

Making the most of an early start to L2 instruction

What this research was about and why it is important

Research shows that earlier second language (L2) starters do not necessarily in the long term maintain the linguistic advantage of their early start over later starters. We discussed four factors which have relevance to early L2 instruction: (i) the role of (bi)literacy skills, (ii) the role of language learning motivation, (iii) the role of factors relating to the transition from primary to secondary school, and (iv) the role of intensity of L2 instruction.

What the researchers found

(1) **It is premature to interpret evidence of a correlation between first language (L1) and L2 literacy skills as pointing to the interdependence of literacy skills across languages.** The suggestion that the L1 needs to be developed to a certain level to guarantee cognitive and linguistic benefits from L2 education runs into the problem that developmental thresholds are difficult to define. Research has found that starting an additional language early proves beneficial specifically for simultaneous bilinguals who were already biliterate and who received substantial parental support. This finding would appear to have important implications.

(2) **The common assumption that early L2 starters are better motivated in the long run than late starters is not confirmed by research.** On the contrary, positive motivation appears to be associated with the onset of secondary schooling – with students feeling the urge to attain proficiency quickly. One notes that the motivation of younger beginners may relate to their biological age rather than their age of encountering the L2. Type of motivation may change, with secondary school students often evidencing more instrumental motivation. Some research indicates that for late starters motivation is more strongly goal-focused than for early starters, and that the broader school context plays an important role in attitude formation.

(3) **The transition between primary and secondary school is often characterized as a delicate moment in L2 schooling.** Among issues that have been raised are: the shift from student-centred, methodology to teacher-directed classes; a mismatch between student and teacher expectations regarding teaching methods; an absence of coordination between primary and secondary teachers; the fact that proficiency outcomes from primary schools may vary greatly; and training inadequacies amongst primary L2 teachers in some countries. Some research suggests that students have the impression that the abandonment of implicit activities in secondary school carries the risk of losing what was learned in primary school. Relatedly, the repetition in secondary school of material covered in primary school may give the impression that what was covered at primary level is not valued at secondary level. Some studies show, however, that secondary learners have no problem with re-encountering familiar content, seeing it as enhancing progress by consolidating knowledge and skills.

(4) **Much attention has focused recently on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which provides teaching of some school subjects via the L2.** CLIL is claimed to yield benefits such as better communication skills, the minimization of the role of individual differences and an increase of L2 exposure without consuming more time. Assessing such claims is difficult in light of the diversity of CLIL programmes and the selection of students for these programmes, who are thereby motivated to succeed. Some research has found that increased L2 contact duration and L2 input intensity in pre-secondary education positively affects L2 development without impacting on the L1.

Things to consider

One clear message from the foregoing is that the question of the extent to which an L2 user's languages are interdependent has no straightforward answer but needs further investigation. Another key element is that problems surrounding the early teaching and learning of L2s not only concern the role of physiological maturation and degree of intensity of instruction; there are broader macro-institutional factors that may frustrate the purpose of offering numerous school-years of L2 instruction. Also to be considered is the influence which classroom experiences have on attitude and motivation, which may be especially strong during primary–secondary transition. Regarding the outcome of an early start to L2 instruction, we can perhaps set aside the question of whether “earlier is better”, and simply recognize the fact that under optimal learning circumstances experiencing a foreign language at an early age of may have positive consequences. Finally, we must acknowledge that a simplistic assumption that age as an internal causal factor is unsatisfactory. Age of onset interacts with and is heavily influenced by environmental influences and should therefore be regarded as a complex, socio-cultural rather than purely maturational variable.