

Learning French from ages 5, 7 and 11

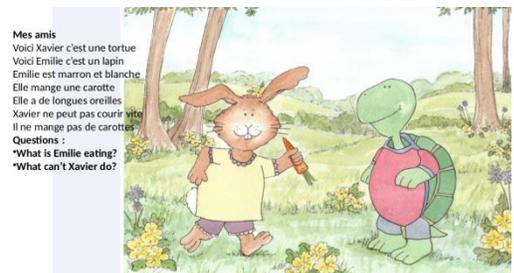
What this study was about

The researchers looked at how the age at which children started learning a second language (L2) affected their development. They compared the rate at which the different age groups learned, the development of their L2 vocabulary and grammar, and their language learning strategies and attitudes. The researchers explored links with children's English literacy and their working memory (a system for temporarily storing and managing the information required to carry out complex cognitive tasks).

What the researchers did

[The study](#) involved three intact classes of primary-school children, aged 5-6, 7-8 and 11-12 respectively. There were 73 in total, all with English as their first language (L1). A specialist visiting teacher gave lessons for two hours a week over 19 weeks (38 hours). Teaching was kept similar across the age groups and mostly oral, with literacy used in a supporting role only. The children had not had any previous language instruction. A pre-test confirmed that the children did not know any French at the start of the project. The teacher followed the recommended schemes of work. All lessons were video recorded and transcribed.

The children were assessed three times: half way through the course, at the end of the course, and again two months later to check retention and recall. The same tests were used at each testing time: telling a story using pictures, elicited imitation (see picture, right), role play (in groups of two or three), and a computer-based vocabulary test based on the words taught ([tasks and further information](#)). Additionally, children's working memory was tested, and their literacy scores documented; children also participated in focus groups and one to one interviews about their attitudes, strategies for learning, and their motivations. The language teacher was also interviewed ([example of a typical class and the interview with the teacher](#)).



What they found

In terms of **vocabulary**, all three groups of children improved over time. The younger children were slower at the beginning (less developed working memory, less developed literacy skills) but caught up. The researchers found that **frequency** (the number of times children heard a word) was the most important factor in learning a word, particularly for the middle age group (years 7 to 8). They also found that **recency** (how recently children had heard a word) was important for the 5 to 6-year-olds. Children remembered words better if they sounded like English words (*bébé*-baby; *fleur*-flower). There was no influence of words heard in **songs**, and no difference between **boys and girls**. With regard to **grammar**, there was a clear progression according to year group with the older children doing best. Working memory was strongly related to children's grammar development, which helps explain why older children did better. All children found repeating the longer phrases (**elicited imitation**) difficult, particularly the younger learners (ages 5 to 6). The children were able to repeat **familiar items** more accurately.

The children had to be helped a lot to produce language spontaneously for the **role play**. All children were very **enthusiastic** towards learning French, although slightly less at ages 7 to 8 than at ages 5 to 6. The main reason given for liking French in primary school was that it was fun; the 7 to 8-year-olds gave more sophisticated reasons and opinions. Repeating a word or phrase was the most common **language learning strategy**. The 7 to 8-year-old children reported a wider range of strategies, e.g. linking a word with a picture, or relating a word to something familiar, a pet, for example. All the children were **motivated to learn** by the desire to communicate on holiday; some of the 7 to 8-year olds gave intrinsic reasons (e.g. personal and educational value).

Working memory and literacy were found to support language learning; children were able to use literacy to help with their vocabulary learning. There was a strong relationship between literacy and vocabulary development for the younger two groups (ages 5 to 6 and 7 to 8), and a strong relationship between working memory and literacy for these same groups. The relationship between working memory and vocabulary was strong for the 7 to 8-year olds only.

Things to bear in mind

Only 14 children in Year 7 (ages 11 to 12) completed all the tests. Children's **attitudes** were analysed only for the two younger (primary-school) groups.