

# **Title: Age, intensity of instruction, and metalinguistic awareness in EFL learning**

**Priority addressed: Starting age and English language learning**

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## **Introduction**

The TIRF grant allowed us to investigate the effects of age, intensity, and metalinguistic awareness among instructed school-aged learners of English.<sup>1</sup> It is a common belief that younger children learn second languages more easily and more rapidly than both adolescents and adults. Implicit in decisions to lower the age of first instructional exposure to an additional language is also the belief that the greater the number of years of academic study devoted to foreign language learning, the better the outcomes. However, there is surprisingly little research evidence to support these beliefs. In fact, there is a growing body of evidence from a variety of foreign language learning contexts that suggests that: 1) older children are actually more efficient learners; 2) the distribution as opposed to simply the total amount of instructional time is a key factor; 3) age may affect some but not all aspects of proficiency. Research is therefore needed to inform policy makers of the respective advantages of an early start and different time distributions as well as of the different ways in which age may affect proficiency.

## **The study**

The study took place in two foreign language elementary and secondary school contexts: bilingual Catalan-Spanish schools in Barcelona, and Francophone schools in regions of the province of Quebec.

In Spain, we looked at the effects of age on the acquisition of English as a foreign language (EFL). Two main groups – early starters (8 years of age) and later starters (11 years of age) - were compared after 200 hours, 416 hours and 726 hours of instruction on different language skills using a variety of measures. That allowed us to investigate the effects of starting age from multiple perspectives (see Muñoz, 2006b). In Quebec, we held age and time constant and looked at the effects of the distribution of instructional time on the acquisition of English by beginner-level francophone EFL learners. Nine classes of 11-12 year old grade 6 students in two versions of a similar intensive ESL program were followed throughout their intensive experience. In one program, the 400 hours of instruction were concentrated in a 5-month block of English-only exposure; students did their French academic curriculum in the remaining 5 months. In the other model, the same total amount of ESL instructional time was distributed at regular intervals in a series of mini-intensives across the full 10-month academic year, alternating with French. This design allowed us to investigate the effects of intensity on English learning.

In Spain and Quebec we also investigated the effects of age and intensity on the acquisition of a problematic linguistic feature. Younger learners in intensive programs were compared to older learners in regular foreign language classrooms in each research context. The aim was to see the extent to which the older learners' cognitive maturity, and hence metalinguistic awareness, could compensate for a restricted amount of

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<sup>1</sup> The collaboration continues and current research projects draw on data collected with TIRF funding.

instructional time (two to three hours per week). The two different-age groups (11 and 13, respectively) received explicit instruction on the differences between possessive determiners in English and French or English and Catalan/Spanish, as well as sustained practice.

### **Findings**

The findings of the age study in Spain show a significant rate advantage for older starters. This advantage is larger on some measures (e.g. accuracy measures from the written composition test) than on other measures and tests (e.g. phonetic imitation test), which may be explained by the older learners' superior cognitive maturity. Thus the potential advantage that younger starters may have in naturalistic language acquisition settings (i.e. greater perceptual skills and superiority at implicit learning) does not appear to be instantiated in foreign language learning contexts with limited exposure. In sum, in the absence of significant input/exposure, no benefits appear to be associated with an earlier start.

The findings of the intensity study in Quebec show that after the first 100 hours of intensive instruction, students in the more distributed model showed greater use of L1 in their oral and written production, but this difference disappeared over time. On many other measures at all 4 times, the two groups showed similar developmental patterns, and where there were significant differences, they were small.

The findings of the age-metalinguistic awareness study in both contexts show that all treatment groups made significant gains on oral and written measures and outperformed comparison groups who did not receive this focussed instruction. They were also able to use metalinguistic information to move to a more advanced developmental stage. Contrary to our expectations, no age effect was found since there were no significant differences between the different age groups. It was concluded that the older learners' superior cognitive maturity did not lend them an advantage over the younger learners in this focussed pedagogical intervention, and that motivation and intensity of instruction affected the learning outcomes.

### **Implications**

In relation to the effects of starting age on EFL, a significant practical implication of the findings is that an early start program that does not provide sufficient input/exposure does not result in learning benefits. One important practical implication of the findings on intensity of instruction is that a more distributed version of intensive instruction, which is often easier to implement in both school-based and workplace-based contexts, may be an effective way to learn an L2. Finally, a research implication of our study is that further work is needed to show the effects that cognitive maturity may have on tasks that engage learners' metalinguistic awareness, taking into account program type and learners' motivation.

### **Conclusion**

Our study has shown that an early start does not provide an inherent advantage in an EFL context with limited input. The importance of providing learners with significant amounts of high-quality input and opportunities for interaction must be considered when making decisions about foreign language teaching programs. Intensive programs of various types have been shown to provide the type of input and learning opportunities that learners need.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Dissemination of the findings**

The findings have been disseminated to both practioner and research audiences.

#### **a) starting age and learning of English as a foreign language:**

\*Muñoz, C. (2006a) *The BAF Project: Research on the effects of age on foreign language acquisition*. Peter Lang.

\*A copy of this book was sent to TESOL; TIRF's help is acknowledged in the Prologue.

Muñoz, C. (ed.) (2006b) *Age and foreign language learning rate: The BAF Project*. Multilingual Matters.

Navés, T., Torras, M.R. y Celaya, M.L. (2003). Long-term effects of an earlier start. An analysis of EFL written production. In S. Foster-Cohen y S. Pekarek (Eds.), *EUROSLA Yearbook*, 3: 103-129.

#### **b) intensity**

Collins, L., White, J., & Springer, S. (2004). *An intensive look at intensive*. Société pour la promotion de l'enseignement de l'anglais, langue seconde, au Québec (SPEAQ) Quebec City.

Collins, L., & White, J., and Springer, S. (2005). *The distribution of instructional time and second language learning outcomes*. The 14<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Applied Linguistics, Madison, Wisconsin.

White, J., & Collins, L. (2005). *The effects of intensity of exposure on oral communication skills in a second language*. The fifth International Symposium on Bilingualism (ISB5), Barcelona.

Collins, L. & J. White. (2005). *Closing the gap: the effects of concentrated instructional time on language learning outcomes*. Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics, London ON.

#### **c) metalinguistic awareness**

White, J., Muñoz, C., Collins, L., Kennedy, S., Pahissa, I. (2004). *Understanding second language performance through metalinguistic comments*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Language Awareness, Lleida, Spain.

White, J., Muñoz, C., & Collins, L. (forthcoming 2007). The His/Her Challenge: Making progress in a "regular" second language program. *Language Awareness*.

White, J., Collins, L., & Muñoz, C. (2004). *The his-her challenge: Does first language make a difference?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Société pour la promotion de l'enseignement de l'anglais, langue seconde, au Québec (SPEAQ) Quebec.

