

PLATFORM

TERESA NAVÉS / UB professor - tnaves@ub.edu

EFL: Is Earlier Better?

It is becoming more and more popular for infant schools and kindergartens to offer English to attract parents. In Spain, the number of primary schools offering English at an earlier age is increasing year after year. When it comes to learning a language, everybody seems to believe 'the sooner the better'.

One reason for this is that studies of how immigrants all over the world learn a new language show us that the younger children are when they arrive, the more successful they will be in language. In immersion programmes, a massive number of contact hours with the language are provided from a very early age. Eventually all school courses are taught in the new language.

In the long-term Canadian immersion programmes, which represent one of the most successful second language learning experiences ever, French-speaking Canadians learn English so well they are indistinguishable from 'native speakers'.

Do French speakers of English in France also manage to learn English that successfully? Apparently not. Results from tests conducted in Europe, Japan, Korea and other parts of the globe show that while English is widely studied both in school and in private academies outside of school hours, most adolescents still leave high school with a limited command of English. They can scarcely keep a fluent conversation going, watch a movie without subtitles, read a novel, or write an essay in English. Spanish students' average level of English, in spite of what



It's all English for 5th and 6th grade kids in a complete immersion English programme in l'Aleixar.

many people seem to think, is comparable to that of their peers in most other European countries.

Altogether, European schools provide less than 1,000 contact hours of English. The difference in number—and quality—of contact hours between formal foreign language teaching and immersion programmes is immense. Some researchers have estimated that for interpersonal communication purposes, at least 2,500 hours of exposure are needed. In order to increase command of foreign languages, the Council of Europe has suggested both

lowering the starting age and teaching other subjects in a foreign language through the Content and Language Integrated Learning Programme (CLIL). While starting earlier is becoming more and more popular, carefully planned, long-term programmes for using the foreign language to teach other subjects are still not very advanced. A combination of the two systems is even rarer.

Research on the effects of age in foreign language learning suggests that it does not make much difference whether students start learning when they are four,

six, eight, nine or eleven years old. The GRAL Language Acquisition Research Group www.ub.edu/GRAL co-ordinated by Carmen Muñoz at the UB, has been researching the effect of the starting age on foreign language learning for more than 12 years. In Spain, thanks to the co-existence of two different education systems, it was possible to compare students who started learning English when they were 11 with students who started when they were just eight. The results of GRAL research clearly show that at the end of high school, after the same number of classes, the group of learners who started when they were eight did not outperform those who started when they were 11. Older learners outscored their younger peers in tasks such as understanding a text, writing an essay, telling a story, and in grammar testing. An early start was not beneficial in terms of grammar, vocabulary, oral or written skills. This conclusion is consistent with findings from international foreign language acquisition research.

The contrast in results from foreign and immersion contexts with regard to the effects of the starting age may have to do with differing amounts of exposure, intensity and quality of input or perhaps simply with older children's being more intellectually mature. What is clear is that starting earlier alone does not make much of a difference in learning a foreign language. Let's hope that the combined effects of starting earlier and introducing CLIL or immersion programmes will succeed in improving results.