

Opinion piece

Early foreign language teaching: some critical remarks and some recommendations

Annick De Houwer | Erfurt

Dieser Beitrag ist eine kritische Beurteilung von Wert und Nutzen des Fremdsprachenunterrichts bei Grundschulkindern, gestützt auf Forschungsergebnisse des frühen Spracherwerbs. Dabei werden auch globale sprachpolitische Faktoren diskutiert. Der Beitrag schliesst mit Empfehlungen für eine gute Fremdsprachenlehrpraxis.



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1. Introduction

Parents and policy-makers in Europe are eager to expose children to foreign language teaching at a very early age. The goal of early foreign language teaching in Europe is to support foreign language learning and to create a multilingual population that ideally knows three languages (Eurydice/Eurostat, 2012). In many European countries foreign language teaching is now mandatory in primary school (*ibidem*). Parents invest a lot of effort and money in foreign language classes at the pre-school level as well.

With few exceptions the first foreign language that children in continental Europe are taught is English. French, German, Spanish and Russian follow at quite a distance (others trail behind even more; Eurydice/Eurostat, 2012). Languages are termed “foreign” if they are not used in the child’s immediate communicative environment outside school.

This article aims to critically assess the usefulness of early foreign language teaching and the wisdom of the choice of English or any other single foreign language in the early curriculum. It concludes with some recommendations.

2. Why start foreign language instruction early?

Two fundamental beliefs about second language learning have contributed to the widespread introduction of foreign language teaching at the primary level. Members of the general public,

including parents, educators and policy makers, believe that foreign language learning will have more success if it is started early (Celaya, 2012). There is also a general belief that certain aspects of language use such as pronunciation are no longer learnable after puberty. However, the scientific evidence for these two beliefs is inconclusive at best and non-existent at worst.

2.1. Is it true for foreign language learning that “the earlier is the better”?

The idea that foreign language learning should start as early as possible relies on yet another belief, namely that foreign language learning is like first and second language learning. There certainly are some similarities: There are language learning processes that are likely similar for all spoken language learning settings (e.g., the reliance on sound perception). However, these are not the ones lay people generally consider. Rather, they believe that children learn to speak their first language fast and effortlessly, and that “picking up” a second language in early childhood is equally fast and easy (De Houwer, 2009). This belief ignores the fact that a child who has been learning a single language for 5 years speaks that language like a typical 5-year-old, but cannot yet read and write, cannot tell good jokes, cannot rhetorically win an argument with an adult, does not understand irony, cannot give complex instructions, has a very limited vocabulary compared to most teenagers, and so forth and so on. There is no adult who would care to invest five full-time years of her life to learn to speak a language at the level of a five-year-old and not know how to read and write it. Furthermore, most adults who would be able to invest 5 full years in the learning of a new language would attain a far superior level of language development than a five-year-old: many immigrant adults

There is no evidence for the need for early foreign language teaching. Instead, primary schools should support linguistic diversity and thus motivate children for later foreign language learning through high-quality foreign language teaching at secondary school.

attain such a level after a much shorter period of time in their new country (Adamuti-Trache, 2013).

Five-year-olds reach their level of language development in a single language after a slow and arduous process. This also goes for children with two first languages (De Houwer, 2009). In contrast, young second language learners (like adults) do not necessarily need five years of regular practice in their new second language to sound like a five-year-old. Indeed, they already know from their first language what language is about, and can use this knowledge and experience to start developing their second language (L2) quite a bit faster than children who learned this language as their only language (Paradis *et al.*, 2011). It all depends, though, on the circumstances. Typically, children need to learn an L2 because it is their region's main language and it is used as a regular vehicle of communication at (pre-)school. This means they will be hearing the L2 quite often. There is, however, very wide variation amongst young second language learners in the speed with which they learn to understand and use their L2. For instance, an immigrant child who is the only one in the group not to speak the new language will tend to learn to speak the L2 much faster than immigrant children in the same class who share the same minority language. Children who are shy and do not seek out the company of others will develop their L2 more slowly (Keller *et al.*, 2013), as will children who have less well developed first language skills. Home literacy practices also affect how fast children develop their L2, as do teachers' attitudes (e.g., Kratzmann *et al.*, 2013).

On the whole, the speed of early L2 learning is related to how often and in how many different contexts children hear the L2 in speech addressed to them and to how often they need and want to actually use it (e.g., see Hammer *et al.*, 2012; Oller & Eilers, 2002; Shin, 2005; Tabors, 2008; Thompson, 2000). One-on-one interaction in the L2 is of prime importance. These insights should guide ideas about the best conditions for early foreign language learning. Unfortunately, this rarely happens. Only particular kinds of early (partial) immersion programs take into account the importance of frequent contact with a language and the real communicative need to use a foreign language. I discuss these and related issues in section 2.3.

In addition to speed, there is the issue of how well children are able to learn a second language. Educators and politicians often lament the fact

that immigrant primary school-aged children do not speak the school language well enough and that they lag behind monolingual children'. They do not realize that, like for first language learning, reaching a high level of skill in a (second) language requires a long time, and a great number of high-quality learning opportunities. Indeed, the quality of the speech models children hear is very important. For instance, children who hear two languages from birth may hear one of them spoken by persons who do not sound quite native-like. This may have a direct effect on children's own language use, which may occasionally sound odd to native speakers (De Houwer, 2009). Thus, the language models that children hear are of prime importance both in first and early second language learning, and can explain many differences amongst children in how fast and how well they develop language. Foreign language early immersion programs that employ teachers who are highly proficient in that language take into account this fact and are to be commended for doing so.

Finally, although the first years of life are crucial in the development of language (Lyness *et al.*, 2013), there is no guarantee that what is learned at that early age will continue to be known later on. Often, children who grow up with two languages from birth and learn to both understand and speak two languages in early childhood are no longer able to speak one of their languages a few years later (De Houwer, 2009). The most likely explanation for this partial language loss (children continue to understand two languages) is insufficient exposure to the lost language and insufficient need to actually speak it (see also Hammer *et al.*, 2012).

It seems, then, that the evidence for a supposed language learning advantage that is solely determined by a supposed ease of language learning at a tender age is not particularly convincing. But, surely, children are better at learning a new language than teenagers or adults? The research evidence for straightforward age effects is currently very unclear (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011; DeKeyser, 2013). There may be age-related differences depending on what aspect of language you look at, though. For instance, adult second language learners can learn words faster (compare Jamieson, 1976, and Milton & Meara, 1995), whereas immigrant children often have a better pronunciation in their second language than immigrants who first started to learn that language as teenagers or young adults. This brings us to the next question.

2.2. Is it true that certain aspects of language, especially pronunciation, cannot be learned after puberty?

Very early language input in a first language strongly facilitates the full development of language (Lyness *et al.*, 2013). This fact has often been used as an argument for the existence of "critical periods" in the learning of a second language (see Lambelet, this volume, for extensive discussion). The notion that there are age-determined, biological

limits on what people can learn in the linguistic realm has been with us for a long time (the Critical Period Hypothesis or CPH was formulated by Lenneberg in the 1960's). Today, neuroscientists have developed a much more nuanced perspective on learning and brain development (Kolb & Gibb, 2011; Lyness *et al.*, 2013). In the field of second language learning, focus on the CPH has shifted to investigating effects of the age at which people first were regularly exposed to a new language (DeKeyser, 2013). The methodological hurdles in these investigations are many, and apparent age differences are often caused by other factors than just age.

However, many adults are impressed by young second language learners' apparent ease and skill in pronouncing sounds in a new language that they find hard to imitate. It seems as if young L2 children can easily learn to pronounce sounds the way monolinguals do. The question is whether L2 learners really need to learn how to pronounce words the way monolinguals do. Many people have ambiguous feelings here: on the one hand

they admire people with native-like accents in a second language, but on the other hand they would not feel good about sounding native-like themselves. Indeed, accent is an important marker of identity (Zuengler, 1988) and pronunciation has a large attitudinal component (Rindal, 2010). Not developing a native-like pronunciation in a second language, then, does not necessarily signify an *inability* on the learning level, but may be strongly connected to an *unwillingness* to sound native-like and thus identify with a particular social group. L2 learners are free to adopt any accent, really, since having an accent in a second language need not get in the way of communication as long as pronunciation is intelligible.

Regardless of whether as an L2 learner you want to sound like a "native speaker" or not, there are quite a few individuals who have started to learn a language after puberty and who pronounce that language in a native-like way (cf. also Nikolov, 2000a). Although these people probably form a minority of L2 learners, their very existence shows that there is no universal cut-off point (as is implied in the

notion of a "critical period") for learning new sounds. Rather, we could speak of "sensitive" periods, that is, periods in which it appears generally easier for a particular age group to learn a particular kind of behavior. In this sense, young children generally do seem to have an easier time than adults in picking up the "right" accent. However, there is a great deal of variation amongst children and adults.

2.3. What does all this mean for early foreign language teaching?

Because people believe that first and early second language learning are fast and easy (see above) they think that learning a foreign language in early childhood will be fast and easy, too. Apart from the fact that first and early second language learning are not as fast and easy as generally thought, the circumstances for learning a foreign language are very different. Both in first and early second language learning children typically hear a massive amount of language, and they need to use that language in order to survive or at least become an accepted member of a speech community. Foreign language learning environments that try to closely mimic these circumstances can be found in various kinds of immersion programs (Tedick *et al.*, 2011) that, if managed and executed well, can lead to considerable success, both for the learning of the new language and the continued development of the first. In fact, for individual second language learners, their experience at school may at first resemble a foreign language total immersion experience, and for initially early foreign language learners the foreign language may become a language they use outside of the school setting as well so the distinction between foreign and second language learning in these immersion settings is not very clear-cut. However, in Europe foreign language immersion programs are still quite rare



Uccelli sull'albero (collage). Realizzazione comune di piccoli artisti tra i 3 e i 6 anni.

(Eurydice/Eurostat, 2012). Instead, widespread early foreign language teaching has been installed in a belief that it will lead to early foreign language learning. Early foreign language teaching is mostly realized through just a few hours' instruction in the new language per week (Eurydice/Eurostat, 2012) and usually takes place in a setting where a single person (the teacher) speaks the foreign language in class some or all of the time. Given the size of many primary school groups, there tends to be hardly any one-on-one teacher-child interaction in the foreign language. Regardless of the actual teaching method used, both these circumstances are very different from the normal settings in which first and second language learning take place: In these, there is plenty of language input, and there are many opportunities for one-on-one verbal interaction.

Clearly, when teaching-induced foreign language learning in the classroom is compared to non-taught second language learning in the classroom, L2 learners progress much faster. No systematic studies are needed to prove this since the evidence is obvious to anyone who has experience with both. This presumably led DeKeyser (2013: 455) to write that even if you accept that in L2 learning "earlier is better" (as discussed earlier, this may not be generally true), this does not necessarily imply that "earlier teaching is better". After all, language learning does not necessarily depend on language teaching: Many L2 learners learn their L2 without any sort of formal instruction. Explicit teaching is just one particular situation in which learning may be provoked.

There is considerable scholarly controversy as to whether it is better to teach children a foreign language earlier rather than later (Schmelter, 2010). Yet the question whether younger children fare better with foreign language teaching than older children or teenagers is an important one. The following section discusses some results from the limited amount of research that has addressed this question.

3. The foreign language learning effects of early foreign language teaching

So far, research investigating the effects on foreign language learning of early vs. later foreign language teaching has mainly focused on English (e.g., Cenoz, 2009; García Lecumberri & Gallardo, 2003; Larson-Hall, 2008; MacKay & Fullana, 2009; Muñoz, 2006). The combined results of this scientific research indicate no clear age-related advantage for foreign language instruction, and generally early foreign language learning in instructed settings initially proceeds very slowly². There is no evidence of a disadvantage for a later start with foreign language instruction. In fact, secondary school students can develop high levels of proficiency in one or more foreign languages that they were not taught in at primary school (European Commission, 2012³). Cenoz (2011: 27) writes:

"Learning a [...] foreign language from an early age may have cultural and social advantages but it is important to keep in mind that if exposure is limited to a few hours of contact with the target language in the school context the results in terms of proficiency may be also limited."

In her authoritative assessment based on the empirical evidence available today, Muñoz (2013) concludes that

"young age does not automatically confer an advantage on young learners if they do not have the amount and intensity of exposure as well as the quality of input required for their learning potential to be instantiated."

The research results looking at age effects have so far not taken into account methods of instruction and quality of teachers' foreign language use. Generally, though, children in the studies above were taught by teachers who themselves were foreign language users of the language they were teaching, and specific instruction methods were not controlled for (there are several in use across Europe, as documented, for instance, by Nikolov, 2009a, 2009b). It is possible, then, that problems with these aspects neutralized any possibly positive effect from children's ages. Going on the assumption that learning a new language involves learning its basic phonology so that mutual comprehension in international communication can be reached, Piske (2007: 313) notes:

"Students will not be able to learn to pronounce a foreign language well unless their teachers provide them with a substantial amount of high-quality, i.e., native-like or at least almost native-like, L2-input. Specific training in the perception and production of the sounds of a foreign language should also help students to attain a more accurate pronunciation of the foreign language."

In her experimental study of German primary school children who had not yet received any formal English instruction, Piszczan (2013) found that they had no problem perceiving the vowel contrasts present in for instance the pair *bad-bed* as correctly pronounced by a near-native English speaker (this distinction is crucial for accurate word comprehension in any kind of international English). Yet it is well known that after they have started to learn English at primary school German children often say *bed* when they mean to say *bad* (and most German speakers of English do not sufficiently distinguish between them, leading to misunderstandings). In spite of an early ability to perceive the distinction, the later error could be the result of children's teachers not pronouncing *bad* correctly (and of children modelling what they say on their teachers' pronunciation – after all, how are children to know that their teachers are making mistakes), and/or of

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the lack of appropriate training in pronouncing the *bad-bed* contrast. Indeed, there are many different factors besides age that can help explain children's level of success at early foreign language learning at school. These include, amongst others, the linguistic distance between children's first language and the foreign language, media exposure to the foreign language, parental use of the foreign language at work and parental educational levels (Lindgren & Muñoz, 2012), as well as the fact whether children have been taught a single foreign language or two (Heinzmann *et al.*, 2010). So far uninvestigated are the roles played by teachers' level of foreign language proficiency, foreign language teaching approaches and teaching styles.

If indeed early foreign language teaching as it is generally carried out in Europe today (with just a few hours of class-based foreign language instruction per week) does not lead to clear and long-lasting foreign language learning advantages for children, then we would have to ask the question: is it worth all the effort? After all, early foreign language teaching comes at a great cost. Teachers must be well trained in the foreign language, and in appropriate methods to teach that language. Teaching materials need to be developed and paid for. If children are taught the wrong way, they may develop negative attitudes towards a particular language and foreign language learning in general. Such negative attitudes will stand in the way of future foreign language learning.

The next section considers some additional aspects worthy of consideration.

4. Some more global factors that need to be considered in the implementation of early foreign language teaching

The goal to create a multilingual population in Europe where everyone speaks at least three languages is a noble and important one. Many countries in Europe have chosen the path of starting foreign language teaching early to help reach this goal. Schools and/or countries often decide on one particular foreign language to be taught early – most commonly, English. This implies a great deal of investment in one particular direction. While English is currently an important lingua franca in much of Europe (Wilton & De Houwer, 2011), the question is how long this will continue to be the case. Russian, for instance, was an important lingua franca in the former Soviet Bloc countries (Pavlenko, 2006). In the former

DDR, Russian was obligatorily the first foreign language taught at school (as is often the case with English in Europe now). With the fall of the Berlin Wall, and German reunification, the position of Russian as a lingua franca drastically changed, and Russian teachers had the choice: learn English or lose your job (Phillips, 2000). Russian is no longer an important lingua franca in former East Germany, and the investment that went into its teaching and learning is basically lost. Generations of ex-DDR students who had to learn Russian have no use for it today, and are unable to function in now more important languages such as English or Spanish.

This example shows how political and societal changes can affect language policy and how it is cost-inefficient and dangerous to place all one's eggs in one basket, so to speak (De Houwer, 2004). What if one makes a choice that after, say, 30 years, turns out to be out of date? While at present English still has a very influential role in international communication on a global level, the question is how long this role will continue to exist. Linguists have speculated that international communication will come to rely much more on many more different languages, rather than on one "super" language, and that the role of English is bound to soon diminish (Ostler, 2010). For the time being, English is still strongly present in European society and educated adults who know little English are at a disadvantage. It is obvious that English needs to be on offer as a foreign language in schools. But this does not mean that everybody needs to invest a lot in it: Not everybody needs English to the same extent and for the same purposes.

Choosing one other foreign language instead of English as the single language that all children and young adults will be trained in is not a solution: then you have the same problem of potentially choosing the wrong language. Rather, if the goal is to create a multilingual population, then it makes more sense to give students the chance to choose from a large number of different languages in function of their own needs and/or interests, and to make sure that students learn more than a single foreign language. Thus every young person will have their own individual language portfolio, and all these portfolios combined will form a strong basis on which to develop international trade and communication. The system on the whole is more flexible this way, too, and allows for quick readjustments to keep pace with changing political and economic developments.

Children's language choices need not be made at the primary level. Given that children and their interests change a lot over time, given the lack of convincing reasons to start foreign language learning at primary school, and given the fact that students in secondary school are well able to learn foreign languages to high levels if proper teaching methods are in place, foreign language instruction can more appropriately start at the secondary level. However, for that later foreign language learning to be successful, students must have the motivation and interest to want to learn a foreign language in the first place. The groundwork for creating this motivation must be laid in primary school (and should be supported at home as well). In this context it

should be noted that early foreign language teaching, if done badly, can jeopardize children's desire to learn a new language (see also Nikolov, 2000b). This should be avoided, since lack of motivation makes language learning impossible. Primary school's main role in foreign language teaching should be to ensure (1) that *all* children are eager to learn new languages in secondary school and (2) that they are familiar with sounds from different languages so as to make it easier for them to gain an auditory entry into any new language at secondary school. The final section makes suggestions as to how to accomplish this.

5. In conclusion: How primary schools can lay the groundwork for successful foreign language learning

Politicians wanting to create a multilingual Europe forget that populations in Europe are generally already quite multilingual. Because of immigration both within and from outside European borders European children often come to school already speaking the school language and an immigrant language (De Houwer, 2003). On average, a third of the children in a European classroom will be hearing another language than the school language at home (either instead of or on top of the school language - De Houwer, 2004). Often, however, this type of multilingualism is ignored. It would be of benefit to the immigrant children involved and to society at large if European children's multilingualism were to be seen as an asset, regardless of what languages they speak (Extra, 2007). In the classroom, children's multilingualism should be recognized and given space (De Houwer, 2004). This can be done without a lot of additional cost, and teachers need not invest much in the learning of a foreign language themselves (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012). An openness to linguistic and cultural diversity is all that is required (see also, e.g., Young & Hélot, 2007).

Working with the resources that children's multilingualism offers will contribute to an openness to other languages and cultures that will prepare children for future foreign language learning. In addition, it will contribute to accepting and appreciating diversity, which is very necessary for the diverse European context in a globalized world. An example from the Alsace shows how

this can be done. In a pioneering project involving cooperation between parents, schools and school boards, Young and Hélot (2007) showed how small linguistic and cultural initiation programs can have big effects. Through direct parental involvement in the school, children

- learned about the geography and history of parents' and children's countries of origin or interest,
- tasted and learned about specialties from different culinary traditions,
- learned to sing short songs with actions in different languages,
- read traditional tales from bilingual books,
- learned traditional dances from different cultures,
- tried on traditional costumes from different cultures,
- watched home-made videos depicting a wedding ceremony or school life in parents' countries of origin or interest,
- learned how to introduce themselves, greet and say "please" and "thank you", as well as basic vocabulary such as colors or fruits in different languages, and much more.

In this project, then, children were engaged in foreign language learning, but not in the sense that they should learn to speak just a single language, and not through focused foreign language teaching. Inclusive projects like these also support democracy and make every pupil feel their culture and language are acknowledged at school, thereby contributing to the realization of universal children's rights, as laid down in the UN Charter for Children's Rights. A recent Concept Paper commissioned by the Council of Europe (Little, 2010) expands on this and also advocates the express recognition of and attention to *all* children's languages in school. Many aspect of the so-called "Mehrsprachigkeitsdidaktik" (Multilingual Pedagogy; e.g., Neuner, 2009) fit in with this approach as well.

Recognizing children's multilingualism at school as done in the Alsatian project will have the added benefit of promoting children's well-being and of bridging the often all-too-wide gap between parents and teachers. These benefits are priceless. If children can learn to be open to other languages and cultures from an early age and are supported in this from all sides - at home and at school - they will have the best basis from which to start "seriously" studying foreign languages. If in turn foreign language teaching at secondary school is done with care, competence and enthusiasm, Europe's multilingual future will be secure.

Notes

¹ It is curious and ironic that the argumentation in favor of early foreign language learning often relies on claims that early second language learning is fast and easy while at the same time immigrant children who are learning a second language early are often claimed not to be learning their second language fast and well.

² This finding does not, of course, imply that children cannot learn a foreign language at primary school. They certainly can reach good beginning levels in some areas of foreign language use (see, e.g., Heinzmann *et al.*, 2010). At issue here is whether there is any particular advantage for an early rather than a later start with foreign language teaching.

Although the first years of life are crucial in the development of language, there is no guarantee that what is learned at that early age will continue to be known later on.

³ Note that in Germany secondary school starts at age 10, after 4 years of primary school, whereas in other countries it starts 2 years later, after 6 years of primary school.

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Annick De Houwer

PhD, is Professor of Language Acquisition and Teaching at the University of Erfurt in Germany. She is the founder and director of the European Research Network for Bilingual Studies ERBIS (www.erbis.org). She is an expert on bilingual acquisition and the author of the first textbook on how children learn two languages from birth (viz., *Bilingual First Language Acquisition*, 2009). She has also published on English in Europe today, early second language learning, attitudes towards child language, language contact, Dutch child language, teen language, and intralingual subtitling. She is on the Editorial Board of several international journals and has been the General Editor of book series on language development and sociolinguistics.



Albert Anker, *Schulmädchen bei den Hausaufgaben*, 1879.