

Early Language Learning in Europe

What this research was about and why it is important

The Early Language Learning in Europe project ('ELLiE'), closed in January 2011, having investigated early language learning in seven European primary-school contexts, including primary schools in England (6 to 8 schools per country; total N = approximately 1,400 children). The principle research aim was “to clarify what can realistically be achieved in state schools where relatively limited amounts of class time are available for foreign language learning” (p. 145).

ELLiE looked at three main issues about additional language learning in the selected contexts: policy and implementation, factors contributing to the success of early language learning, and the linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes of early language learning. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, although the quality and quantity of input across the countries varied: English schools, for example, had the least additional language (instructional) input, little surrounding media input or out-of-school input (Note: in many cases there was some, but too minor to be counted statistically).

What the researchers did

Participating schools were drawn from a wide socio-economic range and diverse geographical spread, although not wholly representative of their respective contexts. The nature of the ELLiE study is necessarily amorphous, in the sense that it covered widely differing educational systems and teaching methods across Europe. All schools learned English as an additional language, except for the English schools which studied French or Spanish.

Instruments included interviews, questionnaires and observation, and an in-depth study of six focal learners from each class. Data were collected on learner characteristics, attitudes and motivation. In some cases class teachers delivered the language lessons, in others, specialist FL teachers. Language proficiency was assessed through communicative tasks in listening, speaking and reading, but for practical reasons only listening data were collected for all participants. The researchers were particularly interested in the interrelationship between learner characteristics, especially attitude and language proficiency.

What the researchers found – some key findings

- most young learners began their learning of an additional language with a very positive outlook, although this tended to deteriorate over time;
- learner (individual) characteristics impacted on language achievement, with the impact stronger at age 10 to 11 than at age 7 to 8 years;
- average ELLiE learners approached A1 level (Common European Framework of Reference) in oral and aural skills during the first four years of additional language instruction, that is at age 10 to 11 years;
- generally speaking, children’s competence in speaking, listening and reading developed similarly in the fourth year of instruction, although there were instances of individuals who were stronger in one or two skills and weaker in others;
- listening skills in children with a more positive self-concept increased over time, whilst skills in those with a less positive self-concept remained static or decreased;
- there were steady gains in vocabulary, although communicative fluency varied considerably;
- factors influencing achievement (language proficiency) included “motivation, teachers, parents and exposure” (p.7).

Lastly, findings suggested that “progress in the ... [additional language(s)] may be more rapid in contexts which provide greater exposure, but, encouragingly, even quite limited exposure can result in the steady development of communicative skills” (p.150).

Things to consider

- The researchers looked at only a few examples of schools with a high proportion of bilingual children in this article.
- Could the languages that children bring to the primary-school classroom be more effectively used? For example, if ‘translanguaging’ were encouraged more, could it help children who know only one language learn other languages better and help them become more aware of other cultures? Also, could it help children who speak more than one language understand concepts better and learn faster in schools where English is predominantly spoken?