

## eVIEWS

An interview with Christine Scharf about teaching languages to kids. American (US) accent.

### GLOSSARY

kids	children
acquisition	learning power
unreal(coll.)	incredible, amazing
to pick up	to learn
forever	always
one on one	direct contact with another person, individually
perspective	point of view
background knowledge	general understanding, education
peers	people of equal standing
actual	real
to mess up	to make a mistake
roll my "R"s	to pronounce the letter R very strongly
malleable	adaptable
wiring	configuration, set-up
semester	university term esp. in U.S.A.
to bombard	to overload, to give too much of
to cram	to study intensely, to learn by repeating/memory
amazing	surprising
to get over sthg	to defeat, to overcome, to recover from sthg
insight	understanding
grade	division of students in a school (one year)
segregation	separation, isolation

## **COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS**

1. What Christine likes most about teaching children is “watching them \_\_\_\_\_.”
2. How old are the children that Christine is living with?
3. The older child is picking up some \_\_\_\_\_ from the au pair.
4. “He says a word \_\_\_\_\_ times and it’s his forever.”
5. Why does Christine prefer smaller classes?
6. Where did Christine look for the answer to the question; “Who invented numbers?”
7. Children are more comfortable about messing up but there’s a lot we just can’t do because “\_\_\_\_\_ is different when you’re a child.”
8. For what other reasons does Christine think that language learning is easier for children?
9. “Children sort of \_\_\_\_\_ learn whereas adults are either \_\_\_\_\_ to or \_\_\_\_\_ to.”
10. “Kids get more excited about things because \_\_\_\_\_ whereas adults always have \_\_\_\_\_.”
11. Why were the adults Christine taught afraid of the computers?
12. How are children different in their reaction?
13. How does Christine feel about young children using computers?
14. What benefits are there in young children learning a second language? (3 benefits given)
15. When do American children start learning another language?

## **COMPREHENSION ANSWERS**

1. What Christine likes most about teaching children is “watching them learn.”
2. The children are four and one years old.
3. The older child is picking up some Polish from the au pair.
4. “He says a word three times and it’s his forever.”
5. Christine prefers smaller classes because she has more time to observe each student.
6. Christine looked first in the encyclopedia and then the Internet.
7. Children are more comfortable about messing up but there’s a lot we just can’t do because “the structure of the brain is different when you’re a child.”
8. Very young children can hear differences in pronunciation that adults cannot learn to hear.
9. “Children sort of expect to learn whereas adults are either trying to or forced to.”
10. “Kids get more excited about things because learning is their main job whereas adults always have something else on their mind.”
11. They were afraid that they would break the computers, afraid they were going to look stupid through ignorance.
12. Kids know that if they don’t know how to use a computer now, they will learn it.
13. Christine feels that young children should get comfortable using a computer early, but not use it as a major learning tool.
14. It’s easier to learn a third or subsequent language, they avoid getting accents, and it gives them a great insight into another culture.
15. American children start learning a second language in the eighth grade.

## LESSON PLAN

1. How many languages can students speak? And how well? How old were they when they started learning each? If they could speak any other language in the world, what would they like it to be and why? What do they think is the right age for starting to learn another language (other than their first language)? People generally assume that children have an advantage when learning a language, is this true of learning other things as well? Or are there many exceptions? In what areas do adults have an advantage as far as learning is concerned? What do they think helps most when learning a foreign language?
2. Go through the glossary. Check meaning and pronunciation.
3. Go through the comprehension questions. Predict the answers as far as possible. For the gapped sentences, students should try to guess words for the gaps.
4. If you want to divide the interview into two listenings the first part would be from the beginning to "...and it should also start out with hearing and speaking rather than writing, right away. More like natural language acquisition." The second part is from "What's the difference between teaching kids and teaching adults? What are the main differences?" to the end. For the first part use comprehension questions 1 – 8 and for the second part use comprehension questions 9 – 15.
5. Play the interview. Check students' answers to the questions. Repeat and pause if / when necessary. (Or students compare their answers in pairs, then listen again and check answers as a group.)
6. Christine looked in an encyclopedia and on the Internet to find out "who invented numbers".  
Students work in pairs to decide where to look or go to find the following:
  - a) a local telephone number
  - b) a telephone number in another country
  - c) the address of an old friend
  - d) how to contact their favourite musical group
  - e) the location of a town in the country where they're studying
  - f) how to get to d) by public transport
  - g) a good dentist
  - h) a reliable handy person
  - i) the author of a famous quotation
  - j) the names of the planets
  - k) why it rains more in some seasons than others
  - l) who first made cheese and how
  - m) how paper was invented
  - n) the name of the director of a certain film
  - o) what films a certain actor/ actress has appeared in

- p) how to apply for a grant to an American or English university
  - q) the names of all of the presidents of the U.S. in chronological order
  - r) the exact origins and history of Esperanto
  - s) why the Roman Empire collapsed
- etc. You can add to this list if you like, or ask each student to write down 3 things they'd like to know and the group comes up with suggestions of where to go to find the answer.

Encourage students to come up with more suggestions than just "the Internet". If they suggest the library, get them to be more concrete about what section to look in.

## TRANSCRIPTION

eViews        What is it that you like about teaching kids?

Christine      I think the thing that I like best about teaching kids is watching them learn. It's really amazing whether you're teaching an entire class, or if you're teaching one individual student, or if you're just playing with a child. You can watch them learn. Currently I'm living with a four year old and a one year old, and their language acquisition is just amazing to watch. The one year old is repeating sounds that we all use and then occasionally picking up words, and it's just so unreal how the human mind works, and how it grows and this tiny little person who can't do anything for himself, he can put food in his mouth, can sit here and learn words. And then with the four year old, he's bilingual, and he's picking up some Polish from the new au pair. Learning a language is so difficult for me. He says a word three times and it's his forever. As far as teaching a whole class, I really enjoy doing that, but the smaller the class, the better because you have more one on one, I think more time to observe, more time to see what they're really getting, and how much more they need to get and, often times they come up with unique perspectives because they don't have the background knowledge to start with, or they don't have the same background knowledge as you and your peers and your colleagues and everything. So it's really interesting to see what they come up with. I had a kid in fourth grade, ten years old, this past year, who asked me, "Who invented numbers?" And I was fascinated by this question because I had no idea who invented numbers. I knew it certainly wasn't one person who decided there were numbers one day, but I didn't know where they came from or... Numbers always existed because there were always quantities of things, but then to sit there and... somebody had to decide that there is a certain way to call these things, which must have developed over a long time, but that was just fascinating. Something I'd never thought about and instantly, because we weren't actually in class time, first thing I did was go to the encyclopaedia, then I went to the Internet and found some probable answers. I don't know if anyone has the actual answer to that question.

eV            And what's the probable answer?

C            They just developed slowly over time, I read the Mayans invented the number zero, but it was just like a natural occurrence and that was the answer from Doctor Math on-line, but I couldn't find any specific history of it.

eV            Going back to the kids; what is it you think, that makes kids faster learners, especially relating to languages, and are there ways that adults can use those techniques or adapt those methods to speed up their own learning process?

C            I think probably in some ways yes, most of the game playing and not being afraid to mess up, children are more comfortable with that usually but I think there's a lot that we just can't do because the structure of the brain is different when you're a child. I think up to about two years old, you can hear differences that adults can't here. For instance in different languages, like the tonalities of Asian languages, that are easy to distinguish for people who

are Asian are not necessarily easy to distinguish for someone who's not. Or for example with me, I can't roll my "R"s, for my life, and I feel like it's a genetic problem, but I'm sure that if I'd learned when I was younger, I would have been able to do it, but there are sounds that are acquired when your brain is more malleable for these things and it's sort of like the wiring of your brain is written, pretty much by the time you're five or seven, for language, so that you don't necessarily hear the different variations of different sounds. So with that, there's nothing that adults can do to acquire that which is unfortunate but I think the only thing adults can do is just the game playing and feeling more comfortable with the fact that language is a natural, slow progression, and it should also start out with hearing and speaking rather than writing, right away. More like natural language acquisition.

eV What's the difference between teaching kids and teaching adults?

C Motivation comes into play. Children sort of expect to learn whereas adults are either trying to or being forced to. I know in college it's definitely a problem. Most people started off a semester wanting to learn and being excited about it but then got bombarded with way too much stuff and just became really negative and gave up actually learning and just started cramming. With kids, I feel that kids get more excited about things because learning is their main job whereas adults always have something else on their mind or something else that's going on. About 9 years ago, I taught a computer class to adults and it was amazing the amount of fear that they had, of these machines. Afraid they were going to break them, afraid to look stupid because they're so ignorant about how to use computers, which is completely natural because computers is something that you know from experience, but I've also taught kids computers, and they don't have these fears. It's just like learning anything else for them. They know that if they don't know it now, they know that if they spend some time with it, they'll learn it. They don't get frustrated that easily. I don't think they get as frustrated as easily as adults do, in general, but the adults were just amazing; once they did get over the fear, they were usually very successful, which is the hardest part of teaching adults, because once they get over that fear they're learning more like a child, I think.

eV Do you think that kids should say, spend the first few years learning how to read and write, and learning how to add and subtract, learning some basic skills, before they're introduced to a computer or do you think it's never too early?

C I don't think it's necessarily a problem to use a computer. Just getting comfortable with the concept of using a mouse or a keyboard or some sort of commands. It's just like another game. Certainly they shouldn't be using it as some kind of major learning tool or anything like that, before they have basic skills. It's never too soon to use a computer but definitely just either tiny little supplementary lesson or game playing. There were plenty of kids at that camp where I taught who were content to play games on a computer for 8 hours in a day, and that's absolutely ridiculous and shouldn't be happening.

- eV Going back to languages, what other benefits do young, bilingual children have? What other benefits are there in having young kids learn a second language?
- C Well once a person knows two languages, it's always easier to learn more languages on top of that. Learning it younger is just great because you can avoid getting accents in one or the other language. I think it also gives a great insight into another culture, but just another way that people think about things. There's a lot more to language than just words, and learning it young is just so much easier, so much less work, and so useful in today's global economy and unfortunately in the United States we don't push bilingualism at all, and that's a terrible shame. Some people are starting to realise that that's a problem, and in New Jersey they're pushing to start teaching language in the second grade rather than eight grade which is really good.
- eV Have you had much experience on the other coast, on the West Coast where Spanish is such an important... role.
- C No I've been out there... I was in Silicon Valley twice this year, my brother lives out there, but I wasn't exposed to it. There's definitely more of a segregation happening, especially because it's Silicon Valley. There's so much money for the people who have money and for the people who don't have money, they're completely separate.

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