

Policy Papers

21 May 2017

Learning foreign languages in primary schools: is younger better?

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- The teaching of a foreign language was introduced in the National Curriculum in primary schools in England in 2014 (Key Stage 2 – age 7–11). Children now study one foreign language for up to one hour per week.
- This policy was primarily based on the belief that young children learn foreign languages faster, and that teaching foreign languages early to young children could therefore close the gap which currently exists between our young people and their European counterparts in terms of foreign language capability, making them more competitive on the global market.
- Research shows, however, that children are slower at learning a foreign language than adolescents and young adults. This is because young children do not yet have well developed cognitive resources and therefore need abundant language input to compensate. The current one hour weekly, well below the several hours of teaching in many European countries, is insufficient to meet current expectations about achievement.
- At the same time, research shows that young children are very enthusiastic towards the learning of foreign languages. There is, therefore, a strong case for an early start, in order to capitalize on this enthusiasm.
- Research on current educational provision has highlighted two further areas of concern, in addition to the low amount of teaching input: (i) the transition between primary and secondary school is problematic because children arrive with very diverse foreign language experiences; (ii) the lack of specialist teachers, lack of training for teachers, and lack of adequate teaching resources.
- Improving provisions for teacher training and resources is vital for the success of the current policy of teaching one foreign language in primary schools. A smooth transition between primary and secondary schools should also be ensured to mitigate its adverse effects on the motivation of young learners.
- There are broader cognitive, cultural, societal and literacy benefits to learning foreign languages besides linguistic proficiency. These benefits need to become more central in the development of the primary languages curriculum and shape expectations.

Introduction

Foreign languages were introduced formally within the primary school curriculum in England in 2014 for the first time. Children at Key Stage 2 (age 7–11) now study one foreign language for up to one hour per week (in 90% of schools, [Language Trends 2016/17](#)). It can be any modern or ancient foreign language and the focus should be on enabling pupils to make substantial progress in one language. The Department of Education states ‘liberation from insularity’ and an ‘opening to other cultures’ as the principal purposes for introducing language learning in primary school. This makes it an opportune time to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of an early start, and what challenges it poses.

There are two main reasons behind the introduction of foreign languages in primary classrooms. The first is the belief that ‘the younger the better’, the idea that young children are intrinsically better language learners, and will therefore become more proficient more quickly. The second is that in an increasingly globalized world, intercultural competence is essential, and that it is important to awaken children’s interests in other people and cultures at a time when they are open and receptive. More recent arguments are based on the cognitive advantages that learning a foreign language brings (such as enhanced problem solving, attentional control or ability to switch tasks, and on the claim that it helps with literacy in English but these arguments have not yet filtered into public discourse.

However, the government policy which made learning a foreign language compulsory in English primary schools from Key Stage 2 was almost exclusively linked to the first of these motives. But what is the research evidence? In the first part, I will briefly review how young children learn by comparison with teenagers and adults, and what expectations can reasonably be entertained given this evidence. I will then draw some of the implications of this evidence for policy.

Is younger better? What is the research evidence?

The belief underlying the introduction of foreign languages in primary schools is that teaching foreign languages early to young children, when they are most receptive, could close the gap which currently exists between our young people and their European counterparts in terms of foreign language capability, making them more competitive on the global market. After all, we just pick up our mother tongue effortlessly as young children, so the logic is that if we teach children early enough, the same will happen with foreign languages. This view was stated, for example, by Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1999: ‘Everyone knows that with languages, the earlier you start, the easier they are’. This popular view has its theoretical foundations in the so-called ‘Critical Period Hypothesis’, which claims that children are born with an innate language faculty which atrophies with age, and that it is therefore important to tap into these innate mechanisms before the critical age when they disappear.

But what is the research evidence? It is important to distinguish between children immersed in the new language they are learning, for example as immigrants in a new country, and children exposed to a foreign language in the classroom, a few hours a week at best, and usually less than an hour per week in the vast majority of English primary schools.

In the case of immigrant children, there is much research evidence that young children are actually slower than older learners at the beginning of the learning process. Many studies have shown that adolescents and young adults are faster learners on all measures of language proficiency. Young children, however, eventually catch up with older learners and typically become indistinguishable from native speakers, which is usually not the case for adults. So, in the case of immigrant children, earlier does seem better, but only in the long run, and only where children are given plenty of time and opportunity to make the most of the abundant language input they are exposed to. This advantage has often been linked to the Critical Period Hypothesis mentioned above.

In the context of foreign language learning in the classroom, are primary school children also more likely than older students to reach native-like proficiency in the long run?

All research investigating whether earlier is better in instructed contexts points in the same direction:

- Young children are very enthusiastic and love learning foreign languages. They find it fun and they enjoy discovering new worlds and new ways of saying things.
- Young children are slower at learning languages than adolescent learners, in all aspects of language. To my knowledge, only one study by Jenifer Larson-Hall found a small advantage for an early start, but in that study, the children had six to eight hours of instruction per week for 44 weeks a year over six years, making the context of learning very different from the one or two weekly hours in other studies.

Probably the most ambitious piece of research investigating the role of age in early foreign language learning in the classroom is the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) project (Muñoz 2006). Carmen Muñoz and her team capitalized on the fact that the government changed the age at which English was introduced in the classroom in rapid succession, creating a natural experiment whereby they were able to compare second language learners having started at ages 8, 11, 14 and over 18. Muñoz was able to follow a large number of learners over a long period of time (learners were tested after 200, 416 and 726 hours of instruction). The team then compared their learning on a wide range of measures testing all 4 macroskills: speaking, listening, writing and reading. They found that with the same amount of instruction, late starters were consistently faster and more efficient learners on all measures.

Most of the research to date has focussed on the learning of English as a foreign language, in countries where there is much pressure for children to learn English in order to become successful global citizens. But what happens in England, where children grow up speaking the international language, and where the cultural context as well as inconsistent commitment from successive governments make the learning of foreign languages anything but central to the educational agenda? In a recent study we compared how children aged 5, 7 and 11 learn French in the classroom in England. All children were complete beginners at the start of the project and received two hours a week of similar instruction from the same teacher over 19 weeks. This study found that the older children learned faster, as they were better able to use a range of cognitive strategies to aid their learning, and they also used their more advanced literacy skills to support their foreign language learning. The younger children, however, were the most enthusiastic, as reported by many studies (e.g. Cable et al. 2010).

So, is younger really better when learning a foreign language in the classroom?

That depends on what we understand by ‘better’. If ‘better’ means faster linguistic progress, the research evidence tells us that older children outperform younger children; their greater cognitive maturity helps them make the best of the limited input and of explicit instruction. The very small number of studies which have found a small advantage for an early start were in instructed contexts with many hours of instruction per week. It seems that young children, learn mainly by doing rather than by conscious learning, that is, they learn more implicitly than older children. As a result, they need abundant input and rich interaction to allow their implicit mechanisms to work. After all, it is estimated that children learning their native language are exposed to 17,000 hours of input by age 4. The one hour per week in the national curriculum bears no resemblance to this quantity of input, and therefore policy expectations must be realistic in terms of linguistic development of foreign languages. At the rate of one hour per week, it would take 425 years for children in a classroom to match the input of children learning their native language!

If on the other hand, ‘better’ means developing an enthusiasm for learning languages, as well as changing cultural perceptions about the centrality of languages to education by embedding them in the curriculum from the start, then much of the evidence suggests that younger is better. In our recent study comparing 5, 7 and 11 year olds learning French in England, 96% of the 5 year olds enjoyed learning French, and 88% of the 7 year olds did so too. It seems that even an hour per week has the potential to awaken a lifelong interest in foreign languages, which must be welcome in a country where foreign language learning is undervalued and in crisis.

However, this enthusiasm clearly requires nurturing if it is to persist. In our study, the youngest children expressed short term and intrinsic reasons for liking French. It is fun; it is different from their other subjects, and they like learning about different countries. By the time they reach age 7, however, children have started realising that learning a foreign language is hard work and that it takes a long time to be able to hold a basic conversation. The common belief that learning a foreign language early equates with it being easy to learn does not really match their experience, and the popular belief that the English are not good at learning foreign languages is reinforced, when in fact the likely cause is the lack of time and effort spent on language learning. Further challenges arise as children get older. Under present conditions in England, they are likely to encounter problems and discontinuity in language learning at the point of transition from primary to secondary school, which may be at least temporarily demotivating. The curriculum also becomes more focussed on examinations, which are perceived as difficult in Modern Languages. More broadly, the misconception grows that if you speak English, you do not need to learn foreign languages as everyone speaks English.

Challenges and implications for policy

In the following section, we discuss the implications of these research findings on the role of age in instructed contexts, for the policy challenges facing the early introduction of foreign languages in primary schools.

Challenges

The rationale behind the introduction of languages was firmly that earlier is better in terms of developing proficiency in the target foreign language. These expectations are problematic for a number of reasons:

- **Limited input:** Research has shown conclusively that language proficiency does not develop faster in younger children, and the expectations placed upon primary school aged children and their teachers concerning the learning that is possible in one hour a week are somewhat unrealistic. The Languages Programmes of Study (Department for Education 2013: 1) specify that all pupils should ‘understand and respond to spoken and written language from a variety of authentic sources; speak with increasing confidence, fluency and spontaneity, finding ways of communicating what they want to say, including through discussion and asking questions, and continually improving the accuracy of their pronunciation and intonation; can write at varying length, for different purposes and audiences, using the variety of grammatical structures that they have learnt; discover and develop an appreciation of a range of writing in the language studied’. Unless the curriculum incorporates several hours a week of foreign language teaching these aims are likely to be over-ambitious, as the limited amount of input will not allow for the implicit learning mechanisms typical of early childhood, that is, learning by ‘doing’, to engage with the input in a meaningful way. Older children are able to use their more developed cognitive capabilities and literacy skills to support their learning; younger children

are not yet able to do so. It is worth noting that the one hour per week is well below the several hours per week offered in many countries (European Commission 2012; OECD 2014). The policy implication is that either the number of weekly hours needs to be increased considerably, or expectations adjusted.

- **Teaching delivery:** Research has shown, unsurprisingly, that specialist teachers are more successful at teaching foreign languages than teachers who have a poor command of the language, and/or who have received little or no training in foreign language pedagogy. There is, however, a huge shortage of specialist teachers, which is unlikely to be solved in the near future, given the decrease in Modern Languages graduates being trained in universities. Consequently, many models of language teaching delivery are currently used in schools, ranging from the employment of one dedicated language teacher for the whole school (only viable in larger primary schools), the use of a peripatetic specialist teacher going from school to school, or, in many schools, the class teacher teaching the language, and perhaps learning it at the same time as the children.
- **Resources:** The introduction of the new policy took place at a time of declining resources, which greatly limited the support available for schools, through e.g. the disappearance of regional languages coordinators. The Routes into Languages project which supports schools in the promotion and delivery of foreign languages, was only centrally funded until July 2016. Schools have had to deliver this initiative with no extra resources and inconsistent support.
- **Transition from primary to secondary schools:** The transition from primary to secondary school has consistently been flagged up as a major challenge to progress in foreign language learning, ever since the first pilot introducing French in primary schools in England in the 1970s, and recent evidence suggests that the problem endures (Ofsted 2015; Tinsley and Board 2016). There is currently very little joined-up thinking about how the transition from primary to secondary schools is managed, with secondary schools receiving children from primary feeder schools with hugely varying practices, not to mention languages, and little coordination between the two. Children are typically taught languages together in year 7, the first year of secondary school, whether they have already studied the chosen language in primary school or not. This does not make for an ideal learning context, and it can be demotivating for learners, as well as for the teacher who typically has to assume children do not have any language skills.

These issues put together make it very difficult to see how the primary foreign languages initiative can be successful, IF its primary goal is increased proficiency and if its success is measured exclusively in terms of proficiency. The expectations are just too high, given the amount of teaching and the current resources and provision.

Implications for policy

The research evidence we have discussed, and the challenges it raises for the implementation of the primary language policy, do not mean that this initiative is not important and that it cannot be a success. However, it would need to be thought about differently with expectations matched to what research has shown about the way in which young children learn and what motivates them. What is

needed is a clear vision of the purpose of introducing young children to foreign languages, and of how the teaching of primary foreign languages can be integrated successfully within the Foreign Language curriculum as a whole, all the way through to GCSE, paying particular attention to evolving learner motivation and to the transition from primary to secondary school.

Research has shown that what really motivates young children is the fun of language learning: not only the fun activities typical of the primary language classroom, but also learning about another culture and its language: learning about children in other countries, what they do, how like/unlike them they are, how they speak etc. Regular opportunities for direct contact with foreign language speakers (including of course children) are highly motivating. Additionally, learning a foreign language helps children with their literacy skills in English, as well as offering other recognized cognitive benefits. The motivational, cultural, and cognitive benefits of language learning need to be stated more positively to ensure adequate recognition of their importance and value in the national curriculum.

Primary school teachers are usually excellent motivators; they enthuse children about learning new topics, and all the evidence shows that children learning foreign languages in primary schools share this enthusiasm. It is only once children realise that proficiency targets need to be met that their motivation wanes. Focussing less one-sidedly on a goal of linguistic proficiency would help mitigate some of the problems outlined above. Visits to and from foreign countries; internet exchanges with foreign schools, projects about some aspect of the foreign country/people, possibly linked with some other aspect of the curriculum, reflections on positive reasons for learning languages, and on the strategies which will help learners progress, would help foster an enduring enthusiasm for language in its cultural and social context, and thus support gradual linguistic progress. This agenda needs to be much more central and consistent in our curriculum.

The choice of language(s) to be taught in primary schools also merits discussion. The most commonly taught language is French, in over three quarters of schools, but other languages may have greater resonance with the experience of school children. Spanish might be a stronger motivator for children, as many have been to Spain on holiday, and its orthography and pronunciation are more transparent. And in contexts where there are many children with English as an additional language, it might be more appropriate to teach one of the languages of the community. One option could be for all children to start a new language at secondary school from scratch, avoiding the transition problems we mentioned above and which are so demotivating for children. A one size fits all model might not be the most appropriate.

To conclude, the introduction of foreign languages in primary has great potential, but its goals need to be clearly articulated and realistic, taking account of what research has shown about how young children learn and of the context in which schools and teachers have to operate. Foreign language teaching needs to be embedded within the children's overall education from the early years to the end of schooling, to avoid the highly demotivating transition issues. In their comprehensive survey of the state of language learning in English schools, Tinsley and Board conclude 'The vast majority of teachers responding to this year's Languages Trends survey are very clear that there are many benefits of teaching languages to pupils at Key Stage 2, especially widening pupils' cultural understanding and confidence, improving their literacy and preparing them for a world of work.' This needs to become central in the articulation of the primary foreign language policy.

Acknowledgments

The paper draws from the research project [Learning French from ages 5, 7 and 11: an investigation into starting ages, rates and routes of learning amongst early foreign language learners](#), by Florence Myles and Rosamond Mitchell, ESRC Ref No: RES-062-23-1545.

Further reading

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Comment

This paper was corrected in November 2017 to indicate that primary school children in the UK are not *required* to learn a foreign language for one hour per week, as was originally stated, but rather the majority of primary school students in the UK are learning a foreign language for up to an hour a week. A reference to the Language Trends 2016/17 document, where this information is reported, was added.