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For pre-schoolers, learning Spanish is like child's play

By Wilson McKinney
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"Arriba la pelota," says "Maestra Silvia" Baez, and 2 1/2-year-old Timothy Blymyer of Bulverde gleefully tosses a multicolored beach ball into the air.

It's part of a weekly Spanish immersion class for 2- to 3-year-olds and their parents at Aragón Spanish Academy, 18952 Redland Road in northern San Antonio off U.S. 281.

On a recent Friday morning a reporter observed a class attended by Timothy, who has been coming to the class with his mother, Sally, since before he was 2.

Timothy and the six other children, with their mothers and one grandmother, take their places on floor mats as Baez, a native of Monterrey, tells the class, "Vamos a empezar," and begins the class with a brief prayer in English and a song wishing "buenos dias" to everyone.

After leading a couple more chil-



Young Spanish learner Timothy Blymyer of Bulverde throws a beach ball up in the air after his teacher, Silvia Baez, tells him, "Arriba la pelota." (Photo by Wilson McKinney)

paper cut-out suns - numbered from 1-15 - alternating in yellow ("sol amarillo") and orange ("sol anaranjado").

None of the learning exercises in the 45-minute class lasts long, and

to name the colors of its stripes ("rojo," "verde," "azul").

"My grandmother spoke Spanish, but I never spoke it around the home," said Blymyer, who also brings along Timothy's infant sister, Trinity. The parent-child classes not only help Timothy learn Spanish, she said, they help her keep her own Spanish up.

Aragón director Rick Gonzales said Blymyer's situation is not unusu-

al for bilingual parents.

"They struggle with helping their children begin using the language," he said. "We're even seeing parents from Mexico, when English is the dominant language in the home (in

Aragón, from 1

The classes for the 1-5 age group are given three times a week, but most come for one session or perhaps two, Gonzales said.

Because such young children are at an optimal learning age for language learning. "They pick up a lot even with one (class) a week," he said.

After two years of preparation, Gonzales and his wife, Rosalinda, opened Aragón Spanish Academy in January 2004 at Los Patios on Loop 410. In May 2004 they moved to their current location just outside Loop 1604. They were licensed by the state in June 2005 as a child-care center.

Classes have no more than eight children per class. Teachers speak primarily in Spanish as they lead the children through early childhood learning activities such as song, dance, games, dramatic play, arts and crafts.

Overall enrollment has reached 150 in various classes, mostly for the half-day sessions from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. that last about 10 weeks, and Gonzales is looking to expand into other parts of San Antonio. A lot of the parents involved are are homeschoolers, he said.

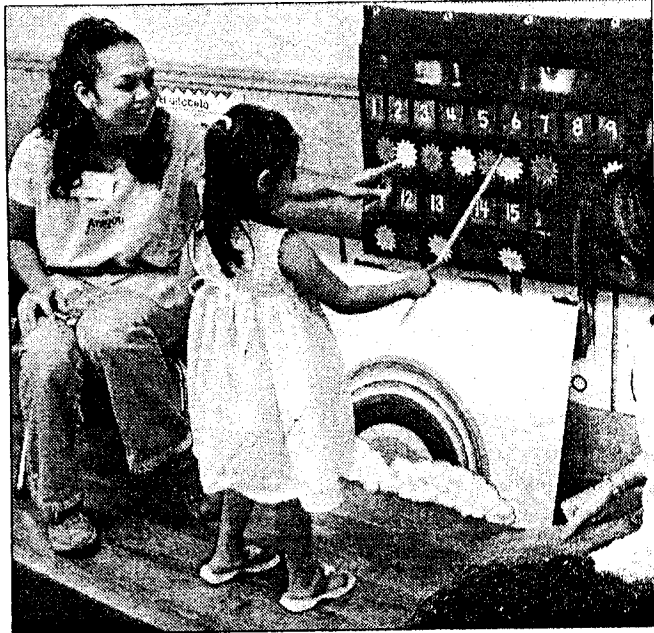
Gonzales said he was introduced to the idea of total immersion language training in the early 90s when as president of the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, then as vice president for development of an international business, he met Latin American business people who spoke fluent English they had learned as adults by going to language immersion schools.

The seed for Aragón Academy was planted when he visited a language immersion preschool in Mexico City, Gonzales said. He realized that if he'd had early training like that, his Spanish now would be much better.

Gonzales has verified his observations by extensive reading in the field of language learning. The experts say children can readily absorb foreign languages during the early childhood years, he notes.

"We've had the most success with children starting as young as a year old," he said.

This is the third summer for the academy's Spanish immersion camps for young chil-



As "Maestra Silvia" counts in Spanish, Ana points to the numbers on a chart. (Photo by Wilson McKinney)

dren, Gonzales said. A camp for the second half of the summer starts this week, including parent and child classes for children 1 to 5 years old and half-day camps for 3- to 7-year-olds through Aug. 11. Call 210-496-0990 or visit www.aragonacademy.com for class schedules.

During the school year, the academy is a state-licensed Spanish immersion preschool and offers after school Spanish classes in addition to the parent and child groups.