



*Theory and Practice in English Studies 3 (2005):
Proceedings from the Eighth Conference of British, American
and Canadian Studies. Brno: Masarykova univerzita*

Do the Early Birds Really Catch the Worm? Demystifying the Factor of Early Age in Language Learning

Světlana Hanušová, Petr Najvar

Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno

In June 2004, the research team Hanušová – Najvar carried out the first phase of the EVYL research project, the aim of which is to contribute to the discussion about effectiveness of teaching languages to young learners.

The entrance exam results of 579 prospective students of the PdF MU English department were confronted with their answers regarding the age at which they started learning English.

1 Introduction

One of the most frequently debated issues in ELT today is undoubtedly the question of when children should start learning a foreign language. We believe that commonly held views promoting early or very early start which are not well-founded and supported by research can cause misunderstanding and lead to false expectations or wrong measures.¹

ELT methodologists use a number of acronyms to refer to different teaching situations; EYL (English for Young Learners) or TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners) refer to primary learners aged five or six to eleven, (sometimes even to 17 years of age). Having considered possible connotations, we propose the acronym of EVYL (English for Very Young Learners) for even younger learners, very young meaning pre-primary learners (usually from three to five years of age). We furthermore believe that any language teaching up to the age of 9 or 10 can be considered EVYL.

2 Learning contexts

Learning foreign languages at an early (or very early) age can occur in three possible conditions: bilingual families, immersion situation and formal schooling. We should be fully aware of the essential differences among the three processes: the first two enable language acquisition (a natural subconscious process similar to first language acquisition) and only the last is based on formal learning and teaching (cf. Lojová 2004). The processes of acquisition are not the focus of our attention. Bilingual education is a matter of psycholinguistics rather than ELT Methodology. Immersion programs (e.g. in immersion kindergartens), are undoubtedly beneficial for the learners involved and inspiring for ELT methodologists. However, in our socio-cultural context they will always be available to a limited number of children and teachers only. The situation we have decided to explore is the formal teaching and learning situation in mainstream schools and kindergartens in the Czech Republic. Conditions specific to the Czech environment will be taken into account, such as the large number of unqualified English teachers at primary (at times even secondary) schools and the fact that university graduates are often unwilling to get involved in primary teaching.

3 Arguments for an early start

According to popular belief, children should start learning foreign languages as early as possible. The reasons usually stated to support this assertion are a good memory, a good ability to imitate, and the longer time available for language learning in their lifetime.² Recent European Commission recommendations seem to reflect these views: in the Action Plan for 2004-06 – called Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity – the Commission of the European Communities calls upon the member states to make language learning available to very young learners, mentioning the European Council meeting in Barcelona, where it was suggested that at least two foreign languages should be taught from a very early age. The Action Plan does recognize possible problems, such as a lack of trained staff, the size of groups or a lack of appropriate teaching materials. However, the effectiveness and benefits of an early start seem to be taken for granted (*Action Plan* 2004).

We believe that serious research is vitally needed to identify whether early age is the key to success or if there are any other alternatives we should focus on. A broad discussion among specialists who are able to see the whole situation realistically and to consider not only the real benefits of early language instruction but also the specific conditions in this country is, in our opinion, crucial.

4 Recent research

Lenneberg's Critical Age Hypothesis (1967) has been challenged from several different points of view in recent years. The studies usually cited to support the hypothesis are those of Mark Patkowski (1980) and Catherine Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978). Patkowski hypothesizes that even if accent is ignored, only those who have started learning their second language before the age of 15 can achieve full, native-like mastery of this language. Having examined 67 highly educated immigrants in the USA who started learning English at various ages, he gives added support to the Critical Age Hypothesis for second language acquisition. Catherine Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle carried out their project in the Netherlands. While studying a group of English speakers of various ages, who were learning Dutch as a second language, they looked into the effectiveness of various age groups at various language

tasks. They identify adolescents as the most successful language learners; young learners outperform adolescents only in pronunciation.³ However, the situation of total immersion – the context of both of these research projects – is radically different from the socio-cultural context of this country.

A longitudinal study carried out in France by Sophie Genelot in 1991-93 produced very interesting results. Significantly for us, the research setting bears a greater similarity to our situation. Genelot studied the effects of formal foreign language instruction in mainstream schools. The research sample comprised 1500 pupils in Dijon. 1000 of them started learning English at primary school, the rest at secondary school. Their success at English was measured at the end of their first and second years of secondary school (corresponding to a Czech eight-year *gymnázium*). The results show that the benefits of early start are minimal after the first year of secondary school and even smaller at the end of the second year. The only group that benefitted from early instruction was that of the most intelligent children.⁴ Also, a number of factors more significant than age of acquisition were revealed, such as the social background and general intelligence of the pupils, the methods of instruction and personalities of the teachers (Genelot 1996).

A similar large-scale study was carried out by a research team in Belgium, France, Britain, Germany, Italy (Blondin et al 1998). The conclusions confirm that early age alone does not automatically guarantee success, more important factors being the quality of teaching and the amount of time devoted to learning.

5 EVYL research project

The aim of the EVYL research project that is currently being carried out in the English Department of the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University, is to examine the overall effectiveness of early language teaching in the Czech Republic. One of the most frequent arguments in favour of early language teaching says that children gain an advantage over their peers and therefore will perform better in large-scale comparisons such as the “maturita” exam or entrance exams to a university. The research team has therefore decided to look for a statistically significant correlation between the age at which participants start to learn English and their score in the language part of the entrance exam to the English Department of the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University.

The first phase of the project took place in June 2004 during the scheduled entrance examination. 567 prospective students (out of 933 present at the examination) agreed to fill out a short questionnaire concerning the age at which they had started learning English, answering among other questions whether they had taken a one-year course at a language school. The data collected in the questionnaires were then compared with the respondents’ achievements in the test. If the popular belief were to be confirmed, the respondents who had started learning English at an earlier age would be expected to achieve higher scores than those who had started with English later.

Out of the 567 respondents, 8 stated that they had been learning English since kindergarten. 43 started learning English in the first or second grade. 258 started in the third, fourth or fifth grade. 109 started at lower secondary level (grades 6, 7, 8 or 9) and 125 started learning English at higher secondary level (high school). The reliability of the findings is reduced by the fact that not many people who applied for university studies in 2004 were old enough to have had the chance to start learning English very early. (Before 1990 English was not a part of primary and pre-primary curricula on a regular basis.) This flaw is to be addressed by subsequent phases of this research in future academic years, which also means the sample will be multiplied.

Quite a typical phenomenon among language students today is the taking of a one-year intensive English course at a language school after graduating from high school. 212 respondents (37 per cent) stated that they took a one-year English course prior to applying for university. These data have also been examined for the influence such a course has on achievement in entrance exams.

The maximum test score is 40 points. 4 respondents achieved between 5 and 10 points, 37 respondents between 11 and 15 points, 92 respondents between 16 and 20 points, 105 respondents between 21 and 25 points, 188 respondents between 26 and 30 points, 102 respondents between 31 and 35 points and 15 respondents between 36 and 40 points.

The chi-square for the age factor was in this case $\chi^2=16,069$ with $df=15$ {the critical values being $\chi^2_{0.05}(15)=24.996$ and $\chi^2_{0.01}(15)=30.578$ }. The effect of an intensive language course showed $\chi^2=11,319$ with $df=6$ {the critical values being $\chi^2_{0.05}(6)=12.592$ and $\chi^2_{0.01}(6)=16.812$ }.

z-score	T1 0-15	T1 16-20	T1 21-25	T1 26-30	T1 31-35	T1 36-40
kindergarten,						
1st or 2nd grade	0,0767	0,1235	-0,2764	0,3242	-0,841	1,354
third to fifth grade	0,3507	0,9922	0,4636	0,1933	-1,424	1,18
sixth to ninth grade	-0,432	0,3531	-0,0178	-1,3061	1,2434	0,5722
higher secondary	-0,1445	-2,0348	-0,647	-0,126	-0,833	0,2971

z-score	t1 5-10	t1 11-15	t1 16-20	t1 21-25	t1 26-30	t1 31-35	t1 36-40
course	-1,226	-1,866	-0,274	-0,416	0,42	1,268	0,555
non-course	0,95	1,456	0,217	0,33	-0,342	-1,007	-0,429

The findings show no correlation between the age at which the respondents started learning English and the score they achieved in the language test. All variances were well below the level of statistical significance. What seems to be of much greater influence is the effect of a one-year intensive language school course, even though this correlation is not statistically significant either.

6 Conclusions

The results indicate that EVYL (and/or EYL) in the way it has been taught in the Czech Republic in the last 15 years does not bring the desired benefits.

Even though we are fully aware of certain limitations of our project, which is focused only on correlations between early start and success at the entrance exam at the Faculty of Education, we can claim that success in the entrance exam can be considered an important indicator of success in language learning. We believe our results are relevant and consistent with those of similar studies carried out in similar socio-cultural contexts in Europe. The results disprove the popular belief. We are persuaded that the importance of an early start should not be overestimated. Assuming it is the quality of language instruction which matters more than the age of the start, we recommend that Czech schools do not introduce English in the first three grades of primary school. Attention should be paid to the quality of the language instruction provided at Czech schools.

Endnotes

- ¹ E.g. the initiative of the current Prime Minister, who wishes to invest CZK 10 billion in EYL without having given the situation proper consideration.
- ² When browsing the Internet we came across the following statement, which caused us some astonishment: “Indeed, learning a second language at a young age is an effective way to greatly advance all children, including brain damaged children and children with autism” (www.helendoron.com).
- ³ The question remains, whether native-like pronunciation is the goal of language teaching and learning in all contexts, even within the framework of ELF (English as Lingua Franca).
- ⁴ Moreover, the results also indicated that the level demonstrated by the pupils in their mother tongue (French) was lower if English was introduced earlier, as the number of French lessons per week had to be reduced.

References

- Blondin, C., Candelier, M., Edelenbos, P., Johnstone R., Kubanek-German, A., Taeschner, T. (1998) *Les langues étrangères dès l'école primaire ou maternelle: quels résultats, à quelles conditions?* Bruxelles: De Boeck.
- Genelot, S.(1996) ‘Au detriment de quels cours cet apprentissage se fait-il?’ *Les notes de l'iredu* 96/4. 15 January 2005. <http://www2.ubourgogne.fr/IREDU/notes.htm>
- Lenneberg, E. H. (1967) *Biological Foundations of Language*, John Wiley and Son.
- Lojová, G. (2004) ‘Niektoré psychologické špecifiká detí predškolského veku a osvojovanie si cudzieho jazyka’ in *Cudzie jazyky v škole 2. Zborník z medzinárodnej konferencie Dieťa – jazyk – svet*, Nitra.
- Patkowski, M. S. (1980) ‘The sensitive period for the acquisition of syntax in a second language’ in *Language Learning* 30: 449-472.
- Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 – 2006*. Brussels: Commission of the European Communities. 15 January 2005. <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/doc/official/keydoc/actlang/act_lang_en.pdf>.
- Snow, C., Hoefnagel-Höhle, M. (1978) ‘The critical period for language acquisition: Evidence from second language learning’ in *Child Development* 49: 1114-1128.