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A Passage in Time

In 1977 (10.1, 5–25), in their state-of-the-art review *Foreign languages for younger children: Trends and assessment*, **H. H. Stern and Alice Weinrib** described the recent contribution of L2 learning to the language education of young children. The guiding principle of the paper is that a language can be taught from any age upwards, and that once this has been accepted, the decision at what age to introduce a foreign language is argued to be based on three criteria: the time perceived as necessary to reach a desired proficiency level, the perceived educational value of the introduction at a given stage of the curriculum, and the resources required to develop and maintain the programme.

> Ultimately, the decision on the stage of education at which to introduce a second language is an educational, cultural and political one. There may be no overpowering reason in the biology of child development in favour of teaching languages to younger children. But there are no overpowering reasons against it either. It is a question, then, for the community and the school to ask whether or not they want the education of young children to be 'ethnocentric' and 'linguocentric'. In parts at least, this decision must be based on a sociolinguistic analysis of the society that wishes to plan its language education policy on rational grounds. An understanding of the role of a second language in a community, and an appreciation of its educational and cultural value are perhaps more important than the search for a psychologically or biologically optimal age … In considering the place of a foreign language in the education of young children, it should further be borne in mind that a unilingual upbringing and education is not more 'natural' than a multilingual one; the emphasis on the vernacular as the sole medium of education is, after all, an artifact of the nineteenth century nation-state. In most countries, ethnic pluralism and linguistic contact are the rule and not the exception (e.g. Perren 1976; Porsché 1975; Stern 1973). It can be argued therefore that language education as well as other parts of the primary curriculum, e.g. social studies, should reflect this reality. There are many ways in which children could be sensitised to the existence of other languages, ranging from a simple language awareness programme, such as was recently proposed at the Copenhagen Symposium (Council of Europe 1977), to the total immersion in the second language exemplified by the experimental programmes in some Canadian schools.

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