

Using Playtime to Make Your Baby Bilingual

By **SHIVANI VORA**

Can a baby easily learn how to say *hola*, *bonjour* or *ni hao*?

A growing number of companies are offering classes, DVDs and play groups that teach babies and toddlers foreign languages. The idea is to offer instruction using fun settings, images and songs to make language engaging.



Radhika Chalasani

The Language Workshop for Children in New York City uses puppets to teach words.

Still, we were skeptical—our nearly 2-year-old daughter was barely speaking English. We also worried that bombarding her with a new language would confuse her. But Virginia Mann, a professor of Cognitive Sciences at the University of California Irvine, says there is little evidence indicating that learning more than one tongue can clutter a young brain and that babies have the sophistication to pick up new sounds. "From the time of birth, the left hemisphere of the brain is wired expecting to learn language and absorbs it

as soon as it is provided," Dr. Mann says.

We tried four foreign-language programs that target toddlers. The Language Workshop for Children was in a structured classroom setting; Little Pim and Muzzy BBC Language Course for Children taught through DVDs; and **Hola, a Playgroup in Spanish**, taught using a play-time setting. The tester was our 23-month daughter, and we chose Spanish for her to learn. We didn't test the programs' long-term effect, but instead judged the products for what they offered and how well they captured our toddler's attention.

Our first program was the Language Workshop for Children, a New York City-based company that's been around since 1973 and has 10 nationwide locations.

| COMPANY | PRICE | CONCEPT | COMMENTS |
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| The Language Workshop for Children languageworkshopforchildren.com | \$330 to \$500 for a 45-minute weekly class running 9 to 10 weeks. | Immersion classes in four different languages in the form of a structured play-group environment supplemented by a | Once our 2-year old daughter got past the initial confusion of the teacher speaking only Spanish, she was |

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| | | CD and workbooks for home use. | thoroughly engaged during the well structured and lively session. |
| Little Pim littlepim.com | \$17.95 for a single DVD, \$49.95 for a three-pack and \$84.95 for a deluxe set with phrase cards, a CD and a Pim stuffed toy. | A panda bear named Pim and real-life characters are used in 35-minute DVDs in 10 different languages in which words are flashed on the screen and systematically repeated in a variety of contexts. | Our daughter was only semi-attentive to the DVDs, which were rather plain and old-fashioned looking. But she did become more interested during subsequent tries. |
| Muzzy BBC Language Course for Children early-advantage.com | A multi-lingual set that covers five languages and has five DVDs, a music CD, software with exercises and a Muzzy stuffed toy is \$199. A 30-day trial costs \$10.95. | Vocabulary and story DVDs in nine languages. Muzzy, a green furry extraterrestrial, and other cartoon characters teach new words and phrases. | The vocabulary DVDs were especially slow paced, but the cartoon storyline held our toddler's attention. |
| Hola, a Playgroup in Spanish holaplaygroup.com | A 17-week semester with weekly 45- to 60-minute classes averages \$550. | A Spanish immersion play group that includes a mix of structured activities and free play. | Our toddler protested when the energetic and engaging class was over because she was having so much fun. |

Besides Spanish, French, Italian and Mandarin are offered in nine- or 10-week sessions, with weekly 45-minute classes conducted solely in the chosen tongue. In the tots' division, the teacher usually greets the students with a welcome song and puppet show and then walks the kids through a variety of activities.

Once our daughter got past her initial confusion of a Spanish-only setting, she was engaged by the fast-paced, lively class. She and six other kids watched animatedly as the teacher showed them different stuffed animals and imitated their sounds, and danced to upbeat songs, such as one that worked through body parts from head to toe. Our baby only said some of the words, but she thoroughly enjoyed herself. To keep up learning, parents get a picture book and music CD to use at home with their children a few times a week.

We went from a live class to a DVD format when we tried Little Pim, a learning tool for

kids from 6-months to 5-years old, that is centered around a panda bear named Pim. Parents have the choice of 10 languages, including Russian, Hebrew and German. Working their way through a series of three, 35-minute DVDs, kids are taught 180 words. We ordered the deluxe set, which included phrase cards, a music CD and a Pim stuffed toy.

Parents are encouraged to let their children watch one DVD a few times a week for 10 to 15 minutes for several weeks before moving to the next. The eating-and-drinking-themed DVD went through foods, such as apples, bananas, water and milk, by repeating them numerous times in different contexts and showing the word on the screen over and over again. "Leche," the word for milk, for example, flashed while a baby drank it out of a bottle, a toddler out of a sippy cup and an older child out of a glass.

Our daughter repeated a few words, but within 10 minutes, she was more interested in playing with the stuffed Pim bear. Julia Pimsleur Levine, the founder and president of the company, says that as children watch the DVDs more frequently, they become more engaged in the content.

We tried another audio-visual method with Muzzy BBC Language Course for Children, a program that originated in England and is part of Early Advantage, a Fairfield, Conn., educational company. Muzzy is a green furry extraterrestrial who arrives in a spaceship in Gondoland to have adventures. It's designed for children between ages 2 and 10 and has nine different language options, including Russian, Dutch and Mandarin.

We ordered the multi-lingual set, which includes five DVDs—two vocabulary builders and three storylines—a music CD, computer software with exercises and a Muzzy stuffed toy. In the vocabulary builder, cartoon figures go through numbers and words one by one. The pace was slow, with long pauses between each word, so our baby kept wandering off. We had better luck with the story DVDs, which she quickly became fixated on. Children were taught concepts and vocabulary contained in a storyline, such as learning about fruits by watching a king, queen and princess eat them in an orchard.

Even though the DVDs were convenient and affordable, Dr. Mann says they're not as effective because they don't have the same level of engagement. "Language learning is best facilitated in a real-world environment," she says.

Our last stop was Hola, a Playgroup in Spanish, held in four New York City locations. Classes, each between 45 minutes and an hour, target kids ages 1- through 6-years-old.

The program's founder, Verónica Braun, focuses each session around a theme of the day. On the day we attended, the focus was on transportation, and the group of eight toddlers learned about cars, buses, planes, boats and other vehicles through a variety of creative exercises, such as playing with toy transportation vehicles while Ms. Braun walked around the room and repeated their names in Spanish. We sang a Spanish version of "Wheels on the Bus," and the kids bopped their heads and clapped their hands. The session ended with 10 minutes of play time, and our daughter was so enjoying herself with the art, music and toys that she protested when we left.

We're not in a position to judge how much of a foreign language a young child will pick up after several months of immersion, but we can say that despite her limited exposure to Spanish, our toddler is walking around saying some of the new words she learned.