

EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN THE LIGHT OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract: *This paper presents the results of the EVYL (English to Very Young Learners) Project. The project was carried out in 2004 - 2006 and its aim was to examine the influence of introducing English at early and very early ages on the performance in English language of prospective students of the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic.*

Key words: *early foreign language learning, young learners*

Background

Early foreign language teaching is a widely discussed phenomenon. Its importance increases in the European context and with the ideas of pluriculturalism and plurilingualism.

Not only the general public but also educational policy makers take the benefits of an early start for granted. In the Action Plan for 2004–06 called Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity, the Commission of the European Communities calls upon the member states to make language learning available to very young learners and suggests that at least two foreign languages should be taught at schools from a very early age. (Action Plan, 2004).

As far as research is considered, Lenneberg's Critical Age Hypothesis (1967) was supported by some authors (Patkowski, 1980, Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). They claim to be able to demonstrate the advantage early starters have over those who start later, especially in the area of native-like pronunciation. These projects were, however, carried out in the situation of total immersion (the British in the Netherlands learning Dutch, and immigrants in America learning English), which is radically different from the socio-cultural context of the Czech Republic.

Different results were produced by a longitudinal study carried out in France by Sophie Genelot in 1991-93. Genelot's research setting bears a greater similarity to our situation. Genelot studied the effects of formal foreign language instruction in mainstream schools. The research sample comprised 1,500 pupils in Dijon. One thousand of them started learning English at primary school, the rest at secondary school. Their success at English was

measured at the end of their first and second year of secondary school (corresponding to a Czech *eight-year gymnázium*). The results show that the benefits of early start are minimal after the first year of secondary school and even smaller at the end of the second year. The only group that benefited from early instruction was that of the most intelligent children. Also, a number of factors more significant than age of acquisition were revealed, such as the social background and general intelligence of the pupils, the methods of instruction and personalities of the teachers (Genelot, 1996). Moreover, the results also indicated that the level demonstrated by the pupils in their mother tongue (French) was lower if English was introduced earlier, as the number of French lessons per week had to be reduced.

A similar large-scale study was carried out by a research team in Belgium, France, Britain, Germany and Italy (Blondin et al, 1998). The conclusions confirm that early age alone does not automatically guarantee success, more important factors being the quality of teaching and the amount of time devoted to learning.

We cannot but agree with Singleton and Ryan (2004, p. 227), who say that “the currently available empirical evidence on the age factor in L2 acquisition is not particularly helpful to those who advocate early L2 instruction”.

Research question

As the popular belief in the Czech Republic and elsewhere has it, the earlier one starts learning a foreign language (English), the better. The EVYL (English for Very Young Learners) research project examines this claim. In the years 2004 - 2006 we carried out the first three phases of the EVYL research project, the aim of which is to contribute to the discussion about effectiveness of teaching languages to young or even very young learners. The results of the first phase have already been discussed in Hanušová, Najvar (2005).

If we are to accept the commonly held views, then the applicants who started learning English earlier in their school career should do significantly better at university entrance exams than those who started learning English later, regardless of various intervening variables (such as personal characteristics, quality of instruction, educational context, social background etc.).

Sample

The sample included 1,827 prospective students of the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic who applied for teacher education courses at the English department in 2004, 2005 and 2006 (529, 665 and 633 participants respectively). Of all applicants in those years, only those

who agreed to fill a short questionnaire where they specified the period in which they started to learn English were included in the sample. As a result of the traditional gender distribution in the teaching profession, the gender distribution in the sample is as follows: 17 per cent male (Nm=307), 83 per cent female (Nf=1520). A typical applicant is aged 19 – 22 (73 per cent in 2004), even though there were also older applicants (over thirty years of age - 7 per cent in 2004), most of them being practising teachers without full qualification.

Method

To determine the participants' language level in English, the scores in the standard Masaryk University Entrance Exam Test of English were taken into account. The test consists of grammar, syntax, spelling, vocabulary and reading comprehension subtests. Graph A shows the distribution of the participants' test scores. In addition, the participants answered a short questionnaire, the key item of which asked them to identify the period in which they started to learn English, the categories being kindergarten (age 3-5), first or second grade (age 6-7), third to fifth grade (age 8-10), sixth to ninth grade (age 11-14) and high school (age 15+). Graph B shows the distribution of the answers in the sample. Non-parametrical tests, namely the Spearman or Kendall test, were employed to measure the correlations between the two variables.

Results

None of the tests carried out so far proved statistically significant correlations between the age in which the participants started learning English and their score in the university entrance English test. As Graph C shows, the distribution of individual cases of the sample in a frequency scatterplot graph implies no correlation between the two variables.

Conclusions

The results, which seem to be contradictory to the popular belief in its most simplified form, indicate that there is no correlation between the age in which the prospective English teachers started learning English and their command of English on the point of entering tertiary education. They suggest the effectiveness of early English language teaching in the Czech Republic (at least in the last 15 years) has been rather low. We find the results relevant and consistent with those of similar studies carried out in similar socio-cultural contexts in Europe.

Although we fully respect the aims set by educational policy makers on both national and European level, we strongly recommend the process of reaching the aims should be carefully considered. A very complicated issue should not be reduced to that of age. The assumed positive effects of early and very early language instruction seem to be levelled with other important variables that intervene in the long process of learning a foreign language. We therefore strongly advise against overemphasising age as a factor in early language teaching.

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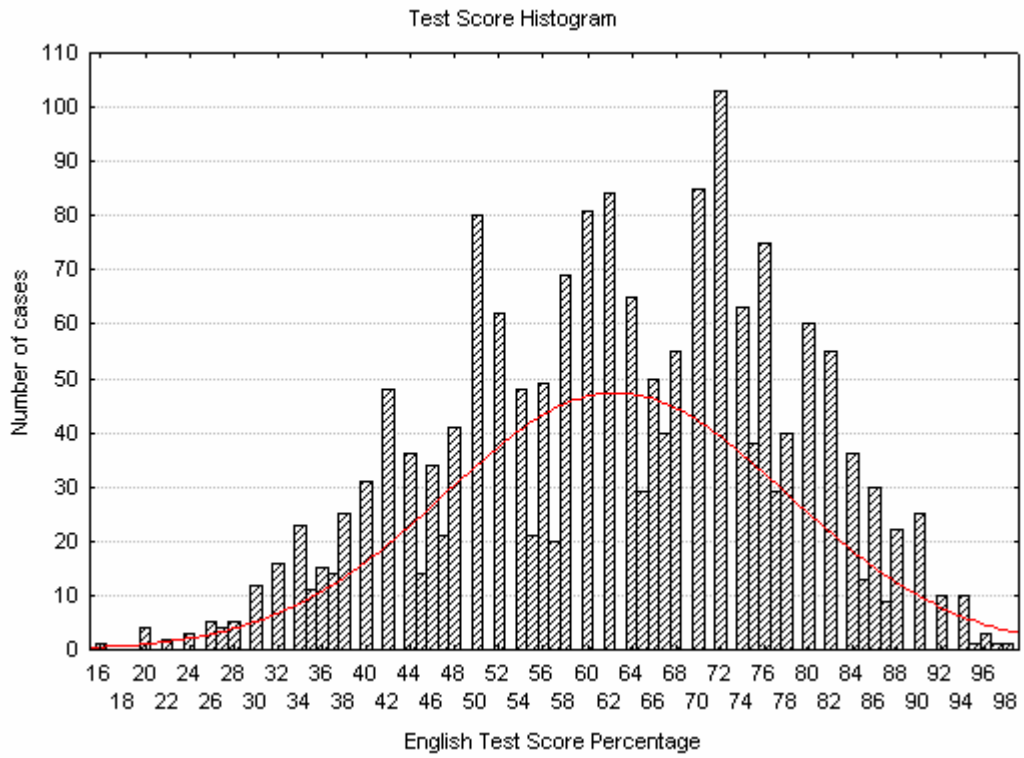
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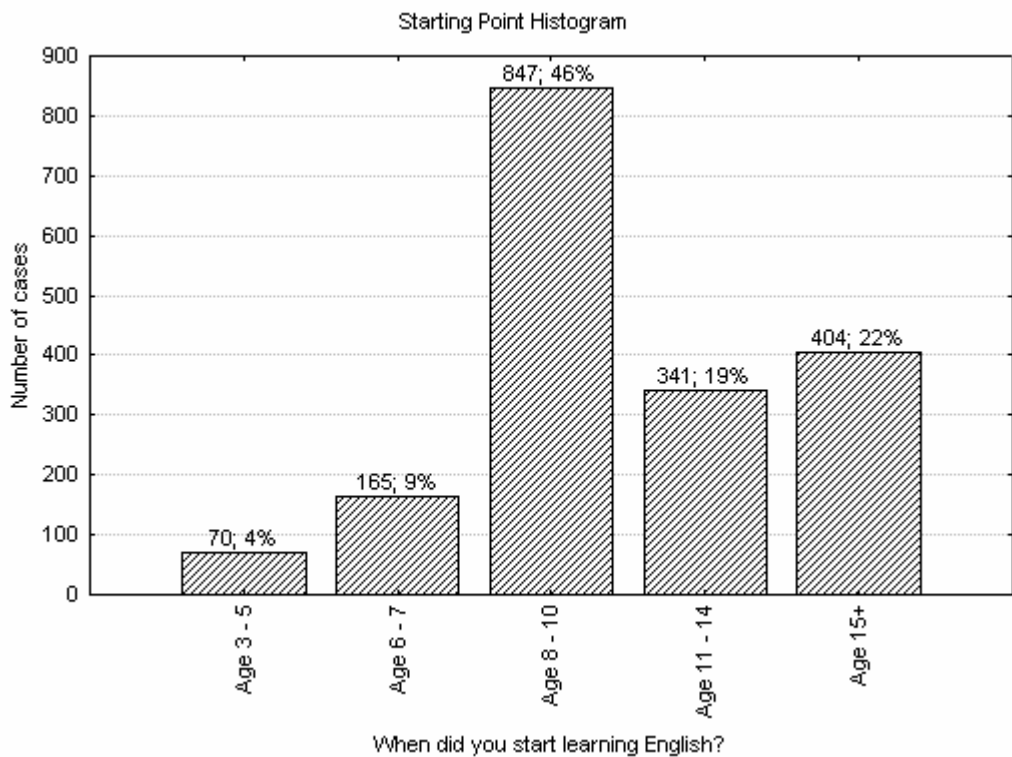
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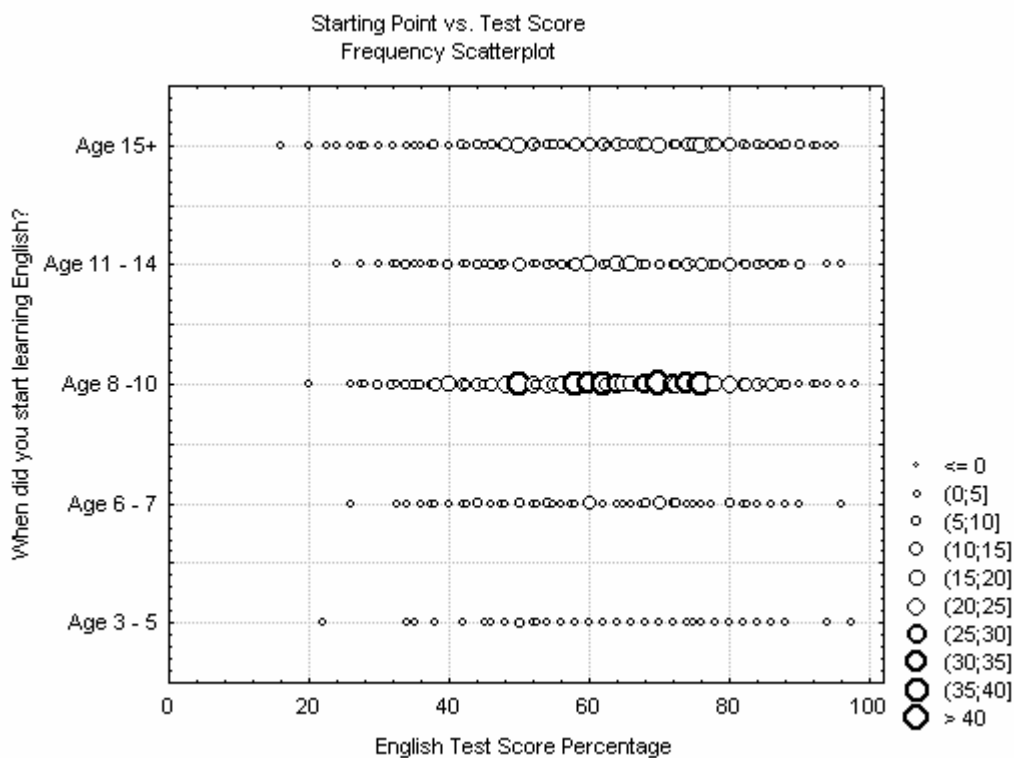
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Graph A



Graph B



Graph C

Resumé: Příspěvek referuje o výsledcích projektu EVYL (English for Very Young Learners – Angličtina pro nejmenší), který probíhal na Pedagogické fakultě Masarykovy univerzity v letech 2004 – 2006. Cílem projektu bylo zkoumání vlivu rané výuky angličtiny na jazykové kompetence zájemců o studium učitelství anglického jazyka na pedagogické fakultě. Zkoumaný vzorek zahrnoval 1827 uchazečů o studium. Výsledky písemného přijímacího testu složeného ze subtestů zaměřených na gramatiku, syntax, pravopis, slovní zásobu a porozumění textu byly korelovány s údajem o věku zahájení osvojování anglického jazyka. Výsledky prokázaly, že neexistuje statisticky významná korelace mezi započítím učení se angličtině v předškolním, příp. mladším školním věku (1., 2. třída ZŠ) a úspěchem u testu.

Výsledky projektu nepotvrzují obecně přijímaný názor, podle něhož brzké započítí učení se cizímu jazyku přináší v dlouhodobé perspektivě lepší výsledky. Autoři příspěvku odkazují také na podobné výzkumy, které byly v devadesátých letech 20. století realizovány v evropském kontextu a které dospěly ke shodným závěrům (výzkumy S. Genelot, rozsáhlý výzkum týmu C. Blondina).