

Opening the Window to Foreign Language

Video Workshop Transcript

Bonjour tout le monde et bienvenue! Voulez-vous apprendre une langue étrangère? Vous pouvez enseigner les enfants chez vous. C'est bien possible! Ask any homeschooler if they want their children to learn a foreign language and they may answer, “Sure! Are you going to come and teach them for me?”

My name is Sara Rask and I am a curriculum consultant here at Rainbow Resource Center. I also happen to be a French teacher, but I don't expect you to be. While I am not able to come over and teach your kids to speak French, I want to help you work a second language into your homeschooling day. It may be easier than you thought.

Let's begin with the reality of your day. You may have several kids of several ages learning several topics at any one time. You also have to prepare meals and fold laundry and other things. Your educational priorities include math and science, language arts and social studies—not necessarily a foreign language. I wonder if you would try it, IF I could simplify the process for you and your students...hmmm.

A few things to consider about foreign language learning in general:

1. Do not expect instant results, learning a language is a process like any other learning. Be consistent but be patient with your student's progress.
2. Not all programs are created equally; there are immersion and partial immersion programs, traditional type programs, weaves, and workbooks and songs. They all may have a purpose in your child's learning.
3. It's ok that it's fun. Sing songs with little ones, make food with older ones, laugh and enjoy yourselves. A foreign language is essentially an elective even for a homeschooler. Make it appealing for the kids.
4. Bi-lingual dictionaries are fine as a resource, but not as a crutch. Looking up every word will get tedious really quickly for everyone. Tell kids to focus on verbs and objects—the subject of a sentence will be obvious so let that go. Prepositions and articles are not imperative to understanding meaning, so let that go too. Online dictionaries can be tricky however if you try to put in more than a word or phrase at a time.

There are a few terms you should become familiar with when it comes to choosing foreign language material for your children. I will be using them often as we go through this workshop and you will see them in our product descriptions as well both in the catalog and on our website.

- ‘**Target language**’ refers to whatever language you are studying. If you are learning to speak French, then French is the target language.
- ‘**Native**’ refers to the language spoken in a particular country as well as speakers of that language in that country. Our native language here is English.
- ‘**Language window**’ (this is going to come up a lot) refers to how easily it is for us to absorb a language verbally. The window is wide open with babies and gradually closes on us throughout childhood. The more open the window, the easier languages will become natural for us. At about middle school, your child's window is about half open. Carpe Diem! Seize the day! As an adult, our language window is open a crack. We can still learn a new language, but we will have to work hard for it.
- ‘**Exposure**’ is another term you're going to hear over and over. It's an introduction of the sounds and structure of the language to your children. The goal is to train their ears to the sounds and have them mimic what they hear.

When little kids are exposed to the sounds of a foreign language, those sounds become natural to them. If you ask an adult English speaker to roll their “R” like in Spanish or in French, they may or may not be able to do it. But if that adult was exposed to that sound as a child, they'll most likely be able to roll their “R”s now.

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Here is another example for you. Have you ever heard a French person speak English? They sound like Maurice Chevalier singing the theme to “*The Aristocats*”. Zey say zings like, “Euh zees ees my friend Nicolas. He ees zee president of zee company.” Why can’t he say “the” and “this?” The reason is that “th” and “i” are not sounds in the French language and it is not *natural* for him to say it. He was likely not exposed to English when his language window was wide open as a small child.

- ‘**Fluency**’ is achieved when you can express yourself in speech and in writing in the target language, you can understand a native speaker speaking at a natural pace and you can read a book in the target language. This takes many years of study to achieve if you are not exposed to the target language daily.
- ‘**Immersion**’ means there is no English—none, nada, *absolument rien!* The older we are, the more this bothers us. Ask yourself, “Does it bother your student that there is no English in a program, or does it bother *you?*” Young children learn languages with immersion very easily. Older kids will benefit from an immersion program as far as learning goes, but they may need an introduction first and we’ll get into that later.
- ‘**Partial immersion**’ means that while you are building fluency, you are using English as a bridge to the target language. Some parts will be in English while other parts will be completely in the target language. English is often used to explain concepts in the target language like a new verb tense.
- A ‘**weave**’ is a blending of the target language and the native language. It typically begins with all native language and gradually shows key words in parentheses in the target language. As students learn more of the target language, more words are shown in parentheses until the ratio shifts to show more words in the target language than the native language. Here is what a “weave” looks like:

Jack and Monica are friends (amis). Jack lives in Paris and is 12 (douze) years old. Monica is 12 also (aussi) and she lives (habite) in Geneva (a Geneve.)

Jacques et Monique sont (are) les amis. Jacques habite a Paris et il a douze ans. Monique a douze ans aussi et elle (she) habite a Geneve.

- “**Novice**” refers to someone new to learning a foreign language.
- “**Formal assessment**” vs. “**informal assessment**”—a formal assessment is pretty much a written test that students take to show you what they know or don’t know. You use an answer key to check the test and they are either right or wrong. An informal assessment can be a variety of things that show you what your student is learning: a checklist, a rubric, a poster, a presentation, a conversation can also be an informal assessment.

We are going to break this down into four age groups and what you can do at each age level. I have ideas for the novice learner and the advanced learner as well as product ideas for you. You will hear French in my examples because it’s what I know, but the same ideas will apply to most languages. Also, while both Latin and American Sign Language are often categorized under the heading of “foreign languages,” I will be talking about modern, spoken languages also referred to as “living languages.” In fact, many colleges recognize ASL as a foreign language in high school. Some questions I will be answering include: How young can you start? Do you need a workbook? What about high school credits? And...How can I teach a language I don’t speak?

OUTLINE FORMAT:

Age Group:

Novice Ideas:

Advanced Ideas:

Products:

Let's start with the youngest learners: toddlers to about 1st grade. Babies are born with their language learning window wide open. The language they hear spoken most becomes dominant in their brain, or natural. If a baby is raised with bilingual parents in the home, they grow up with both languages as natural. As children grow older, the language window gradually closes. This does not mean that older kids can't learn a second language, but it will be easiest for the youngest children. Immersion materials are going to work beautifully with these students. Little kids don't have that giggling voice in their head like teenagers do that tells them to be embarrassed by making new sounds or trying new things. Since writing at this point is still being learned in the English language, this is a time to focus on speaking and listening skills in a fun and informal way. Look for products with songs or videos in the target language—full immersion (no English!)—and go for repetition even if it drives you crazy listening to the same song over and over in the car on the way to the grocery store. Exposure is your goal here, but if you have done a couple years of exposure at this age level, you can overlap into the next age group as far as your goal and the materials you choose.

For the Novice, keep exposure time short, maybe 5 minutes at a time to start. The first time you show a video, be very enthusiastic in front of your child. Make them curious about why you are so excited about what is on the television. Repeat the same song or video every day for a week and see if your little one starts to repeat what they are hearing. If they do, add another 5 minutes or another song to their repertoire.

You can think of your exposure time as your foreign language lesson. This can go on as long as you want it to, even a year or two. You can do one "lesson" a day or one a week, but the more you repeat the content, the better it will stick. There are many products to choose from, so if you tire of one, you can mix in another. Alternate between songs and videos, but working one in daily is going to work the best for long term retention.

After a year or two of exposing your child to the target language, you could introduce a simple vocabulary workbook if they are at an age to write or flashcards with pictures and pronunciation help. Continue with the audio and video. You could watch a video together and ask your child to tell you what they see. Sing a song together and leave the chorus for your child to sing solo. Ask your little one, "What is this?" when you are doing something you have seen in a video, like eating an apple. What you are doing is called an *'informal assessment'* of their language learning. It's like a test that is not really a test, but tells you something about what they are absorbing.

Some products for this age group:

- **Little Pim** are DVDs using immersion & a music CD .
- **Bilingual Baby** are colorful & stimulating DVDs.
- **Bilingual Beginner** and **Bilingual Preschool** are books & music CDs.
- **French & Spanish Bible Songs** from the people who make Mission Monde.
- **Hola Amigos!** are animated videos.
- And there's a series called **Learn Languages through Fairytales** that are DVDs using a slow immersion approach.

Okay, it's pep-talk time.

When kids get older, the content gets harder for kids and for parents too. I remember when I could no longer help my boys with their math homework; I think they were in 3rd grade. "Fun and games" learning is replaced with a more structured day and *a lot* more material to learn, and you are *not* a foreign language teacher...Ok, I get it.

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Think of yourself as a facilitator. If I had to teach my kids math I would be in the exact same mind set as you are with foreign language. You don't have to have a degree or be fluent in a language to get your child learning. You facilitate learning by setting the scene and finding the materials to help you and your kiddo. You are a homeschool parent; you can do this! You are the most dedicated person on the planet to your child's education. You are a coach and cheerleader. You excel at multi-tasking. You are a presenter of the material and a mirror for what your child's learning.

Let them be the "French teacher" to you. You can even make it out like they are teaching you a weekly lesson. How fun would *that* be for a 3rd grader?! After a week of learning a language under the guidance of Mom or Dad, to then be in the teacher role on Friday. Or you could give them the weekend to "prepare their lesson" to present to you on Monday. Of course, what this role-reversal is really doing is serving as an informal assessment of what your child is learning. No test, just show me what you know; bring it! If there are multiple kids learning the same language, this could be a chance for them to demonstrate what they are learning by presenting a situation like a skit, greeting friends and family, ordering food at a restaurant, or even asking for directions and giving them, say to a museum.

The next age group I would like to address is the elementary students between about grades 2 and 5. If you are just beginning to study a foreign language with your student, your goal is *exposure*. Train their ears to the sounds of the language even though they don't understand the content. Let them sing songs and imitate what they hear even if it's not perfect. Avoid anything written if this is their first introduction.

Use the same tactics you would use on younger kids, but put the ball in their court a bit more. Let them feel like they are figuring something out. Show interest and ask them to tell you about a song or a video. Talk about the different sounds you're hearing. Ask your child what is different about this language? What is the same in both languages? Look at a map or a globe and talk about where kids speak the target language around the world. Look for a video of kids the same age as yours, speaking the language in their own country. Ask your student to point out similarities about where they live and where you live. You are sharing with your child that the world is a big place and people are people wherever they may live. People eat and drink and work and live in different ways and they also speak different languages.

So what about the non-novice? It is now time to add a written component. A simple workbook will suffice. Find one with pictures that your student will enjoy doing. Since this is not a core subject, you want the student to like learning a new language. That is not to say that you shouldn't be structured about the lesson. Agree to do a page a day, and if your child wants to do more... Then yay you! Do a written assignment after the audio or video component. See if you can make a connection between the two, or better yet, ask your child to make the connection!

Flashcards are another option and this is a do-it-yourself kid project. Get a bilingual dictionary and a set of index cards. Let your child go around the house labeling everyday objects in the target language. Give them some guidelines when it comes to the tape so you don't get it on your good furniture. Have them put the article (a or the) in front of the noun also to designate gender and number. For example: on a bowl of apples they would write a card that reads '*les pommes*', which tells you that the word 'apples' is plural and you can write an (f.) after the word to show it's feminine in its singular form. They would write *le miroir* to show that the word 'mirror' is masculine and singular. Learning these details now will help them later when they are making adjectives agree with nouns in both gender and number and writing sentences.

Do not let them write the English word, only the target language on the card, this will continue the immersion experience for your child. Also, continue with the audio and look for ones using native speakers. Keep training your kids' ears to the sounds. Listen in the car, listen with a book, download songs to an MP3 player in the language and tell your kids that they don't have to recognize all of the words, just listen and enjoy the music. You want them to hear the sounds. Keep it low key, low pressure. You want them to *want* to learn the target language, let it be (somewhat) their idea to explore further.

Here are some workbooks and flashcards for this stage of learning:

- **Skill Builders** are vocabulary workbooks.
- **DK Language Learner** kits are workbooks with audio CDs and a dictionary.
- **Learning to Speak Spanish** is a basic vocabulary workbook.
- **Word Puzzle** books are crosswords & word searches in a variety of levels of difficulty.
- **Bilingual Flashcards** are great for vocabulary practice.
- **Dice**—use these in creative ways. They have the numbers written out in words in the foreign language. Have kids make up a game, or substitute the dice in a favorite board game with these for extra language practice.
- The **Learn Languages through Fairytales** are going to work here kids are already familiar with the story so they can focus on the language rather than comprehension; they know what happened to Goldilocks.
- **Teach Them Spanish** are teacher idea books with worksheets.
- **Let's Speak Spanish** are vocabulary workbook with conversation.

The third age group I want to address are those middle schoolers; kids from about grades 5 to 8. If you are just starting them on a second language, ease them into it, but you are not going for just exposure here. These kids can do more. Also, their language window is not quite as open as it was a few years ago, so something with a writing component is appropriate. In fact, that window is now only about half open. If you go for a full immersion program with these guys, they may panic on you—and then they'll whine ... and we don't want that.

Look for something with an audio component that is connected to a writing component. Since kids at this age are used to writing, this will help them digest this foreign language in a way that is logical to them.

Some items to consider for these kids would be:

- **10 Minutes a Day**—a workbook with audio CDs.
- **DK Language Learner Kits**—workbook, flashcards, CD.
- **Learn Languages through Fairytales**—videos of familiar stories.
- **Easy Spanish Step by Step** is a book of basic & practical grammar.
- **Let's Speak Spanish** are books that use conversation to bring in vocabulary & grammar.

For the kids who have already been exposed to the sounds of the target language and have some writing practice using it, it's time to look at language programs. Look for something with listening, speaking, reading, writing. IT IS TIME! They should be comfortable enough with the sounds to go into a full immersion program whether it is software or books and CDs.

You can look at:

- **The Learnables**—immersion program using workbook & audio CDs.
- **Powerglide** is a weave.
- And for a mature 8th grader, take a look at **Tell Me More** or **Rosetta Stone** which are both immersion programs.

High schoolers and foreign language is serious business. Immersion and credits and college ...OH MY!

If your big kid is a novice language learner, and you're not sure where to begin, there are a few possible scenarios. Tell me if any of these fit your present situation:

- 1 – You make them do 2 years of *something* because you think they have to have it to graduate. You may get minimal effort on the part of the student, and let's face it Mom, you may be lackluster in keeping tabs on their learning at this age.
- 2 – They are eager little students that want to learn a new language and are asking you to get them *something*. You are not sure what to get. You think there is only one choice because you saw it on TV...so it has to be good, right?
- 3 – Someone gave you an old version of a language program. You don't have all of the parts, but the price was right so you will make it work. This can be frustrating for everyone. Think of someone giving you a puzzle with pieces missing. Sound like fun to you? It won't to your student either. Most revisions are beneficial and make a program easier to use and enhance learning.
- 4 – Or maybe you're looking for a less expensive, but still effective program to do for a year or two. It is not an option to spend hundreds of dollars on an elective course.

Remember when I talked about babies and their language windows being wide open? Well your big kid's window is about three-quarters of the way closed now. It's ok to put these kids into an immersion program without prior exposure if they really want to learn the language. But let them go at a pace that is manageable for them. There's going to be a warming-up period. Caution—there may be a fuss...“I can't do this. It's in Spanish.” Or this one...“Um, Mom, how am I supposed to learn this when I have no clue what they are saying?” If you believe they are really trying, let them warm up to the language and proceed when they get comfortable. Tell them to go slowly. Repeat the same lesson until they see progress in their comprehension. Encourage them to share their frustrations and their breakthroughs with you. What are their expectations for the week? For the year? Are they being realistic?

Make sure they understand that they are in charge of what they get out of this program. Document what your goals are. Post these goals in your student's work space. Are you trying to CLEP out of language classes once you get to college? Are you going to take an AP test? Or are you going for a well-rounded high school transcript including two or three years of a foreign language?

No one says you have to do a new lesson every day. You can do the same lesson every day for 2 weeks at first if that's what your student needs to do to build some momentum. Ask your student what would help. Be that facilitator. Do they want a dictionary? A workbook? Flashcards? These are all economical options that you can provide whether you borrow one or buy one.

If they're not trying, it may be because they need a different type of warm-up. Kids will stop trying out of frustration, just like we adults do. Try a different product with a different approach for awhile, and then come back to the immersion program. Remember, their language window is not as open as it once was and they are having to work much harder now at learning this foreign language.

Another possibility is that your student has had some exposure to the language, but hasn't really done a program to speak of. What do you do? They are probably a good candidate to be successful with an immersion program. Let them do short bits at a time, maybe 10 minutes a day for the first few weeks. Have them keep a vocabulary notebook where they write new words as they hear them and take time later to look them up. Assign them to write sentences in their notebook using the new words. Your novice may only get through half of the first year of a program, and that's ok. You can either do the 2nd half over the summer or wait until the next school year to finish it.

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Now—the perfect storm has arrived! Your child has been exposed to the target language in their elementary years. They've done a couple years of a program in middle school, and they are prepared to go in depth in their language study in high school. The clouds open and rays of sunlight shine down on you and your ready-for-fluency second language learner! These kids are fully capable of an immersion program, or any program for that matter, for the next several years. They can use the program independently of Mom or Dad with you having a weekly conference about what they're learning. If you have them keeping a notebook like we just discussed, this would be a good place for weekly commentary by the parent on your child's progress. They should be able to complete a full level of any program in one school year. Any opportunities you can provide for your student to use the target language will be a tremendous help to their learning.

Since this is not always possible, you want to seek out websites or printed resources that are in the target language including newspapers of other countries. You can print off some articles from foreign newspapers; use them for grammar and vocabulary practice. Have your student summarize an article in their own words. Newspapers use a lot of sophisticated language that will not be a part of your child's repertoire. Have them compare the verb tenses used in a news article with an exercise in a workbook. Talk about formal and informal language in English. Ask your student if they speak to their friends the same way they speak to a grandparent or an employer. Point out that we use formal and informal language and so do other countries. Ask if how they speak is the same as how they would write a research paper. How is it different?

If you have a friend who is traveling to a country speaking the target language, ask them to bring back brochures or magazines in the target language for your student. Look for packaging in the language. This could be anything from food to electronics. Think about why these products have the particular language on them. Is the product sold to Canada or maybe Mexico?

You want to show your student that is studying this language that it is relevant to the world and to them. What do they want to study in college? What job would they like to have as an adult? Do they want to travel for business? Or do they hope to share the language with their own children someday? Or maybe they just like it because they like it

Some products for this age would include immersion programs.

- **Rosetta Stone** has 1- 5 levels in a box, includes voice-recognition software (which is like a teacher correcting your child's accent), works on a variety of computer systems, and has many, many languages to choose from.
- **Tell Me More** is also an immersion program. It has a total of 10 levels in a box, and you choose 5 consecutive levels. That means if you've had language before you don't have to start at level 1; you can go to level 3 or 4 and do the next 5 levels. It also has voice-recognition software, it only works on Windows computers, and it has a nice selection of languages to choose from (not as many as Rosetta, but it's a really good value and it's definitely worth your consideration.

Some good grammar books here include:

- **McGraw Hill's Big Book of Verbs**
- **Grammar Drills**
- **Barron's Verb Books**

Traditional programs are going to work as well here like:

- **Bob Jones Spanish**—includes a teacher and a student text, a teacher and a student activity book, audio CDs, tests & an answer key.

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So what about language credits? Does one year of language study equal one year of credit? The answer is not so straight forward. Of course *you* may assign your student a foreign language credit for each year of study, depending somewhat on your state laws regarding homeschool transcripts, but a college may see it differently. Your student may have to take an entrance exam, like a CLEP test, to see what sort of credits can be given for classes they are qualified to skip in college. For example, if you take a French CLEP test after many years of study, you may get credit for 2 or 3 college French classes depending on your score. This saves parents money in the long run and parents really like that.

To learn if a college will accept a certain curriculum for credit, you really need to find out from the school itself. Credits do not come in the box when you buy a program. An exception to this would be if your child completes an accredited online program. The academy holds your student accountable for the material through testing and such, where a home-type program does not do this. Be sure to investigate this thoroughly when you're considering this type of program.

On the other hand, it's quite possible for a high school student to sit in front of a computer-based language program and not get the much out of it at all. Parents may see their high schooler apparently working diligently at the computer. They're hearing Spanish, assuming the child is actively learning while Mom spends time with younger kids doing math and spelling. If your teenager is not motivated to learn the language, this format is not going to be the best choice. You may want a more traditional program with a text book and a workbook, exams and listening CDs. This will help you keep on top of their learning.

A workbook will help parents at this time with any program choice. Use it as a communication tool with your kiddo. Have a weekly meeting where you ask them questions about what they are doing in their language program. Ask to see their vocabulary notebook. You can use these words to create a vocabulary quiz if you want to. Or better yet, have your student write a test for himself! What's the point of this, you ask? It's an assessment tool. Do you want to assess what they *do* know? Or what they *do not* know? Think about that one...

Go over their grammar workbook and see how it looks to you. Feel free to play against type here. Yes, you are the parent, but your child probably knows more French (or whatever language) than you do at this point. Have some fun with it. Ask them to explain concepts even if you are not sure if they're right or not. Put on your best "this is very interesting" face like you did when they were little and wanted you to play trucks and you didn't want to play trucks. Bring that forward again! It's definitely a subject where you and your student will get out of it what you put into it.

When it comes to materials, do you have to buy a ton of stuff to get started in a foreign language? Well, if you keep in mind that your initial goal is to expose them to the sounds of a new language, all you need is something to listen to. Look for native speakers on any audio material you purchase. Look for websites in the target language. As you student's ears develop, so will their speaking. It will come more naturally for younger kids than older ones, but it will come. Be encouraging! Ask your kids to teach you how to say things. You can even say it with a very "American" accent like *mercy bookoo* instead of *merci beaucoup*. Let them correct you on the proper way to pronounce the words.

Bring in workbooks once you have exposed them to the sounds. This will give them something to produce that you can use as an assessment tool. Ask them to explain the exercises to you. "What did you have to do here?" Have them tell you why they chose the answer they did. "Well, why was that the right answer instead of this?" When you ask these types of questions, you are making your child think critically about what they've learned.

Once your student gets to the high school years, materials will be more costly, but you are also getting more content. Immersion programs are often more communicative than what parents are used to. There will be more speaking, listening, and reading than there is writing. You can simply add a workbook for grammar practice; it's no big deal. Also, having your student keep a notebook of new vocabulary as they study at the higher levels is a good idea since so much of their learning is on the computer.

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So not all of us are going to live where we can speak a foreign language daily. I know that in central Illinois, my opportunities are limited. But I've often been in a big city and my ears perk up when I hear people speaking French with each other. I totally eavesdrop on their conversations!

A few years ago I was in Chicago with my kids at the Lincoln Park Zoo and decided that I wouldn't speak English... at all... just because I could... spoke French... because I could. My children did not think was very funny. They said stuff like, "You *do* know we can't understand you, right?" and "Mom, stop it. You sound like a foreigner."

Another time I was out with my husband and just chose to speak French for awhile. He doesn't speak or understand French, but he didn't mind either because everything sounds pretty *en francais*.

Goofiness aside, I took French in high school because it was the only language offered and I knew I was going to college. I started as an International Business major and enjoyed telling people my glamorous goal. I quickly realized that I did not have a head for business, but did have a talent for sharing my love of the language. I got a teaching degree and taught high school French upon graduation.

Since then, this background has gotten me some interesting jobs including teaching English for Honda in Ohio, living in Europe with Caterpillar, teaching high school French again (and this time they gave me the good classes – International Baccalaureate Program and the AP students). I was contracted by a global language service to tutor families that Caterpillar was moving abroad. And now, as a curriculum consultant at Rainbow Resource Center, helping homeschoolers find the right materials for their children's education. And people say Spanish is the only marketable language in the U.S...humph!

Merci bien tout le monde pour m'écouter. J'adore les langues étrangères et j'espère que vous les essayer chez vous. I hope I have given you some ideas of how you really can *easily* bring foreign language learning into your homeschool day in a way that is *realistic* for you and *beneficial* for your students. Have a go! ***Bonne chance et courage a vous! C'est bien possible!***