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The Age Factor in the Foreign Language Class: What Do Learners Think?

Abstract: The present paper analyzes beliefs about the age factor of learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) with different starting ages (early vs. late starters), in different grades, that is, at the beginning (Year 7) and at the end of secondary school (Year 12) with different levels of EFL proficiency (high achievers vs. low achievers). The sample for the study was drawn from a larger sample of 200 secondary school students who were part of a longitudinal study, undertaken in Switzerland between 2008 and 2015. From this sample we selected 10 early starting high-achievers, 10 early starting low-achievers, 10 late starting high-achievers, and 10 late starting low-achievers. A qualitative analysis of language experience essays written at the beginning and at the end of secondary school revealed that learners with different starting ages, in different grades, and with different levels of proficiency displayed different beliefs about the age factor. The overall lack of age effect on FL achievement found in our previous studies may be explicable in terms of a number of affective factors (e.g., disengagement of the early starters due to language practices of the classroom) and contextual factors (e.g., transition from English in primary school to English in secondary school).

Keywords: starting age, language experience essays, learner beliefs, motivation, individual differences

Introduction

In a previous longitudinal study of ours (see Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016), we addressed the question of the relationship and interaction between long-term foreign language (FL) achievement and motivation in learners with different starting ages. The results revealed that the late starters were able to catch up very quickly (i.e., within six months in secondary school) with the performance

of the early starters, who had an advance of five years of English instruction in primary school, with respect to a range of oral and written measures, and that they were able to remain on a par with the early starters until the end of obligatory schooling in Switzerland. The overall lack of effect of starting the FL at an earlier age on FL achievement was able to be accounted for with reference to a number of theoretical, affective and contextual factors. On a theoretical level, as has been pointed out in myriad classroom studies, the long-term advantage conferred on most learners by an early start in a naturalistic language learning context may not be found in an FL learning context (see e.g., the reviews in Lambelet & Berthele, 2015; Muñoz & Singleton, 2011; Singleton & Ryan, 2004). With reference to possible reasons for the “kick start” of the late starters in the initial stages of FL learning and the general lack of age-related differences, our results indicated that for the late starters, motivation was more strongly goal- and future-focused at the first measurement, while the motivation of the early starters was predominantly influenced by (present and past) cumulative experiential factors. Since future selves—but not present selves—had a strong impact on the FL achievement, we have argued that the late starters were able to profit from their orientations at the beginning of secondary school.

However, the value of investigating motivation from a purely quantitative perspective may seem somewhat limited and tangential. For instance, the quantitative analyses can shed relatively little light on the needs and experiences of early and late learners (e.g., how their motivation shapes and is shaped by specific events in primary school and secondary school), and it does not reveal WHY the influence of motivation operates as it does. It was also not always straightforward to figure out from the questionnaires used in Pfenninger and Singleton (2016) to what extent events, actual or imagined, were incorporated into the self-concepts of the learners, which makes a qualitative analysis of the learners’ stories indispensable. In this article, it is our goal to use the qualitative data gathered from our focal group of 40 participants to explore aspects of the quantitative study that could not be quantified, that is, learners’ perceptions, thoughts, and opinions. We are particularly interested in beliefs about the age factor elicited via language learning essays written by EFL learners with different AOs (early vs. late starters), in different grades (in Year 7 at the beginning and in Year 12 at the end of secondary school), and with different levels of EFL proficiency (high-proficiency vs. low-proficiency learners). Such a qualitative dimension allows analysis to get right down to the individual level, to take note of very personal circumstances, attitudes, and quirks that would not otherwise figure in the reckoning, and to arrive at a “flavor” of learners’ perceptions and reactions which is very often very much needed when it comes to constructing a true-to-life interpretation of the quantitative data.

Background

A common view in research on the relationship between biological age and L2/FL learning motivation is that younger learners show significantly better attitudes toward learning English than older learners (see e.g., Cenoz, 2004; MacIntyre et al., 2002; Nikolov, 1999), which Kanno (2007) attributes to psychological and educational factors. For instance, younger learners are known to have a natural tendency to respond enthusiastically to new challenges in contrast with the self-consciousness that afflicts adolescents when performing in an L2 (Driscoll, 1999). However, one has to be cautious when generalizing from the fact that primary school beginners seem to demonstrate more positive attitudes to speaking an L2 than secondary learners. For instance, the quality of instruction might affect the strength of the motivation-outcome relationship negatively, for example, when the learners start off very enthusiastic (as it is often the case in the primary school classroom) but the teaching approach is not adequate (cf. Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005) or the teachers lack the necessary language skills. In the Zagreb Project 1991, for instance, Mihaljevic Djigunovic (1993) observed that the 336 seven-year-old children who participated in the study did not list FLs (English, French, and German) among their favorite school subjects, possibly because games and other kinds of play, which constituted a large part of the L2 curriculum, bored them. In Mihaljevic Djigunovic and Krevelj (2010) we read that under less than ideal conditions (large groups, two lessons per week, unqualified teachers), which is the current reality in many European contexts, young learners soon start to develop negative attitudes to FL learning. In Ushioda's (2013, p. 7) view, such an early dislike can have damaging consequences for long-term learning, as the first contact with the FL may be decisive for the young learners' aptitudes and motivation for the rest of their lives (cf. Singleton & Ryan, 2004, pp. 206–211)—a hypothesis which will be further analyzed in this paper.

Early adolescence, on the other hand, is typically associated with a period of flux and uncertainty—a period when learners “struggle to achieve a coherent sense of self” (Lamb, 2012, p. 19). Sometimes older learners are described as having a tendency to reject the school system in general, or they might be less motivated by the use of more traditional and less active methods in high school (e.g., Tragant, 2006). Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow (2000) suggest that most adult learners are less successful language learners because they fail to engage in the tasks with sufficient motivation, commitment of time or energy, and support from the environments in which they find themselves to expect high levels of success. This, however, does not explain late starters' fast learning rates in the initial stages of L2 acquisition that are so often described (see e.g., Muñoz, 2006): older starters profit from an initial short-term advantage, that is,

they experience a faster rate of learning (e.g., of morphosyntactic development) than younger learners in the initial stages. This phenomenon is often ascribed to their cognitive advantages at testing. However, there is also a motivational dimension to this picture. The general impression is that late starters seem to feel the urge to achieve proficiency quickly. Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) hypothesize that the superior initial performance by late starters (and thus older learners) is perhaps due to the greater academic demands placed on these learners by the schools, creating higher levels of motivation in them than in younger learners to learn the language necessary for success in school.

Tangential to motivation, attitudes, and learners' beliefs, for example, pre-conceived ideas about the age factor and early vs. late FL programs can affect learners' approach to language learning, but at the same time, new experiences can lead to changes in attitude and approach (see Moyer, 2014). In other words, because of learning experiences, feedback relating to the development of FL skills, and other salient events in the course of primary and secondary school, attitudes towards the age factor are likely to be re-evaluated and consequently reformulated as well as revised. Since "the earlier the better" or "the later the better" are specific beliefs that can be allocated to a set of beliefs that Horwitz (1988) called "difficulty of language learning," which includes beliefs about the time investment necessary to become fluent in language learning difficulty, we believe this is an emerging area of interest in age-related research, albeit still grossly under-researched.

Methodology

Participants and procedure. The present study is part of a larger, longitudinal investigation conducted in Switzerland between 2008 and 2015 on the effects of age and age-related factors, during a period when there coexisted for some time students who were subject to one or the other of two educational policies that were implemented before and after the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education issued a new set of guidelines for foreign language (FL) instruction throughout Switzerland (see EDK, 2004). 200 Swiss secondary school students (89 males and 111 females) took part in the longitudinal component of this project, all of whom had similar characteristics: they had the same biological age, the same L1 (Swiss/Standard German) and additional FL (French), and the same SES, schools, classes and teachers, thereby allowing us to isolate the influence of starting age (and co-occurring amount of target language exposure) at the level of EFL competence attained at the beginning and at the end of secondary school in German-speaking Switzerland. The participants

belonged to two AO groups: the early classroom learners (henceforth ECLs) were instructed according to the new model and learned Standard German from first grade onwards, English from 3rd grade onwards and French from 5th grade onwards, while the late classroom learners (LCLs) were instructed according to the old system without any English exposure at primary level, learning only Standard German from first grade and French from 5th grade onwards. They were tested at the beginning and at the end of academically oriented high school when they were 13 and 18 years old respectively.

For this qualitative analysis, we selected a focal group of 20 early learners and 20 late learners from those 200 who had participated in the quantitative phase. Early and late learners were selected according to scores on a range of FL proficiency tests at Times 1 and 2 (listening comprehension task, oral proficiency tasks, productive and receptive vocabulary tasks, argumentative and narrative essays, grammaticality judgment task, see Pfenninger, 2014a; 2014b; Pfenninger & Singleton, in prep.). Following Muñoz (2014), the criterion for selection into the high achievement groups (early or late start) was a score in the 75th percentile on all tasks. The criterion for selection into the low achievement groups (early or late start) was a score in the 25th percentile on all tests. Furthermore, the high-achievers all had grades at or above 5 (6 being the highest grade). Following these grouping variables, we ended up with four groups of 10 participants, each of which was tested at the beginning and at the end of secondary school (Time 1 and Time 2 respectively), amounting to a representative sample of 40 students: 10 early learners, high achievement (ELH); 10 early learners, low achievement (ELL); 10 late learners, high achievement (LLH); and 10 late learners, low achievement (LLL). This procedure enabled us to study different groups within the design, that is, early vs. late starters, younger vs. older students, and the most successful learners vs. the least successful learners in the sample.

Task and procedure. We asked our participants to write a 200-word language experience essay so that we could directly hear from these students in their own words what it was like to start studying a FL relatively early and relatively late respectively. We chose this task because exploring participants' own perspectives through certain forms of introspection, such as reflective writing, can help us understand which (contextual) elements may be relevant to motivation in a given classroom. Ushioda (2009, p. 216), for example, writes that "individual difference research can tell us very little about particular students sitting in our classroom, at home, or in the self-access center, about how they are motivated or not motivated and why." While student perspectives have occupied a central position in social constructivist approaches to education (e.g., Brooks & Brooks, 2000; Larochelle et al., 2009) as well as in the advocacy of autonomy in the classroom (e.g., Cotterall & Crabbe, 2008; Little,

2007; Ushioda, 2009; 2011), individualized approaches to age research are still scarce (but see Muñoz, 2014). Thus, in order to give a better account of the interaction of AO and other (often hidden) variables such as attitudes and beliefs, we used language experience essays, which were supposed to elicit: (a) the participants' reflections on their experience of multiple FL learning at the beginning and at the end of secondary school; (b) the participants' affect for FLs and English in particular; and (c) participants' beliefs about the age factor at the beginning and at the end of secondary school. The use of these essays was based on the idea that, on the one hand, learners' beliefs are—consciously or unconsciously—gleaned from past experiences, and, on the other, learners' beliefs have an influential role in learning outcomes and achievement (see e.g., Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). In that respect, these essays come close to the individual difference research tradition which uses interviews to identify differences among learners to establish why and how such differences may lead to differential linguistic attainment (Dörnyei, 2005); on the other hand, they also share some traits with the language experience interview, which is designed to elicit students' reflections on their own internalized experience of language learning (e.g., Benson & Lor, 1999; Polat, 2013).

We provided loose guidelines for the writing. These stated, “You should write about your feelings, thoughts, opinion, motivation as well as any experiences with regard to the early or late introduction of multiple foreign languages.” No specific length was set.

The first test series was administered after six months of EFL in secondary school, that is, after 440 hours (ECLs) and 50 hours of instruction (LCLs) respectively. The second data collection took place five years (680 hours) later. At no point were early starters mixed with late starters in the same class.

Results

High-achievers vs. low-achievers. We begin our analysis by concentrating on retailing high- vs. low-proficiency learners' perceptions and perspectives at Time 1 with regard to the age at which their instruction in EFL had begun. There was something of a trend at the beginning of secondary school for learners to be positive about the age that they themselves had started learning English. The early high achievers came out fairly uniformly at Time 1 with sentiments like the following:

- (1) *I wouldn't begin instruction too early. And not too late either. Finally, we need all these languages in everyday life. So I think primary school age is ideal for starting them. (07_ELH2_F_GER)*
- (2) *'The earlier the better'. We should learn foreign languages early because our brain learns a foreign language faster when we're children. (07_ELH3_M_GER)*

At Time 1 the late high achievers tended, on the other hand, to support the pattern of starting English at a later age—the regime that had been in force during their own school years:

- (3) *I think the system is fine as it is [i.e., as it was!]. (07_LLH7_M_GER)*
- (4) *I personally don't think it's good to begin learning too early ... but I think of course that learning shouldn't begin too late, so beginning English at 12 or 13 I think is exactly right. (07_LLH10_F_GER)*

At Time 1 the late low achievers also tended to support the pattern of starting English later, which they themselves had experienced:

- (5) *I had French from 5th class in primary and English from secondary. I think it's good only to have one language to begin with ... I find French harder than English, and so I think it's good only to have French at first. (07_LLL2_M_GER)*
- (6) *I think it's too early to learn English in 2nd class. An 8-year-old child very probably still doesn't understand grammar. He/she at that time has other things in his/her head. I think it's not relevant to be already learning English this early. (07_LLL4_M_GER)*

The exception at Time 1 to the expression of satisfaction with what had been experienced was the tenor of the comments offered by the early low achievers, who were clearly less than charmed by their encounter with English in primary school (see examples 7–10):

- (7) *English is already there in 2nd class, I find that a bit early. At the beginning, I understood nothing... (07_ELL1_M_GER)*
- (8) *I had difficulties. But I think this was because of my former teacher, she taught us the same stuff again and again and we somehow stayed where we were. For that reason, I was very much at a loss when I got to secondary. (07_ELL13_F_GER)*
- (9) *In primary school our teacher even still spoke German, but here at XXX the teacher only speaks English. (07_ELL10_F_GER)*

- (10) *I had English for the first time in 2nd class (primary school). Actually, we really didn't get much out of it.* (07_ELL6_F_GER)

At Time 2 the early high achievers showed less unanimity than previously in regard to their assessment of the value of early English instruction. At Time 1 it will be recalled, the views expressed were overwhelmingly favorable; when the learners in question were older the picture was rather more complex. Opinions supportive of early English were still in evidence:

- (11) *It's hardly the case that children who have English instruction from second class in primary school, can speak the language fluently after four years. In my opinion, however, it's not primarily a matter of making as much progress as possible, but much more a matter of getting a feel for the language. So, for example, in relation to pronunciation and intonation.* (12_ELH6_F_GER)

Some more nuanced, more skeptical views also appeared, however:

- (12) *With the help of simple games and songs in a foreign language a small vocabulary can be built up. But I remember how in early years the learning was unconcentrated and slow. At secondary level it progressed really fast.* (12_ELH9_M_GER)
- (13) *Anyway I must say from my own experience that the children in the way they learn these days only learn a couple of words in another language and nothing else. And the real learning of language in relation to the system begins only at secondary level, when you learn sentence construction and basic grammar. As at this point you mostly already have contact with the English language outside school, this is of course easier. But what you've learnt in the primary school you can't really use. So the teaching of a foreign language at this level is unnecessary.* (12_ELH1_M_GER)

The early low achievers were, if anything, even more skeptical about early English at Time 2 than they had been at Time 1, as examples (14)–(15) illustrate:

- (14) *In my opinion, the early 'learning' of foreign languages ... isn't meaningful. First, really because they (the students) don't learn anything, but are only killing time and get demotivated for foreign languages. Besides this, day by day they lose motivation for school, as this additional, unnecessary teaching asks too much of many students.* (12_ELL1_F_GER)

- (15) *Nowadays children are learning numerous languages earlier and earlier. The earlier the better runs the motto. But is that really of any use? In my opinion, this development is rather bad. From personal experience I can say that e.g. learning English in the primary school brings you practically nothing.* (12_ELL2_M_GER)

Amongst the late-starting high-achievers, at Time 2, as at Time 1, the overwhelming trend was approved for the late start in English that they had experienced. A lone voice talked about the benefits of an early start in this age of globalization:

- (16) *... It's hardly surprising that schools should if at all possible bestow on every child the advantage of multilingualism—and indeed as early as possible. Children can put up with more than we think!* (12_LLH2_M_GER)

The others in this subgroup were definitely not convinced that the change to primary-school English had been a good idea for their successors. They remained content with their own late-starting path (see examples (17)–(18)).

- (17) *Actually, it seems to be doubtful how great the usefulness is of teaching foreign languages as early as the second class of primary school in regard to how sensible it is already to be introducing a foreign language at this very early stage in a child's development.* (12_LLH1_F_GER)
- (18) *As a child I always envied my brother, who had English as early as the second class of primary school. It seemed to me that because of that he was a step ahead of me and therefore superior to me. ... But looking back I don't see this advantage as so big any more. Within half a year I had in the 2nd year of secondary school the same level of English as my brother.* (12_LLH6_M_GER)

The late low achievers at Time 2 on the whole remained as satisfied as they had been at Time 1 with the late English regime they had experienced, and as skeptical as they had been with regard to the idea of the introduction of English at primary level. The odd voice was raised in support of early English:

- (19) *The idea ... they start with is that a child has less trouble to learn a language than adults. ... Therefore I think that it's fundamentally not a bad idea to begin to learn foreign languages as early as in the childhood years.* (12_LLL10_F_GER)

The large majority of comments, however, took a negative line with regard to early English, as the following examples show:

- (20) *My little brother has had early English since second class, but till now he still can't perform better than I can. He is now in the 1st class of secondary school. I don't think it's worth it to learn a foreign language as early as just eight years old.* (12_LLL1_M_GER)
- (21) *I don't believe that early English is an especially sensible model. In the first couple of years the children anyway learn almost nothing in early English, and also when I look at the teaching materials, I can clearly see that after a year in secondary school I was at the same level as the children who had been taught in the early English programme for about 3 years.* (12_LLL7_F_GER)

Early vs. late starters. In general, it seemed that the ECLs had to deal with a range of challenging aspects of FL learning and FL-related experiences at the beginning of secondary school, such as difficulty adjusting to the new teaching style. They indicated that, apart from the, as it were, intrinsic qualities, favorable or otherwise, of the early English experience, there seemed to be a host of difficulties associated with the perceived lack of congruence as regards the primary level and the secondary level of education. Specifically, the ECLs pointed to the (perceived) inefficiency of early FL instruction, they criticized the choice of language of instruction at primary school, and thus lamented the repetition in secondary school, as illustrated in (22)–(24):

- (22) *At primary school I didn't learn the technique of learning in English. But now at secondary school I have to learn most of it, because I have to catch up with everything, above all I must learn to learn!* (07_ELb55_F_GER)
- (23) *At primary school, I found, we only learned vocab, but not rules. Here it's very different, we learn to write sentences and so on. I would have liked it better if we had learned grammar earlier.* (07_ELb81_M_GER)
- (24) *For example, until 6th grade we were allowed to spell the way we wanted, e.g. the word the as de, and it wouldn't be counted as wrong. In secondary school, suddenly correct spelling was expected, as well as some knowledge of grammar, which is something we'd never looked at before.* (07_ELb39_M_GER)

Examples (22)–(24) illustrate that many of our participants reported that the work was getting harder at secondary school. Some participants felt disillusioned because they received lower grades on their assignments or because they felt unfamiliar with the expectations of English at secondary school. Many of the

students felt that too much emphasis on communicative practice left too little time for grammar. As we have seen in the examples above, the LCLs seemed content on the whole with the conditions of their later start.

Younger vs. older students. Finally, the interval between Time 1 and Time 2 is so large that one might expect some changes to have occurred in learners' perspectives in this period. Indeed we have already seen evidence in our discussion of the focal group of such a change of perspectives especially in relation to the early high achievers' perception of the early experience of learning other languages. These kinds of changes are in evidence in the sample at large. The following quotation (25), for example, talks about the experience of looking forward to the prospect of encountering a new language in primary school followed by the disillusionment of failing to make the progress expected. It relates this explicitly to the age question.

- (25) *I can still remember well when I began to learn French in 5th class. I had been looking forward to this immensely and was very motivated to learn everything. But today when I look at old tests from this time, I can see that I didn't learn anything. I got almost everything wrong, despite intensive learning and even got a 5 [on a scale from 1 to 6, 6 being the best]. Now I'm still hopeless in French and much better in English and Spanish. Two languages that I started to learn somewhat later. Therefore I don't believe it's better to have children learn languages earlier. Despite their enthusiasm they won't get much out of it, as they're at that stage simply not as receptive as they would need to be. (12_LLH3_M_GER)*

On the other hand, at a different level and in the shorter term, it is possible for learners to notice in themselves a growing desire to learn languages as more become available. This seems to be the kind of change being talked about in what follows:

- (26) *Actually I think it's good that we learn several languages simultaneously. You get to want more, once you've understood. I certainly have the inclination to learn more! (07_ELH2_F_GER)*

The durability and solidity of this kind of change may be in some doubt. It may be significant that the above remarks are associated with the early high achievers' initial (and in many cases temporary) enthusiasm of Time 1.

Discussion

What did we learn, then, from giving these learners a voice concerning how they felt about the age at which they had started being exposed to English at school? We learned that for the most part the late starters were content with and positive about their late start, and that those who had been able to compare themselves with early starters (e.g., younger siblings) did not find themselves at a disadvantage from beginning English later. Amongst the early starters we found differences between the high achievers and the low achievers. At Time 1 the mood amongst the high-achieving early starters was very buoyant; many of the positive opinions expressed, though, seemed to be based on ‘received wisdom’ about the desirability of beginning English instruction early. At Time 2, views were mixed; a number of high-achieving early starters referred to their disappointment with the actual experience of early English. The pattern of perceptions voiced by the early low achievers was overwhelmingly negative at both Time 1 and Time 2.

The expression of negative attitudes towards FLs and the learning environment at Time 1 is a striking result for the early starters, as it is one of the main goals of early English in Switzerland to make the learners aware of the role English plays in the world and to raise their cultural awareness. From the qualitative analysis it became clear that various factors seemed to contribute to the disengagement of the early starters and might be responsible for the observed lack of enthusiasm for engaging with English in school. These might include a lack of belief in the efficacy of in-school learning environments among learners (see also Henry, 2014) and a relationship between not liking the teacher and not liking the subject (see also Taylor, 2013). Resistance also appears to have arisen from a discrepancy between the learners’ expectations of ‘good teaching’ and the pedagogical practices of the teacher. It also seemed that the ECLs had to deal with a range of challenging aspects of L2 learning and L2-related experiences at the beginning of secondary school, such as difficulty adjusting to the new teaching style. Some participants felt disillusioned because they received lower grades for their assignments or because they felt unfamiliar with the expectations of English in secondary school. Many of the students felt that too much emphasis on communicative practice in primary school left too little time for grammar. This is also what Cenoz (2004) observed. She found significant differences in favor of late starters when it came to the FL learning motivation of learners who were in the same school year (4th secondary) but who had received different amounts of instruction. Cenoz hypothesized that this might have been related to the differences in input and methodology between primary school and secondary school: the earlier starters “experience a more grammar-based approach after they have

moved to secondary school and this contrast between the two methodologies may affect their motivation” (214).

The ECLs’ dissatisfaction with early English and the transition from English in primary to English in secondary school is problematic in several respects. Norton (2014), who takes a poststructuralist view of motivation and resistance in a classroom, points out that a student can be highly motivated and eager to learn English in general, but that if the language practices of the classroom make a learner unhappy or dissatisfied, the learner may resist participation in classroom activities, or become increasingly disruptive. This position finds support from Ushioda (2014), who points out that social-environmental conditions that undermine learners’ sense of competence will generate forms of motivation that are less internalized, less integrated into the self or aligned with its values, and more externally regulated by environmental influences, pressures, and controls: “If the learning challenge is too great and students do not feel competent to undertake it, they will not develop any intrinsic motivation for doing so and will feel that they are acting under coercion (i.e., lacking autonomy if obliged to try)” (135). The reports in this study also confirm the influence of the teacher (in our case particularly the primary school teacher) which has been documented abundantly in the SLA literature (e.g., Noels et al., 1999; Taylor, 2013; Ushioda, 2011). Lamb and Budiyanto (2013) explain that if the teachers do not have any personal experience of Anglophone culture, English will be taught and learned as a “values-free body of knowledge conveyed via official textbooks” (26) and the students might become more oriented towards practice for local and national exams. In a similar vein, anxiety can result from the classroom situation (see e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986). For many students, the learning of English is not an enjoyable activity in itself, but one which they have been required to persist at for many years in primary school with negligible levels of success.

Conclusion

This study aimed at gaining insights into beliefs about the age factor of EFL learners with different starting ages, in different grades, and with different levels of EFL proficiency. The comparison of the profiles of the four participant groups revealed certain distinctive characteristics that distinguish the early starters from the late starters, the high-achievers from the low-achievers, and the younger students from the older students. At Time 1, early high achieving starters in English tended to value the importance of their early experience of English in primary school. Early low achievers in English as well as late starters in English in general were much more diffident regarding early second

language instruction. At Time 2 the attitudes of these latter groups had not altered markedly. The attitude of the early high achievers, on the other hand, had moved away from the enthusiasm for primary school language instruction evidenced at Time 1, and showed signs of being affected by disappointment with the effectiveness of such instruction. Another noteworthy result is that the early starters in this project seemed to have lost much of their optimism and motivation when they made the transition from English in primary to English in secondary school. Besides the problematic issue of streaming (see Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016), this finding raises the question as to whether the skills that are acquired in primary school are adequately measured and accredited in secondary school.

Thus, the overall lack of age effect on FL achievement may be explained with reference to a number of affective and contextual factors. The fact of this overall absence of an advantage for younger FL beginners in schools (not just in this study but generally and worldwide) has very far-reaching implications, which to date educational policy-makers have seemed intent on ignoring. The contribution of learners' own perspectives on this issue may perhaps add a little pressure to the clear requirement for a response to research findings in this area. What is called for in the first instance is some attempt to radically improve and enrich the primary school experience of foreign languages, as well as some serious attention to the disconnection between the primary and secondary level treatment of foreign languages. If such measures fail substantively to change the situation—as well they might—the notion of rethinking the place of foreign languages in the primary curriculum will in the longer term be impossible to resist.

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**Der Altersfaktor im Fremdsprachenunterricht:
was meinen die Schüler?**

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag untersucht die mit dem Altersfaktor verbundenen Einstellungen der Englisch als Fremdsprache lernenden Schüler, die in verschiedenen Altersgruppen mit dem Lernen beginnen (frühe Anfänger vs. späte Anfänger), in verschiedenen Klassen Englisch lernen (angefangen von siebenjährigen bis zu zwölfjährigen Schülern) und verschiedene Spracheinstufung vertreten (schwache vs. erfolgreiche Schüler). Zu Versuchszwecken verwendeten die Verfasser die Stichprobe von den groß angelegten Forschungen, die in der Gruppe von 200 Oberschülern, als einem Teil der in der Schweiz in dem Zeitraum 2008–2015 durchgeführten Längsschnittstudie, durchgeführt wurden. Aus der Probe wurden 10 erfolgreiche Frühanfänger, 10 schwache Frühanfänger und 10 schwache Spätanfänger gewählt. Die Ergebnisse der qualitativen Analyse, die anhand der von den Schülern am Anfang und am Ende der Lehre in der Oberschule geschriebenen Aufsätze durchgeführt wurde bewiesen, dass die Schüler welche in verschiedenem Alter, in verschiedenen Klassen und mit verschiedener Spracheinstufung mit ihrem Fremdsprachenunterricht anfangen, sehr unterschiedlich den Altersfaktor beim Unterricht beurteilen. Die Ursache dafür, dass das Alter das erfolgreiche Spracherwerb nicht beeinflusst, was auch unsere früheren Untersuchungen bestätigten, liegt wahrscheinlich sowohl in den die Lernqualität beeinflussenden Faktoren (z.B.: unzureichende Hingabe des Lehrers daran, die Frühanfänger in der Klasse zum Lernen zu motivieren) als auch in kontextuellen Faktoren, wie z.B.: der Wechsel von dem in der Grundschule zu dem in der Oberschule unterrichteten Englisch.