamental problem - how to interest all of our kids in education. Does anyone really ask what is happening to the loads of kids who sit in lessons, bored out of their minds, picking their noses in the back row - if they make it to school in the first place?

Despite the plethora of research data available, the education system continues to get it wrong. A case in point is language learning, which is in crisis. Research from the US shows that non-English speaking immigrants'

eventual level of proficiency in English is lower if they arrive after the age of about five. We all know that the sooner we start to learn a language the better. Indeed the language we learn at school appears to reside in a different part of the brain from our native language. Perhaps this is because the whole input process is different.

When a dog bit me, my mum said it was a dog, but when I learnt French I saw an ill-drawn dog with the letters c-h-i-e-n underneath it in a book. I had no idea how to pronounce the word. My first inclination would be to say chy-en and certainly not she-n; with the 'n' pronounced out of the "nd" of my nose. The whole experience was distanced and foreign. I did not get to France or hear anyone other than my French teacher speak French until I was a teenager so French was a very low priority after art, science, English, tennis and girls.

I didn't do well at French, although I tried quite hard. Who should shoulder the blame - me, my teacher, the system or my parents?

No matter how much I argued that it was actually the fault of the French for not speaking English or, at the very least, Wellington's for not letting Napoleon win at Waterloo, so solving the European Union problem 200 years ago, my dad was in no doubt - it was mine.

On the other hand, being refugees from Germany, my parents often spoke German. As a schoolkid with a funny name in Bolton just after the war, the last thing I wanted was to stand out any further by being able to speak a language originating south of Stockport - let alone in Germany. But no matter what barriers I put up, somehow I osmotically absorbed some German, even though it is really only *kinder Deutsch* (children's German).

Such intrinsically untranslatable phrases as *Der Bengel frist wie ein Affe* (literally, "the rascal eats like a monkey") come spontaneously to mind.

The point is that I learnt it because I heard the sounds of spoken German from my earliest months and if at any point I sensed that my parents might be talking about me, I would immediately prick up my ears. Apparently "vee hef vays" of learning language automatically whether we like it or not - it is the way we survive. We probably store sound memories and make subliminal connections all the time without thinking.

So, one solution to the language problem that would have a guaranteed 100 per cent success rate would be to ship all our toddlers off to France, Spain, Japan or China. After all, every little French kid is fluent in French - without trying - long before they ever sit in front of a desk.

Moreover, some people go abroad for hospital treatment: why not do the same with education? Learning by osmosis rather than by pressure is a much more natural and successful process. If I had small kids today, I think I would try to help them to learn another language without trying.

Various ideas could be useful, such as setting up a projector and displaying non-stop images on one wall of the kids' room of school playgrounds and street scenes from France, Spain, Japan or China - just everyday life-size scenes and sounds of kids talking and playing. At least that way they would see and hear everyday sounds and activities

from another country from toddler age onwards. They might just take notice of the things they find interesting if they don't have any pressure on them to do so. One thing we know is that when kids start school it's far too late for far too many.

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