

The Value of Foreign Language

By Sasha Clayton

Many families are drawn to Hilldale because of the breadth of knowledge that students acquire throughout the course of their education here. A critical element of Hilldale students' educational experience is the study of Spanish. Learning a foreign language is beneficial to students in a multitude of ways: understanding an important part of the culture and history of California, being able to play a role in our close-knit global community, and developing thinking skills which benefit students across curricular lines. Furthermore, foreign language training strengthens a student's understanding of how English is constructed.

Additionally, learning a foreign language early is advantageous for several reasons. According to Valerie Strauss in her February 16, 2009 article from the Washington Post entitled *Early Launch for Language*, linguists agree that "children learn inductively, by example, and by interacting with the environment around them, and adults tend to learn analytically and deductively." Therefore, when Señor Cohen immerses the students in Spanish before they can understand every word he says, students are taking in the information and making connections. They infer from the context and their skills sharpen. Furthermore, Sr. Cohen teaches the younger students some of the same vocabulary in Spanish that they are learning in English. He talks to them about names, numbers, greetings, weather, seasons, colors, etc. These concepts are on par with the development of students of this age. According to Julie Sugarman of the Center for Applied Linguistics (as quoted in the aforementioned article), "If students start younger, it is much easier to match the language level with the student's development level. Students are doing things interesting and relevant to them. One of the reasons foreign language is less effective in upper grades is that students aren't able to do things at their cognitive ability, so they may be bored." Sugarman is referring to high school language classes where Freshman who are beginning a foreign language are required to talk about colors, numbers, names, weather, etc. They have to start with the basics even though their cognitive abilities are far beyond this. It makes sense that foreign language training should begin early and progress with the students' abilities.

Finally, according to Catherine Ingold, director of the National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland at College Park, "The quality of the teacher is the single biggest factor in foreign language learning." Well then, we know our students have the best foreign language experience possible! Señor Cohen is adept at inspiring our students at every level. While a master teacher of students as they grow in their Spanish education, he is also gifted at bringing new students up to speed so that they can quickly match the level of their peers. Additionally, he includes his own experiences from traveling and living in many countries, he references his love of history and cultures throughout his lessons whenever appropriate, and he teaches students about the intricacies of language which leave them wanting more! Finally, he is kind, but firm; he knows how to support and inspire while maintaining the kind of environment that fosters joyful learning. We are extremely proud of the hard work and enthusiasm that our students put into their study of Spanish here at Hilldale. Muchas Gracias!