

A long-term study of early foreign language learning in school

What this study was about

[The study](#) looked at how the age at which children begin learning a foreign language in school (age 6 to 7 years as opposed to age 8 to 9 years) and the amount of instruction they receive affect their later achievement in listening and reading.

What the researchers did

5,130 primary-school children from 31 schools learning English in Germany participated in the project. The children were grouped as early starters (beginning to learn the language at age 6 to 7) and late starters (beginning at age 8 to 9). The children's progress in the receptive skills (listening and reading) was tracked over two years each, and children were tested for language proficiency twice, at the beginning of secondary school at age 10 to 11 and again at age 12 to 13. By age 12 to 13 the early starters had received 549 hours of instruction in the language, and the late starters had received 444 hours of language instruction. Only children who were present for testing at both times were included in the analyses. Data were also collected on individual characteristics: gender, parent's socioeconomic status (parental income), cultural capital (number of books at home), home language, cognitive abilities, and language grade at the end of the year before first testing. There were some differences between the groups, but these were marginal. The parents / carers of the early starters had a higher income, there were fewer books at home, and more early-starter children reported a non-German home language than late-starter children. At first testing (age 10 to 11), children completed a 28-item multiple choice test in listening which included picture recognition and sentence completion, and a reading comprehension with 20 multiple choice and four open-answer questions. At second testing, children completed similar tests. In reading comprehension, the number of open-answer questions increased to 15, and the number of multiple-choice questions decreased to 11. All tests had been used in previous studies. All data was collected during regular school lessons.

What they found

At first testing (age 10 to 11, first year in secondary school) the early starters made much greater progress than the late starters in both listening and reading comprehension. The extra 105 hours instruction that the early starters had received by then gave them a significant advantage of 27.5 points on average in reading and 33.6 points on average in listening. This was a small to medium effect. On the other hand, at second testing (age 12 to 13), the late starters had made greater progress than the early starters in both reading (34 points higher on average) and listening (17.35 points higher on average). Thus in the two years at secondary school the late starters not only closed the gap that had been obvious in the study at primary-school level, but also made much greater progress than the early starters.

'[D]espite the common belief that younger learners are better language learners, research has consistently shown that older learners make faster progress in classroom language learning ...' (p. 19)

At each testing time different individual differences explained the children's performance and helped to predict the level of children's later language proficiency. At first testing time, gender, cognitive abilities, the number of books at home, family income, and whether the children were early or late starters explained the performance of the children. The largest positive effects came from children's cognitive abilities and whether they were an early or late starter. At second testing time, whether children were early or late starters, their cognitive ability, gender, and home language predicted language proficiency at age 12 to 13, although the influence of home language was marginal. At this second time of testing, being female combined with having more books at home and a family with a higher income predicted much higher test scores.

A shift in teaching methodology (i.e. more explicit teaching) as children moved from primary to secondary school may have been a contextual factor. Transition across schools was seen to be a weak point. Children received only minimal input (90 mins or less per week) at primary level which may not have allowed them to retain the benefit from an early start; research shows young children require a lot of L2 exposure to benefit from an early start.

Things to bear in mind

There was limited time allotted by the schools for assessment. It might have been better to test children's cognitive abilities by using a verbal test alongside (or instead of) the non-language-based ability tests that were used. Only listening and reading were tested, not speaking and writing. Additional individual differences such as attitude and motivation were not assessed.