

Is younger better?

Carol Read sees early learning as a way of opening windows of the mind.

All over the world, children are increasingly required to start learning a foreign language, usually English, at a younger and younger age. The cry of 'younger is better' has become a mantra, chanted almost unthinkingly by those with a stake in implementing language programmes and courses for children.

It is a mantra which is popular with politicians: bringing down the age of learning English wins votes.

It is popular with parents: it offers opportunities for a brighter future for their children.

It is popular with publishers and language course providers: it opens up new markets.

For teachers, and others closely involved in children's education, it has almost become part of our collective, professional 'group think' – something that we take for granted and rarely question. If we also rely on education for a living, we have a major vested interest in believing it to be true.

I would like to explore whether 'younger' is actually 'better' in the context of learning a foreign language in long-term, drip-feed courses at school, or whether it may be a fallacy, based on wishful thinking and faulty assumptions, as recently suggested, for example, by David Nunan and Penny Ur.

Two central ideas which lie behind the popular assumption that 'younger is better' are:

- 1 the widely-held view that since young children learn their mother tongue so quickly and effectively, they will be able to pick up a foreign language in the same way, without ever having to make any real effort.
- 2 the concept of a critical or sensitive period, an idea developed around the mid-20th century of a 'magic' period in children's lives (usually identified as up

to the age of about 12) after which their brains lose plasticity and they are no longer capable of learning another language so effectively. This idea is also implicitly reflected when you hear people say things like 'Oh, I wish I'd started learning Spanish (or whatever language) when I was younger'.

However, a look at the evidence, and at the needs, motivations and contexts of different learners, suggests that both these assumptions may be fallacies, except in particular circumstances.

The mother tongue

In the case of mother tongue acquisition, children are learning language at the same time as they are discovering who they are, establishing vital family relationships and beginning to make sense of the world. This experience is fundamentally different to the contrived encounter with a foreign language, possibly two or three times a week and often with someone (the teacher) not known personally very well. Given the huge gap between the two experiences, there is no way that we can expect children automatically to transfer skills from one to the other.

A critical period?

Although a critical or sensitive period is generally agreed to exist for mother tongue acquisition (and there are strong and weak versions of this), there is little conclusive evidence to support the idea of a critical or sensitive period for foreign language learning, except in the case of children learning a second language in naturalistic conditions, where there is lengthy exposure to the language and the degree of motivation is very high.

Therefore, although 'younger is better' is an argument which may hold with the young children of migrant parents, for example, it will not necessarily apply in the kind of formally-organised teaching situation which most of us work in.

The question of evidence

In research studies which compare older and younger learners in the same situation and under the same conditions, older learners consistently do better. From a whole body of research done since the 1970s right up to the present day (and summarised in eg McLaughlin or Marinova-Todd, Bradford-Marshall and Snow), evidence shows that it is older learners who make more rapid progress in much less time and are more efficient learners. Penny Ur refers to two classes she taught, one starting at the

Is younger better?



age of eight and one at the age of ten, and reports that, by the time they reached 13 and moved up to secondary school, there was no perceptible difference between the two. Similarly, David Nunan reports on language programme evaluations that tested groups of students aged 15, some of whom started learning English at the age of ten and some at the age of five, and again found no difference at age 15.

In summary, research studies repeatedly show that older learners have a better grasp of grammatical concepts which they can transfer to foreign language learning. They have greater cognitive maturity and better developed learning strategies and skills. They are more efficient at acquiring facts and concepts and have more practice at negotiating, turn-taking and sustaining conversations. All this combined makes them much better, faster learners than children, who learn considerably more slowly and with much greater effort.

Marinova-Todd et al say: *'Typically, the early elementary FL course will be able to cover only half as much material in a year as the middle school course, which in turn will progress much more slowly than the secondary or university courses'*.

Similarly, Sharpe says, citing a recent research survey from a range of European countries, *'there is no conclusive evidence yet that early foreign language teaching makes a substantial difference to children's attainment at secondary school'*.

Penny Ur concludes: *'If I'm in charge of allotting foreign language teaching hours, I'll invest most of them in the older classes where I'll get a better return for my investment'*.

In the face of the evidence and these views, we need to ask ourselves why we persist in the belief that teaching children a foreign language at an ever younger age is a valuable enterprise. What is the 'return for investment' that we're looking for?

The question of experience

It seems to me that, in attempting to answer these questions, we need to look beyond narrowly-defined, linguistic 'returns', measured in terms of snap-shot pictures of language knowledge and production, to the intrinsic value of the experience of starting to learn a foreign language at a young age – opening windows of the mind – and the wider and more diffuse benefits that this can bring.

We need to have a broader, longer-term vision of the 'returns' we seek. My views of the potential for 'younger' to be 'better' in foreign language courses at school are summarised in the web diagram below. They are grouped into three broad areas as follows:

1 Characteristics of young children vs older learners

While there may not be a 'magic' age for starting a foreign language, there is no doubt that young children are in a crucial formative phase of their social, psychological, physical, emotional and cognitive development. This may positively influence and benefit language learning in formal language teaching situations.

2 Potential benefits to the individual and society

Over the short and long term, the potential personal and academic benefits to the individual are huge. There are also clear potential benefits to society in terms of citizenship, democracy, tolerance,

peace and an enhanced economy through a better-trained workforce. The good news here also is the correlation between the actual length of time spent studying a foreign language and proficiency in the long run (see eg Curtain and Pesola), with particularly positive beneficial effects on the development of memory, listening skills and pronunciation.

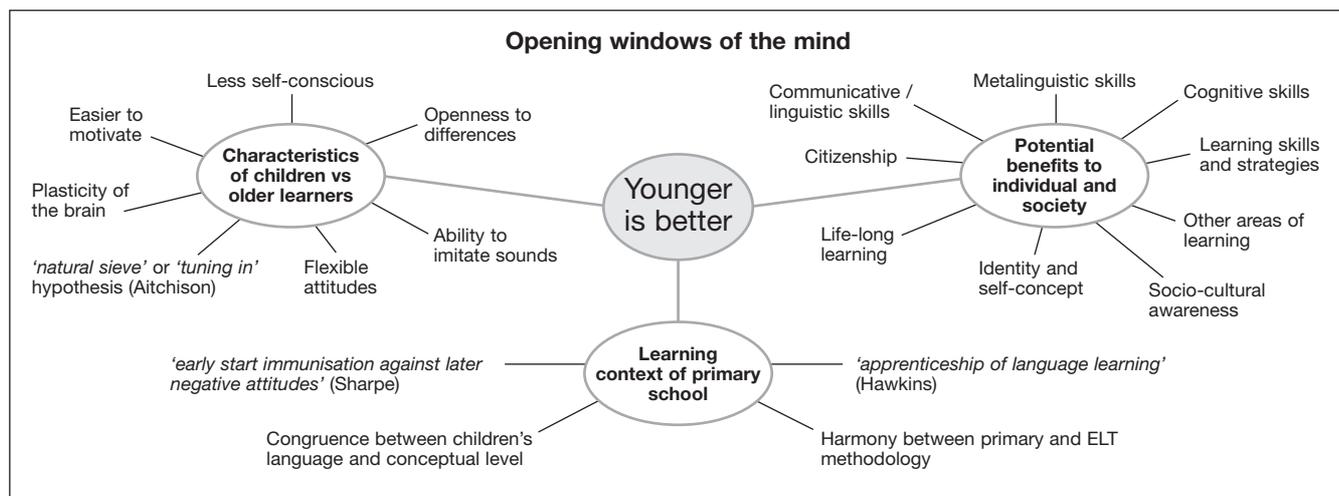
3 The learning context of the primary school

Primary schools generally provide an ideal context for a whole learning experience appropriately structured to meet children's needs. Through 'learning by doing', language competence can be built up gradually and naturally and provide the basis for more abstract, formal learning in secondary school. After all, no one ever suggests postponing the age of starting to learn maths because it will be easy to catch up later.

From the three broad areas identified in the web, we can see that, potentially, the conditions for 'younger' to be 'better' do exist in formal teaching-learning situations. However, in my view, whether it will be truly worthwhile in the long term depends on two crucial factors: how it's done and what happens after.

How it's done

As Shelagh Rixon has said, what counts is not an 'optimal age', but 'optimal conditions'. These include not only things such as the way the target language is valued within the society, but also what happens inside the classroom itself. On page 7 is a checklist of ingredients which I think help to ensure that 'younger is better' in the local context in which I work. You may like to look at them and decide a) if you



My own experience

Although there is no research evidence from long-term, drip-feed courses to support the points in the web on page 6, my current classroom experience with three to seven year olds in a state school in Spain convinces me utterly of the value of these potential 'returns'. I will illustrate this with three stories from my classes which exemplify different points.

1 Enhanced pronunciation skills

In my class of five year olds, at the start of an activity, I hear a child say 'Listen. Quiet now, please!', imitating my gestures, voice and intonation exactly. I turn round quickly and the thought of parody passes through my head, even though this seems unlikely at the age of five. It isn't parody. The child is doing my classroom management for me (one of the best strategies I know!) and just has my voice, accent and intonation off to a tee!

2 Developing learning strategies

In my class of four year olds, we're learning more colours. I hold up something white and several children call out *blank*. They've recently learnt that *elefante* in Spanish is *elephant*, so there's a pretty good chance *blanco* may turn out to be *blank*. They're already brilliant little linguists, cognitively engaged in strategic guessing at every moment, and with a definite feel and intuition for the way English may work.

3 Developing empathy and understanding of others

Mohammed is a Moroccan boy in my class of four year olds. Recently arrived in Spain, he doesn't speak either Spanish or English and he's finding it tough. One day when he's absent, I talk to the children (in Spanish) about how we can help Mohammed. They're full of ideas: play with him, sit with him, share their snacks, and then one little boy pipes up 'We can help Mohammed speak Spanish like you help us with English.' 'How's that?' I ask, intrigued to hear their views. 'By showing us pictures and speaking slowly' comes the response. Thus it is that, through their own experience of learning a foreign language, these children are able to understand and empathise with how it might feel not to speak their own.

think they also apply in your context, b) which one(s) you think are most important and c) if you don't teach children, how many of the criteria may also apply to older learners as well. (My personal answer to b) can be found at the end of this article.)

Younger is better when ...

- learning is natural
- learning is contextualised and part of a real event
- learning is interesting and enjoyable
- learning is relevant
- learning is social
- learning belongs to the child
- learning has a purpose for the child
- learning builds on things the child knows
- learning makes sense to the child
- the child is challenged appropriately
- learning is supported appropriately
- learning is part of a coherent whole
- learning is multi-sensory
- the child wants to learn
- learning is active and experiential
- learning is memorable
- learning allows for personal, divergent responses
- learning takes account of multiple intelligences
- the learning atmosphere is relaxed and warm
- there's a sense of achievement

What happens after

For early foreign language teaching to be ultimately successful, there is a crying need for coherent primary and secondary policies to provide for progression and continuity throughout the school years. Such policies need to be reflected in language planning and curricula, which should build on what children know by the end of primary school rather than require them to start again. They need to be reflected in evaluation and assessment programmes which use appropriate instruments and objectives at each age and stage. They also need to be reflected in an increased awareness and understanding between teachers and schools. On the one hand, primary school teachers may often not be aware of how to prepare their pupils for secondary school and, on the other, secondary school teachers often find it hard to 'tap in' to what the children coming up from primary school already know.



In conclusion, although there is not a water-tight case for saying that 'younger is better' in formal teaching-learning situations, the potential is certainly there. Whether this potential is realised depends on a range of factors and more research needs to be done. In the meantime, we need to keep the richer picture in mind and embrace language training as an integral part of children's whole development and education. Long-term, drip-feed, foreign language courses starting from a very young age are here to stay. In my view, as we become more proficient in delivering them, these will not only increasingly produce competent speakers of other languages but will, above all, open windows of the mind in ways that, I suspect, we can only now begin to glimpse. 

Aitchison, J Reith Lectures 1996, quoted in Hawkins (1996) and Sharpe (2001)

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(My personal answer to b) is 'the child wants to learn', which underlines the importance of motivation. As the saying goes, *You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink*. In my view, making children 'thirsty' for learning in the primary years is one of the keys to long-term success.)



Carol Read is a teacher, teacher trainer and writer based in Madrid. Her most recent publications are *Here's Robby!*, *Hello, Robby Rabbit* and *Superworld* (with co-author Ana Soberón, Macmillan) and *Instant Lessons: Fairy Tales* (Penguin Longman).

c.read@arrakis.es