

Wordplay

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Little 4-year-old Samantha Cecil is very proud to impart a bit of her Spanish repertoire: vaca, caballo, amarillo and azul—or cow, horse, yellow and blue. And it’s easy to see that her dad is equally proud, if not more so than Samantha.

But Samantha did not learn Spanish from dad Michael Cecil. Instead, she is part of a growing group of children who are literally being immersed in innovative Spanish language instruction at The Language Workshop for Children® (LWFC) at the Kids Club in Overland Park at 135th and Quivira.

Directed by Maria Salazar, The Language Workshop just celebrated its second anniversary in August and currently offers Spanish, French and Chinese instruction on Mondays through Saturdays to children ages 6 months to 12 years in two spacious, brightly colored classrooms.

When asked why Samantha was enrolled in the program, Michael Cecil explains that their family has relatives in Spain and also that they like to travel.

Additionally, he, like most parents of The Language Workshop students, believes that becoming proficient in a second – or third – language will ultimately translate into a future competitive edge in the evolving global marketplace.

For Colombian-born Salazar, opening a school to teach languages to children was a dream that took root during her upbringing.

Growing up with parents who owned a private English school in Colombia, Salazar was surrounded by an environment that fostered bilingual education.

As someone who spoke Spanish and English fluently, she went a step further and headed to France at the age of 17 to attend school and study French for a year by way of complete immersion.

She eventually moved to the United States where she earned a business degree from the University of Kansas.

Upon deciding to develop a language program, she conducted extensive research on various language programs to determine exactly how she wanted to operate her program.

She discovered The Language Workshop for Children®, founded in 1973 in New York by Parisian and long-time educator François Thibaut, and knew instantly it was something she wanted to emulate.

“Their program has been around for such a long period of time, about 36 years, and they have been very successful,” says Salazar.

Upon contacting them, she learned that the company was looking to further its reach throughout the U.S., and Salazar subsequently became the first person to open an LWFC-licensed program outside of New York.

The New York program utilizes the Thibaut Technique® to teach French, Spanish, Chinese and Italian in a manner described as an enriched play method.

Salazar and her three other native-fluent instructors have gone to New York and been trained in the Thibaut Technique® which suggests that engaging young children with carefully constructed curriculum comprised of original music, vocabulary-building songs, language immersion, festive visual aids and action games will lead to natural acquisition of a language.

“When a child learns English,” says Salazar, “he or she is not given a list of vocabulary words or grammar lessons. Parents just talk to the children and that is how they learn best. First they hear, then they understand and finally they speak.”

In the past, many have questioned whether learning a second language at such a young age would confuse a child. But Thibaut and other industry experts suggest otherwise, saying that children in other parts of the world often grow up hearing three or four languages spoken.

The LWFC, and indeed many linguistic experts, contends that the earlier a child begins to study another language, the better. In fact, according to Thibaut, science has yet to set a limit to the number of sounds and meanings a human mind can store.

When observing one of Salazar’s petite classes, either by way of video monitor in the reception area of her facility or by sitting in on a session, it is easy to see that the children are happily engaged in their bilingual instruction. But to them it is merely play, and therein lies the secret to learning success.

“We want this to be a fun and interactive experience,” says Salazar. “As they do activities and play with props, the kids are absorbing everything.”

Parents can help further reinforce learning at home with educational CDs and workbooks created by Thibaut, which are provided to LWFC students.

Little 5-year-old Sonia Desai is one of the more than 125 children who have attended Salazar’s program since it opened.

“This program offers a really good learning structure,” says Sonia’s mother, Rajas. “We have been coming here since it opened two years ago, and Sonia really knows and understands a lot of Spanish. She is constantly learning.”

Classmate Ashley Jacobson, also 5 years old, is already seeing pay-offs from her early bilingual education.

“Her kindergarten teacher tells me she is picking up Spanish so quickly in her class,” says Bertha Jacobson, Ashley’s mother.

With plans to expand the program further and eventually offer Italian and German classes, Salazar clearly has created a stellar learning experience for children from all over Johnson County—and beyond.

There can be little doubt that progressive education achieved through happy play is a winning combination in any language. ¡Qué bien!

For more information on The Language Workshop for Children® at the Kids’ Club, visit www.kidsclubkc.com.

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