DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 119 531 FL 007 572

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TITLE For and Against an Early Start.
PUB DATE Nov 75
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the International Congress of the Federation Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (12th, Washington, D.C., November, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Development; *Cognitive Processes; Elementary Education; Elementary School Curriculum; *Fles; Fles Programs; French; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; Research Projects; *Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

The arguments for and against the teaching of foreign languages from primary school level onwards are discussed. Young children, if suitably taught, can make good progress with the learning of a foreign language, and whether they are better at language learning than older beginners is to some extent irrelevant. However, there is no convincing evidence that young children are inferior language-learners. Various investigations are mentioned, and a critical examination is made of certain aspects of the research project into the primary school teaching of French in Britain. An early start may be made, with language teaching as with other subjects and activities, in recognition of the mind-broadening and personal developmental effect a well-run foreign language course can have on the children taking part in it. There is room for further research on the age of beginning, the pace and intensity of the teaching, and the individualization of the teaching/learning process. (Author)

FIPLV Congress-Washington
November 1975

FOR AND AGAINST AN EARLY START

Among the numerous questions in the field of language teaching to which no generally accepted answer is given is that of the age at which it is best to begin learning a foreign language at school. Let us restrict the setting in which the teaching and learning are carried on to the school placed in a community where that language is not in daily use. This is the so-called foreign-language learning situation. We need not refrain from glancing now and then at the second-language learning situation, in which the language taught at school is in fairly widespread use outside the school, although not necessarily as the community's main language, and even at the immigrant's language-learning situation, where the new language is met with almost everywhere. But we have not much choice with immigrants: we must start teaching them, more or less, from the time they arrive at school.

One assumption which underlies argument on when to start is that foreign-language learning should at least have some place somewhere on the school curriculum. At once, if we examine that assumption, we are inevitably plunged, it appears to me, into problems of the content of a basic education. What should a basic education consist of - at primary level, at secondary school, and so on? What ought to be included? What ought to be left out? Should foreign-language learning be left out, and if so on what grounds? Is the fact that younger children take to certain 'subjects' or certain types of learning activity more readily or less readily than older learners a sufficient reason for including or excluding these 'subjects' or types of activity from the primary curriculum? At a deeper level, what are the aims of basic education; that is, of the education that everybody receives (or in the opinion of most people and many governments should receive) early in life?

I would like to dodge some of these broader problems, since my time is limited and my chief concern with the practice of foreign-language teaching. But I fear that they cannot be altogether dodged. I shall return to them later and attempt a brief comment.

Those who have urged or defended the introduction of foreign-language teaching at primary school level, by which I mean before the age of eleven[1] have generally done so on one or both of two grounds:

(a) that younger children are better at foreign-language learning than older children are;
(b) that an early start ensures a longer total period of learning.

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1) In some countries the primary-school period lasts until the age of thirteen.

As for (a), there seems to be no proof that this is so. But what, after all, do we mean by 'better'? Are we referring to the result, over a short period or a long period of time, in terms of ability to use the language as a means of communication? Are we referring to examination results? Are we referring to the learners' attitudes, to the readiness with which they co-operate with the teacher and enter into the lesson activities, the willingness they show to continue using and learning the language? The bare statement that younger children are better language-learners has little meaning as it stands.

Almost everybody, I suppose, who has taught young children - of, say, eight to eleven years of age - has found them in general eager and co-operative, a delight to teach. Problems of class management lie not in arousing and maintaining their interest but in keeping it within orderly bounds. The teacher I have in mind here, of course, is a reasonably skilful one with adequate experience of teaching such children. At a higher age-level - let us say at fourteen or fifteen - indifference and lack of co-operation, not to say sheer hostility, are more probable, and the teacher may have a hard job to create and maintain interest, at least in a class of unselected learners.[1]

In view of what has been achieved in places too numerous to mention, nobody can seriously dispute that young children at school can, but only if certain conditions are fulfilled, successfully learn a foreign language, to the extent, moreover, of speaking it in a way felt by native speakers of the language to be natural. Need one ask whether they are more successful than older learners? It is not essential to ask this. We do not often ask whether they are better at arithmetic, or singing, or history, or geography, or elementary science. We strongly suspect that they are not. Yet it is rarely suggested that these activities should be postponed until the pupils reach the secondary school. We do not ask whether they would learn to read and write their mother tongue more quickly if they were to wait a few years longer for initial instruction. Perhaps they would. Perhaps there should be research to establish how soon those who begin to read and write the mother tongue early are overtaken by those who begin to read and write it late. But if there were, what conclusions could be drawn? That the primary schools should be closed down? And suppose it were established in due course, as a result of really ruthless investigation, that most learning tasks are more successfully tackled by adults, would it follow that secondary schools should be closed down too?

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1) By the time such an age-level has been reached, selection of some kind or other has usually taken place, as a result of decisions taken by the school itself or as a result of options exercised by parents or pupils. Older classes represent less often than younger classes a cross-section of the community.

I ask these questions half-seriously because it appears to me that, when it comes to foreign-language learning, there is a curious assumption that if only one could prove young beginners to be less capable than older beginners, one would be justified in suggesting that money is wasted in enabling them to begin at all. In the present economic climate suggestions for reducing expenditure are generally welcome.

But is it so clear that younger learners (I am thinking all the time of eight-to-ten-year-olds, and not for the moment, of children very much younger than that) are inferior language-learners? Many language-teachers and language--teaching specialists have thought otherwise. E.V.Gatenby, for instance, described a kindergarten class of multilingual seven-year-olds in Istanbul where 'the results obtained must seem miraculous to the ordinary secondary-school teacher of languages, for after nine months these children have, for all practical purposes, become English as far as speech is concerned... Only in reading, writing, and extent of vocabulary do they seem at this stage to be a little behind pupils of the same age in England; and this gap soon disappears as they progress up the school. I went round testing individuals while they were drawing or modelling and spoke to them in normal, idiomatic English, as their teacher did. Not once was there any hesitation in reply, and no sign of mental translation such as one finds in a secondary-school class of older children.'[1] Admittedly, however, there were two or three native English-speaking children in the class, and no other lingua franca, since the children were of many nationalities. But this was not so in classes of nine-year--olds I observed two years ago in Belgrade, where similarly outstanding results had been obtained and where, above all, the classroom atmosphere was one of enjoyment. I might have said then, echoing S.R.Ulibarri (of New Mexico): 'The child accepts the second language on faith, the faith of a child. He believes in his teacher. He doesn't question her ability or the validity of what she offers him. He has faith in himself. Nothing is impossible for him, for he has no reason to doubt his own ability; he has no record of failure, to dissuade him from what he sets out to do... In many classes I have conducted for children, the parents and myself have been amazed at the interest and the desire the children have shown... Those of us who have seen little tots learning a new language can only marvel at the ease with which they conquer the obstacles that trip their brothers and sisters in junior high, high school, and college.' (This ability decreases year by year until the child has reached his late teens, when it reaches its lowest level. Unfortunately that is when we usually begin to teach them a foreign language.'[2]

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1) E.V.Gatenby, 'Second Language in the Kindergarten' in English Language Teaching, I, 7, 178-181.

2) Sabine R. Ulibarri, in Teaching English as a Second Language, ed. H.B.Allen. 1st edition, 1965, p.315.

One need not agree with every detail of this to be in general sympathy with it, as I must frankly admit I am myself, although the writer is evidently to some extent talking about children under eight. I find that it squares with my own teaching experience. Nor is it a rare or isolated view, and it would not be difficult to find numerous other instances and quotations. Probably there is widest agreement that young children have a remarkable facility for picking up the teacher's pronunciation (which may not be a good one), but I would add to this that most children of eight to ten (there are exceptions) have a remarkable eagerness and unselfconsciousness which enables them to throw themselves into some of the very activities which best help foreign-language learning along: such activities as miming, play-acting, language games, dramatisation. Older children tend to be self-conscious about such goings-on and to think them silly, unless they have got on good terms with them when younger.

Now this is all anecdotal evidence, it might be said, and therefore of little account. To be 'anecdotal' is almost as bad as to be 'behind the times'. Apart from so-called anecdotal evidence, which however includes the accounts given by successful teachers of their own teaching experience, there is a certain amount of research, so far not demonstrating that young children in a foreign-language learning situation are any better at language-learning than older pupils are. In 1931, for example, the American and Canadian Committees on Foreign Language Study reported on research carried out, though on a fairly small scale, in England, Canada, and the U.S. which indicated that groups of early beginners had been overtaken in 4½ years by those who began in the secondary school.[1] Among more recent investigations have been those of Clare Burstall and colleagues into the primary-school teaching of English in England and Wales[2] and of Oller and Nagato into the teaching of English in Japan.[3] According to Oller and Nagato, learners with six years of English before they entered the junior high school were overtaken by those lacking this headstart by the time they reached the eleventh grade. 'In the school system examined here,' they say, 'it seems the major obstacle is the lack of co-ordination between the elementary and the secondary programs. Since FLES and non-FLES students are integrated into the same classes from the eighth grade on, the FLES students must mark time while the non-FLES students catch up.'[4] They add, perhaps not surprisingly: '... there is no evidence that students with a FLES background will progress more rapidly than non-FLES students in foreign-language study at the secondary or college levels.'

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1) I have not been able to trace the original report, briefly referred to by Michael West, an opponent of an early start, in 'At what age should language study begin?' English Language Teaching, 1959.

2) See Primary French in the Balance, by C.Burstall, M.Jamieson, S.Cohen and M.Hargreaves. NFER Publishing Co. London 1974.

3) J.W.Oller and N.Nagato, 'The Long-Term Effect of FLES - an Experiment', Modern Language Journal LVIII, 1-2, Jan-Feb 1974.

4) FLES = Foreign Languages in the Elementary Schools.

The large-scale and prolonged research carried out in recent years by Mrs Burstall and her team, under the auspices of the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales, comes to a similar conclusion. The main purpose of this NFER evaluation of the teaching of French in primary schools was to obtain evidence on which to base a decision about whether to 'extend the teaching of a foreign language to pupils who represented a wider range of age and ability than those to whom foreign languages had traditionally been taught'. Among questions formulated to guide the research team's work was: Is any substantial gain in mastery achieved by beginning to learn French at the age of eight? The answer finally given was, to quote the report,[1] 'unequivocally in the negative', since by the age of 16 'the only area in which the pupils taught French from the age of eight consistently show any superiority is that of listening comprehension... Where the pupils taught French in the primary school do appear to gain is not in "mastery" (author's quotes) but in attitude. When they have been successful in their efforts to learn French, they do appear to retain a more favourable attitude towards speaking the language than do those who were not introduced to French until the age of 11.'

This report has received a great deal of publicity, or at least, it would be truer to say, the press handout issued by the NFER and the 'overview' which forms the concluding chapter of the report have. In particular, the final sentence of the report ('...it is hard to resist the conclusion that the weight of the evidence has combined with the balance of opinion to tip the scales against a possible expansion of the teaching of French in primary schools') was seized upon by the popular press, which with sensation-mongering headlines declared that primary school French was dead. They were largely wrong, since it seems that few of the numerous local education authorities in the U.K. under whose auspices French was being taught at primary level have decided to drop it. I understand also that a conference organised by H.M.Inspectorate in York in March, 1975, and attended by modern-language advisers, language teachers, and university staff, recommended that French should continue to be taught in primary schools and considered the educational grounds for including it in the curriculum to outweigh the deficiencies in current practice observed in some places. It recommended local education authorities to remedy shortcomings, and in any programme of expansion to attend particularly to staffing and resources.

Foreign-language teachers who have studied the report will agree that it rests upon a solid foundation and that the research, covering a period of ten years and concerning itself initially with more than 15,000 pupils, was carried out with care. Here I shall not attempt to describe it, since it is fairly well known in the foreign-language teaching profession and the account of it is readily accessible. I shall merely refer to certain aspects of it which appear to be immediately relevant to my present theme.

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i) See pp.243-44.

To some extent, I believe, it is legitimate to regard the research as one thing and the conclusions drawn from it as another. This is especially so, of course, when conclusions are drawn by those who are not involved in the research. Sometimes it seems to apply to the conclusions drawn by the researchers themselves. Indeed, it is hard to see how the damning final sentence of the so-called Burstall report is justified by the main point said to be demonstrated, viz. that the achievement of those who began learning the foreign language at eleven, when they entered the secondary school, was not much less than the achievement of those who began at eight, when in the primary school, and that the only noteworthy differences were to be seen in the later beginners' less favourable attitude towards the speaking of it and in their somewhat inferior listening comprehension. For how can it be argued that the value of an educational activity is to be seen only in its results as measured several years later? What effect did the learning of French have on these young primary-school learners at the time? It is of course difficult to say, because here we come upon things which are hard to measure. On some, no doubt, the effect was undesirable, just as arithmetic or history or science lessons might be, giving the children a permanent distaste for arithmetic or history or science. Yet we are told that in general a favourable attitude towards the speaking of the language was still clearly evident at sixteen. Is this not a worthwhile achievement?

It is clear from the report that, in general, a fairly satisfactory level had been reached by the end of the primary stage. Members of the inspectorate were impressed by the pupils' command of spoken French. They were said to respond to the teacher spontaneously and confidently, and in the majority of classes the pupils were considered to be 'enthusiastic' and the teacher's skill was often quoted as the main cause of success. Most primary-school head teachers were in favour of teaching French across the whole ability-range. Towards the end of the first year of teaching, three-quarters of the pupils said they enjoyed learning French, but later this majority shrank.

If a respectable level of achievement was reached in the primary school, why was it that this headstart was not altogether maintained subsequently? Without detailed knowledge of how these early beginners were taught French in their various secondary schools, and of the various pressures put upon them (both inside and outside the school), an answer can hardly be attempted. But it does seem that, for administrative and other reasons, they were often not taught separately from those who began their French in the secondary school, and that where they were so taught the separation was not always maintained over the secondary-school years. As C.J.Gamble and A.Smalley say, in an article in Modern Languages: 'It is apparent from the report that the experimental pupils often found themselves alongside eleven-year-olds just beginning French and with a teacher who had to cope with such a wide range of differing children. Inevitably her attention would have to be focussed on those who had no knowledge of French.' [1] However, in some instances - we are not told how many - the early beginners were indeed, for a considerable time, taught in separate classes.

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[1] Modern Languages (London), LVI, 2, June 1975, p.95.

Evidence of a carefully thought-out transition for the early starters from the primary to secondary school stage is thin. There appears to have been no general attempt on the part of the receiving secondary schools to establish thoroughly and systematically what levels of achievement in French the incoming pupils had reached and to ensure that the teaching techniques and materials used were such as to ensure that further progress would readily be made. In other words, there was, it seems, in many instances, a complete break, and whether this was inevitable or not in the circumstances is irrelevant here, when the question before us for the moment is whether anything has been proved as to the advisability of an early beginning. It is relevant to point out, however, that many of the primary-French children were so widely dispersed, into such a number and variety of secondary schools, that the research team had great difficulty in tracing them. The implication seems to be that continuity of teaching techniques and materials was probably impaired.

What seems necessary, if anything at all is to be proved about the connection between achievement (in the sense in which this word is used in the Burstall report) and an early start, is research - which would clearly have to be on a smaller scale - into the relative achievements in the secondary school of (a) average classes which had done reasonably well with a foreign language in the primary school, as a result of appropriate teaching, and which had been kept together as classes thereafter and still well taught along very similar lines, but separately from beginners, and (b) classes of those who began at eleven or some later age, also well taught. It would then be strange, and call for thorough investigation into the reasons, if the early starters could not maintain their lead, most especially if they were taught by the same teachers. Such an experiment would be very difficult to conduct except in circumstances (which in certain areas do exist) where there is no change of school. But with large-scale dispersal, changes of teacher, changes of teaching procedures and materials, and above all in many instances allocation to classes consisting in part of beginners, it would surely be surprising if (at what is, after all, a comparatively elementary level) a decisive lead were long maintained.

But the relevant factors are difficult or impossible to isolate; for example, the older beginners would not, if only because they are older, be taught with the same kind of teaching materials or even exactly the same teaching techniques as the younger.

The failure of the early starters (we are still thinking of eight-year-olds) to maintain their lead in achievement may also be due to certain features of the methods or techniques by which they were taught - a rather obvious point and one touched on by the York conference resolution to which I referred. Clearly, as far as primary French in the U.K. is concerned, there was much reliance on imitative pattern-drills supplied by the tape recorder.

But I do not wish to offer speculative criticisms here of any teaching material, but only to say that this, among several causes of success or failure which have nothing to do with the learners' ages, must be taken fully into account.

The research carried out into the results of teaching French from the age of eight in the U.K. was very specific. What if comparison had been made of the achievements and attitudes of beginners of seven or nine on the one hand and of beginners of twelve or fourteen on the other? We do not know whether the outcome would have been similar. And what about a comparison of the later achievements and attitudes of, say, fourteen-year-old beginners with those of sixteen-year-old beginners, neither group being specially selected? Or of the later achievements and attitudes of five-year-old beginners with those of eight-year-old beginners, each group learning in ways that seem to suit it well? Moreover, what if the foreign language had been another one? Or what if the country had not been Britain?

Few would claim, I imagine, and least of all the research team involved, that the results of such investigation are applicable outside the field in which the investigation was made. But are they applicable inside, and has a case been made for the abandonment of any further expansion of and experiment with the teaching of French at primary level in the U.K.? Notwithstanding the value of the research in uncovering certain aspects of what was in progress, I think the answer is definitely no, mainly for the reasons on which I have touched. Some fresh doubt has been cast on the belief that young children are better language-learners than older children, but neither this investigation nor any other is at all conclusive either way. Suppose the young beginners had not been dispersed; suppose they had started earlier, or later; suppose the tape recorder had been used differently; suppose there had been adequate group-work; suppose half a dozen other things. And select a number of suppositions, unconnected with age, concerning the later beginners too. Then one is forced to the conclusion that the matter is much less susceptible of proof than has often been supposed. Perhaps Jakobovits and Gordon are overstating, however, when they say that 'there is not a single piece of research... that contributes meaningfully' to the problem of 'the relationship between age of learner and success in second-language learning'. 'Nor can there be,' they more reasonably add, 'given the nature of this problem and the presently available research techniques'.[1]

Although imitation is in some quarters under a cloud, it is an element in any successful language-learning, and it may be that young children (particularly the very young) are better imitators - particularly of intonation and stress patterns - than older children and adults are. It certainly seems so to many who have taught both. It seems so too where adults and young children have been plunged into the daily life of a foreign country. Many adult immigrants, including

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[1] L.A.Jakobovits and B.Gordon, The Context of Foreign-Language Teaching 1974, pp.87-88.

those who do not have much chance to mix with their own compatriots after immigrating, are still linguistically identifiable as immigrants ten or twenty years later, whereas this is rarely or never so when they arrived as young children, even if they were not cut off from other children speaking their own language. (In recognising this, however, one is not committed to any of Wilder Penfield's inferences about the brain.)

It is also, one may risk stating, harder to draw the shy and sometimes awkward adolescent into foreign-language-using activities to which most young children will take almost as ducks to water - especially if these activities have the aspect of a game. It is, I believe, easier to create situations in which young learners will find themselves interacting enjoyably with the aid of the new language. Again, there is not time to illustrate the point.

Nevertheless, a decision in favour of an early start is not necessarily a decision that young children excel at language learning. H. Stern's view, as expressed in Languages and the Young School Child, is that it is 'not necessary to justify language learning at the primary stage on such excessive expectations.'[1] It may possibly be a decision that, as J.B.Carroll puts it, 'if learning a foreign language takes time the earlier it is started the better.'[2] (Incidentally, Carroll quotes research results which indicate strikingly better achievement at university level by those who started in the elementary school than by those who started in the secondary school.)

A decision in favour of an early start may, however, be taken on still more fundamental grounds, in recognition of the effect that a well-run foreign-language course may have on the children's minds at the time of learning. In spite of some failures, resulting in distaste both for the language and for the people who speak it, it is hard to believe that the opportunity to acquire something of a foreign language does not result, by and large, in a certain broadening of the mind brought about by an increased awareness of the modern world. There seems no reason for postponing this kind of education to the secondary school: there may be traces in this of the assumption that language-learning is a privilege for selected pupils. Many headmasters taking part in the Burstall research reported a general enrichment of the life of the primary school as a result of the introduction of French, and many reported special benefit to the apparently less able pupils.

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1) Languages and the Young School Child, ed. H.H.Stern, O.U.P., 1969, p.28.

2) ibid., p.62.

'It is preferable,' declares Wilga Rivers, 'to have no FLES program rather than a bad one.'[1] One can hardly quarrel with that. One may also query with G.Perren the 'cost in time and energy of the results achieved',[2] so long as one can find a way of measuring all the results that matter and of measuring the results and costs of other school activities.

In conclusion, however, I will quote Stern to the effect that 'the problems, difficulties, and failures have not been of a kind as to throw doubt on the value of the entire operation. They are generally viewed as caused by deficiencies in teaching and preparation which can be identified and remedied.'[3]

A final two or three words: the primary/secondary classification is not in the nature of things, and there is also the middle school, with a straight run through from an early age to thirteen or fourteen, which may help to smooth away some of the problems of transition. Then, also, we have not looked at the matter of an earlier beginning still, say from the age of six, with all its extra problems, including those of mastering the visual form of the mother tongue: this would be substance for an entirely different paper. Then, again, we have not considered different ways of learning and the problems of individualising instruction. Finally, timetable regularity is not in the nature of things either, and experiments with intensive teaching (both at primary and at later levels) have been going on. An early start does not mean that one has to continue at the same pace - why not try to get a long way quickly, and then resume later? The possibilities are many and various, and there seems to be as good a case for continuing to experiment in the primary school as at any other level.

W.R.Lee
November 1975.

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1) Wilga Rivers, Teaching Foreign-Language Skills, p.365.

2) G.Perren, 'New Languages and Younger Children', English Language Teaching (London), XXVI,3,1972 pp.229-30.

3) op.cit., p.28.