

Evaluating the long-term effects on proficiency of starting English in the elementary school or middle school in Saudi Arabia
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This study evaluates the long-term effects on the English proficiency of Saudi Arabic speakers who started learning in elementary school or in middle school. Does an early start in a minimal input setting (the classroom) offer the same beneficial effects on later competence that has been found in studies of learners exposed to English in immersion settings (see DeKeyser, 2000; Johnson & Newport, 1989, 1991; among others)? The study is conducted with 132 adult Saudi Arabian college students, of whom 50 started learning English in elementary school and 82 in middle school, along with a control group of 15 native speakers. The participants are tested on a range of semantic and syntactic properties: (a) conditions on adverb placement (*The boy carefully crossed the street*/**The boy crossed carefully the street*); (b) absence of 'resumptive' pronouns where they are possible in Arabic (*That stain is hard to remove* (**it*) *with soap*); (c) conditions on VP-ellipsis (*John slept and Mary has slept too*/**John slept and Mary was sleeping too*); (d) interpretation of the present progressive/simple present contrast; and (e) the interpretation of the present perfect/simple past contrast. Three core tests are used: (a) an acceptability judgment task, (b) an aspectual interpretation task, (c) a fill-in-the-blanks elicitation task, along with a cloze test and a background questionnaire.

The results of the study will be of interest to educators and policy-makers in relation to classroom foreign language learning in Saudi Arabia. Is the optimal point for starting English the elementary school or the middle school?