

IS AGE AN IMPORTANT FACTOR?

Does a child learn a language faster than an adult? Yes and no. Before puberty, the child uses the same area of his or her brain for all languages. After adolescence, each language is committed to a different zone. Even if only by a millisecond, a child processes information more quickly than an adult. The adult has to resist the temptation to translate from the target language into a language that he knows better. By contrast, the acquisition of abstract vocabulary, which is difficult for a child, poses no difficulty to an adult.

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Therefore an adult with the motivation and the desire to learn can progress as fast as a child. An adult's commitment to learning, to following a strategy and to saving time can bear as much fruit as a child's playful and carefree approach to learning. For all children, whatever their mother tongue, the process of acquiring a language is spread out over a period of 13 to 15 years.

Children Do Not Learn Rapidly!

Contrary to what is generally accepted, children do not learn that rapidly. They start to speak after listening for 10 months. Between 9 to 15 months old, they pronounce their first words. They produce incomplete sentences after only 18 months. At the age of three and over, the language has been formed, though the number of acquired constructions is extremely limited. With less than 1000 words, vocabulary is still very limited at this age.

Mother Tongue: 6 New Words Per Day

According to the most optimistic studies, a 6 year-old child should know, at least passively, 12000 words, an average acquisition of 6 words per day, or about 2000 words per year since birth. Why is

this process so slow? Why are 12 years necessary to master the spoken language? At that age, one is still far from having acquired the written language or abstract vocabulary. Before attending school, a child learns without noticeable effort: speaking is just another game. Speaking slowly forms its thoughts and personality. It takes time. One often forgets that a child automates its speaking, and this process of automation requires a long time.

The key to automation: 3000 repetitions

To communicate naturally and with pleasure, one must have acquired the more widely used phrases. There is no miraculous solution: these phrases must be repeated 3000 times. It's just the same when learning to swim or ride a bicycle.

LIKING THE LANGUAGE

A major factor in learning a language is the relationship that one develops with it. Getting to like a language and assimilating its logic and culture enables the learner to make unimaginable progress.

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FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING THE RIGHT COURSE FOR YOU

• What level do I wish to achieve, is it?

Social conversation only?
Written and conversational skills?
For work or business purposes?
For entry into university?

• Do I require a certificate or recognised qualification at the end of the course?

If yes, select a school that offers the possibility to sit exams. Note however, if you require professionally recognised qualifications for work or university purposes, it is better to opt for one of the French Community recognised courses. See the Qualification Options in the Table on Page 106

• Do I want a course that offers progressive learning levels i.e. beginner, intermediary and advanced levels?

If so, make sure that the school or learning method you choose provides these options.

• How much time can I dedicate to learning a language? Can I attend a day or evening class?

If the answer is no, possibly one-to-one tuition or self-learning would be the preferable option. A tutor helps in putting together a programme and guiding you whilst you learn. If attending a class during the evening or during the week is difficult, look for a school that provides Saturday or lunch time classes.

• Can I commit myself to attending a class at the same time each week?

If you know that you will often be away then the effort of catching up on missed lessons may, in the long-term, prove to be too difficult. If so, opt for an e-learning course which combines an internet based course with a tutor, or a « blended-learning » course which combines an Internet course with study at a language centre.

• Am I geographically well situated to attend a class?

If the journey to class takes too long, you may soon feel de-motivated; therefore select a class that is easily accessible, especially if you need to travel during the rush hour.

• Do I want to continue studying the language after I leave Belgium?

If so, an international school with centres worldwide, such as The Alliance Française which has a worldwide network of schools established in 131 countries worldwide or a recognised learning method will be better for you.