Foreign Languages

The Scales Tip in Favor of Starting Early
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To the Editor:

I am writing to express outrage at your publication of Brad Marshall's Commentary. Any fair-minded researcher would present a balanced review of the research literature, instead of hand-picking the studies that only support his bias. For this reason, I and many others who have been both practitioners and researchers in the field take strong issue with this scientifically unsound essay.

The author neglected to mention studies that do indeed support the "child advantage" for starting foreign languages before the age of 10. Eileen Rafferty's statewide study of students in Louisiana compared those who studied a foreign language in elementary school with those who did not, in terms of performance in reading, language arts, and mathematics in English (*Second Language Study and Basic Skills in Louisiana*, 1986). The results, which repeated results in similar studies in the 1970s, indicated that those studying a foreign language outperformed those who did not.

Other studies by Stephen Krashen and Michael Long have shown that those children who began their study of a foreign language before age 10 or 11 developed near-native pronunciation of the foreign language, while those who started later, after puberty, almost never were able to reach that high level of pronunciation (*Child-Adult Differences in Second Languages Acquisition*, 1982.)

Other studies conducted by the Educational Testing Service compared the Advanced Placement results on the 1995 French AP examination and found that students who had started in grades 1-6 outperformed those who had started French in grades 7-12 ("Does FLES* Help AP French Students Perform Better?" *Practical Handbook to Elementary Foreign Language Programs*, 1998 (Lipton).

Other studies, by John Carpernter and Judith Torney, found that before the age of 10, children had greater openness to other cultures than older students had ("Beyond the Melting Pot," *Children and International Education*, 1973). Charles Hancock and I compared elementary school foreign-language students' attitudes

toward the French people and their culture with those of students not studying French and found similar advantages in starting early ("A Study of FLES* and Non-FLES Pupils' Attitudes Toward the French and Their Culture," *The French Review*, 1976).

Richard Landry, in Quebec, has conducted studies on cognitive thinking, divergent thinking, and creativity, and found that those students who started foreign-language study early outperformed those who had not studied a foreign language early.

The last area I will mention (there are many others, which I have enumerated in my books and articles on FLES*) deals with the studies by brain researchers. There are many researchers, such as Harold Chugani, who have examined positron emission tomography, or PET, scans and observed the glucose metabolization of various areas of the brain, uncovering the timetable for the development of various areas of the brain. Michael Phelps, a biophysicist and the co-inventor of the PET scan, said, "When small children learn a new language, the ability to use that language is wired in the brain" ("Kids' Brainpower," *Oregonian*, Dec. 13, 1993).

This is a mere sampling of the growing body of solid research concerning the "child advantage." From having examined both the negative and positive research studies on starting foreign-language study early, I can say that, clearly, the scales tip in favor of starting early.