



BBC USA Direct News

07/30/98

"Early learning is thriving in New York.

Classes to teach a second language are being offered to babies. It's all part of a new trend for anxious parents to give their infants a head start.

But does it really work? USA Direct's Paula Harrington investigates.

It sounds like beginner's French, the only difference is that the students have not yet learned how to speak. This is The Language Workshop for Children, a school designed to teach a second language to infants and toddlers from the age of 6 months to 3 years. According to Mr. Thibaut the best time is that critical period between 0 and 3 years in which a child is said to have the greatest capacity to absorb and imitate languages.

But whether or not they are really learning a second language is an open question. At Memorial Sloan Kettering Medical Center in New York City, Dr. Joy Hirsch studies brain activity using FMRI, Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, a recent brain imaging technique that can identify exactly which parts of the brain are active during a cognitive task like talking or singing. With this technology, the Sloan Kettering group published a report in the journal "Nature" last year. The results of this study created a frenzy among parents, educators and policy makers.

What we have contributed is really just one simple fact, and that simple fact is that the brain records languages differently if they are learned early in life relative to if they are learned later in life."

Dr. Joy Hirsch