
Questioning an early start: the transition from primary to secondary foreign language learning

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study which compared the performance of new and continuing French students at an independent girls' school in Melbourne. The purpose was to investigate whether the school's placement procedures, where students are streamed into beginning and continuing groups, were justified and, if so, how they could be improved. The study found that there were significant differences in the proficiency of the respective groups at Year 7 for writing and listening (but not for reading and speaking) but that these differences seem to disappear in years 8 and 9. The main issue addressed in this study is whether the study of French in primary school gives students an appreciable advantage, the nature of such an advantage and whether it is maintained over time. The study also raises important issues relating to the transition from primary to secondary foreign language learning, including how best to measure the benefits of an early start.

1. The Problem

An early start for second and foreign language learning at school is not unusual. Examples include foreign language teaching in the elementary school in the USA (FLES), French in the UK primary school (FPS) and languages other than English in the Australian primary school (LOTE). What all of these programs demonstrate is the willingness among educational planners to (a) extend the length of explicit language learning and (b) take advantage of the greater plasticity of young children in automatising new skills and internalising new knowledge. Whilst aims such as these are

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plausible, these initiatives are often characterised by doubts and reversals of policy such as the on-off programmes found in the UK. Why the suspicion, among professional language educators as much as among administrators, that spending longer teaching a language and starting earlier are not necessarily beneficial? How could they not be?

The literature on this question is either in favour of an early start on the grounds of consciousness raising and length of exposure (Clyne 1986, 1995) or neutral, even sceptical (Davies 1996, Harley 1986, Genesee 1994, Martin 1991). Objections tend to be practical: too expensive and wasteful, the lack of primary-secondary articulation, the over-crowded primary curriculum. Where they are empirical, they reflect a lack of evidence (Davies 1996), the all-too-common null finding of non-experimental educational research, beset by a regiment of confounding variables (see Stern 1983 for a summary). After a 10-year study, Burstall et al (1974) concluded that, while it was perfectly feasible to teach a foreign language in the primary school, whether it offered any special advantages was unclear.

In the event, we don't really know whether children who start formal school language learning early are advantaged over those who don't. There is anecdotal evidence (though again we are uncertain as to the cause) that many of those who do start early do not continue with the same language in secondary school. Whether this has to do with the lack of credit given at secondary school for previous language learning remains to be seen.

The question of studying a foreign language in the primary school is of course a sub-question to the larger questions about age of start and length of exposure. Harley (1986) maintains that time alone is insufficient as a predictor of relative L2 proficiency. Genesee (1994) similarly concludes that condensing the period of time spent on a foreign language is better than spreading the same amount of tuition over a longer period. In the Australian setting, these views are corroborated by Martin (1991).

In addition to the lack of hard evidence, there appears to be some confusion as to what an early start is for. Is it, like literacy, to acquire a skilled habit, or is it, like Social Studies, to provide cultural enrichment? Is it, overall, worth doing? This last question indicates the dilemma of curriculum decisions, because the answer

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does not depend on research findings but rather on a prior value judgement. Furthermore, the success of a cultural enrichment program will be determined very differently from that of a program which aims to develop language proficiency.

2. The Australian Setting

For demographic and geographic reasons, Australia has boldly promoted foreign language learning. Along with the boldness (eg in Victoria, 43 languages are offered for examination at VCE, Year 12 of school) has gone an uncertainty about policy. In particular, the shifting status of European versus Asian languages has reflected Australia's uncertainty about its geo-political identity.

At present, Asian languages (notably, Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian and Korean) are in favour, largely for instrumental reasons, but also in part because of recent in-migration from these countries. As the still-important roles of Greek and Italian in school foreign language teaching show, Australia has a tradition of fostering heritage languages. Finally, the traditional European languages, French and German in particular, continue to be important and supported for historical and cultural reasons.

However, it is not clear whether there are adequate resources to maintain professional language teaching in all these languages everywhere in Australia. The assumption of the various State Governments and of the Commonwealth (Federal) Government is that there really is no choice, that it is incumbent on Australia (for the reasons mentioned) to make adequate provision for these languages. A recent Government report (Rudd 1994) has encouraged State Governments to make provision by 2006 for all students to study one foreign language from the beginning of primary school to the end of Year 10. In the short term, this has encouraged a range of interim measures, such as the use of televised language instruction to classes where the teacher may have no or only limited proficiency in the L2.

Implementing such a policy without adequate resources, especially the most important one, a pool of qualified teachers, on the face of it, makes the assumption that exposure (any exposure) is good. It takes for granted that students gain an advantage from an early start, an assumption which must stem in part from the idea that the

longer a language is studied the better, and in part, from the view that young children pick up new languages more easily than older learners. Clearly, there is an underlying assumption that children continuing foreign language study from primary school (perhaps not necessarily the same language) have an advantage over those with no previous instruction in the language.

The two main arguments for primary foreign language instruction can thus be summarised as follows:

1. the earlier the better.
2. the longer the better.

Apart from proficiency, gains in terms of attitude have been claimed. There is some local evidence on the affective side. Kipp (1996), reporting on a one-school study, found that there are gains other than proficiency and other than continuation. This seems to be an argument for partial success: 'this study may challenge the assumption that all students who begin a particular language at primary school must continue it through Year 12 in order to benefit from the primary programme' (Kipp 1996: 16). Kipp is encouraged to say this because a majority of her respondents claim that early exposure has made them open to the study of another foreign language in Year 11 or later. However, it is interesting to observe that, when asked for more detail on their positive attitude, the reasons given are more cognitive than affective, relating to their 'basic knowledge of a language', 'you know what's involved' and 'many learning techniques are similar'. This seems to be a kind of language-awareness argument for primary foreign language instruction. What matters is that the student is now open to learning any new language: 'you know what's involved'.

One final assumption: whether or not there is juncture between Primary and Secondary instruction is unimportant: smooth linear progression is assured.

3. The Case Study

The impetus for the study reported on in this paper came when language teachers at an independent girls' school in Melbourne began to challenge some of these assumptions.

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Observations by the teachers had indicated that, after 2 years in the secondary school, girls who had studied French in the junior (primary) school appeared to be performing at the same level in all four macro skills as those who had begun French in the secondary school. In fact, the only advantage perceived for the earlier starters was accent. There were differences, of course, but these appeared to be individual, rather than group-related.

Intrigued by what they were observing and anxious to investigate further and more objectively, the college invited LTRC to work with teaching staff on a project to investigate what, if any, gains there were in an early start to language learning in their own school. LTRC was in turn attracted by the opportunity to work on a real, if intractable, research problem at the unusual invitation of a real work setting. In the context of a push to primary foreign language instruction, it seemed important to examine the question in the local setting as perceived by teachers who are being encouraged by administrators to promote primary foreign language instruction while themselves remaining somewhat sceptical of the benefits.

The school, Presbyterian Ladies' College (PLC), offers a choice of six languages from Year 7 to 12. One of these, French, is also offered in the junior (primary) school from pre-Prep (3 year olds) to Grade 6. In Years 7 and 8, students are streamed into Beginners French or Continuing French, with the aim of maintaining and developing the advanced skills of the more experienced learners. Whilst the two streams use the same textbooks in Years 7 to 9 and both start at the beginning of new texts in Year 7, it is expected that the continuing learners will treat the earlier parts of the textbooks as revision and move faster than the beginners. However, by the end of Year 8, teachers feel there is no longer any justification for keeping the two strands separate. Hence, the two streams are combined in Years 9 to 12.

4. Research Questions

The LTRC was asked to investigate whether the school's placement procedures are justified and, if so, whether (and how) they should be improved. In particular, the questions to be addressed were:

1. Do continuing students achieve at a higher level than beginning students?

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2. If so, in what areas?
 3. Is this advantage maintained over time?

The findings were expected to have relevance for:

1. placement procedures in the senior school
2. teaching practice (eg the use of same texts with both groups)
3. the policy of teaching foreign languages in primary school.

5. Methodology

5.1 Subjects

150 subjects (comprising all students in Years 7, 8 and 9) participated in the study. In each year level, approximately half were continuing students and half were studying French for the first time (Table 1).

	Beginner	Cont.	Total	Hrs p/wk
Year 7	24	27	51	2.0
Year 8	24	27	51	2.5
Year 9	19	28	48	2.5

Table 1. Group Composition

Continuing students will have studied French for anything up to a total of 300 hours in primary school. A number of the continuing students had done some or all of their primary schooling in the PLC Junior school. All students (ie beginning and continuing) have approximately 2 hours of French tuition per week in Year 7 and approx 2.5 hours per week in Years 8 and 9. As stated earlier, the same texts are used in each year level for the two groups.

5.2 Instruments

5.2.1 Reading & Listening

The National Australia Bank Language Certificates (Beginner French), an achievement/proficiency test designed for junior secondary school students, were used to test the receptive skills. The reading test comprises 30 MCQ items and lasts 30 minutes. The listening test comprises 25 MCQ items and also lasts 30 minutes. Each test includes a range of topics and text types with vocabulary and structures appropriate to the ability level of the target group.

5.2.2 Writing

For the writing task, all students were asked to write as much as they could about themselves in thirty minutes. All students completed the task at the same time under supervision.

5.2.3 Speaking

The same coloured picture stimulus, representing a family situation, was chosen for all levels. Students were instructed to say as much as they could about it in French, including imagined information about the characters and the items. Students were allowed two minutes to speak. The test was administered to one student at a time and their responses were recorded onto audiotape.

5.3 Scoring

All marking was carried out by the French teachers at PLC. The Reading and Listening sections were objectively scored. The speaking section was assessed using a five-point analytic scale (where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest possible score). The criteria for assessment were 'message' (including 'vocabulary', 'structure' and 'phrasing') and 'pronunciation'. The writing section was also assessed using a five-point analytic scale. The criteria for assessment were 'content', 'organisation', 'vocabulary' and 'structure'. For speaking, each student was scored by two assessors working together. For writing, each student was scored by two assessors working independently.

6. Results

The test scores of Beginner and Continuing students were compared at the three year levels (i.e. years 7, 8 and 9) taken individually and combined (using t-tests and Mann Whitney).

Reading	<i>n</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Year 7</i>				
Beginner	24	16.8		
Continuing	26	17.5	-0.67	ns
<i>Year 8</i>				
Beginner	22	21.7		
Continuing	27	21.6	-0.06	ns
<i>Year 9</i>				
Beginner	18	24.3		
Continuing	28	24.7	-0.37	ns
<i>All</i>				
Beginner	64	20.6		
Continuing	81	21.4	-1.01	ns

Table 2. Differences between beginning & continuing students
(Reading)

As can be seen in Table 2, no difference was found between beginner and continuing students for Reading at any year level.

Writing	<i>n</i>	<i>median</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>p</i> [*]
<i>Year 7</i>				
Beginner	23	34		
Continuing	26	28.5	736.5	0.001
<i>Year 8</i>				
Beginner	23	16		
Continuing	26	19	478.5	0.05
<i>Year 9</i>				
Beginner	19	16		
Continuing	27	15	476	rs
<i>All</i>				
Beginner	65	21		
Continuing	79	20	4900	rs

* *adjusted for ties*

Table 3. Differences between beginning & continuing students
(Writing)

For Writing (Table 3), significant differences were found at Years 7 and 8, but not at Year 9 or for the combined levels. This result is in line with teachers' perceptions that any differences between the two groups seem to have disappeared by the end of Year 8.

Listening	<i>n</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Year 7</i>				
Beginner	23	11.3		
Continuing	26	15.3	-4.34	0.0001
<i>Year 8</i>				
Beginner	22	16.7		
Continuing	27	17.3	-0.65	rs
<i>Year 9</i>				
Beginner	18	19.7		
Continuing	28	19.7	0.04	rs
<i>All</i>				
Beginner	63	15.6		
Continuing	81	17.5	-2.6	0.01

Table 4. Differences between beginning and continuing students (Listening)

For Listening (Table 4), a significant difference was found in Year 7, with the continuing groups performing at a higher level, but this difference was not significant in Years 8 and 9 taken separately. However, when all three year levels taken together were compared, a significant difference was found, again in favour of the continuing students. One explanation for this may be the magnitude of the differences between the two groups in Year 7. It should be noted, however, that the size of the groups for comparison within year levels is very small. That is, it is possible that, with a larger sample size, significant differences might also have been detected within Years 8 and 9.

Speaking	<i>n</i>	<i>median</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>p</i> [*]
<i>Year 7</i>				
Beginner	23	8		
Continuing	25	7.5	608.5	ns
<i>Year 8</i>				
Beginner	24	5.8		
Continuing	23	5	633	ns
<i>Year 9</i>				
Beginner	18	4		
Continuing	27	4	451.5	ns
<i>All</i>				
Beginner	65	21		
Continuing	79	20	5062.5	0.04

* *adjusted for ties*

**Table 5. Differences between beginning & continuing students
(Speaking)**

Again for Speaking (Table 5), whilst no differences were found at individual year levels, a significant difference (again, in favour of the continuing group) emerged when the combined year levels were compared.

Finally, looking at scores for Pronunciation (one of the criteria for Speaking) (Table 6), the difference between the two groups was significant at Year 8 as well as for the combined levels, apparently confirming teachers' perceptions regarding the superior accents of continuing students.

Pronunciation	<i>n</i>	<i>median</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>p</i> [*]
<i>Year 7</i>				
Beginner	23	3		
Continuing	25	2.5	625.5	rs
<i>Year 8</i>				
Beginner	24	2		
Continuing	23	2	664.5	0.05
<i>Year 9</i>				
Beginner	18	2		
Continuing	27	1.5	436	rs
<i>All</i>				
Beginner	65	2		
Continuing	75	2	5151	0.01

* *adjusted for ties*

Table 6. Differences between beginning & continuing students
(Pronunciation)

6.1 Rater feedback

One interesting phenomenon, observed by the two teachers who assessed the speaking tests, was that the continuing students tended to simply list discrete vocabulary items without using verbs or prepositions to form sentences or simple phrases. The beginner students, on the other hand, attempted to form sentences; they often resorted to inserting a verb in English in the correct position, rather than leave an item "hanging".

7. Discussion

One limitation in this study was the size and composition of the sample used. The results seem to indicate that, had the sample size been larger, more significant differences would have emerged. As for

the composition of the sample, continuing students may have studied French for any period from 1 to 7 years (depending on when they commenced at PLC or when foreign language instruction commenced in their previous school). Furthermore, because the senior school students are drawn from a number of different primary schools, the methods of language instruction in those schools may have ranged from partial immersion to programs delivered via television. Obviously, in an expanded study these parameters would need to be more carefully constrained.

As regards the testing instruments used, the Reading & Listening tests were found to be insufficiently challenging for a number of students at each year level. Furthermore, the limited time and resources available to carry out this study meant that the rating design for Speaking and Writing tests did not allow the task, criteria or assessors to be properly evaluated (although the feedback from the assessors/teachers was that the assessment criteria worked well). Assessors also provided informal feedback about the effectiveness of the Writing and Speaking tasks.

8. Conclusion

The results only partially confirmed the perceptions which first motivated the study. Whilst the differences for pronunciation were much as expected, the only other result which clearly conformed to teachers' expectations was for Writing, where differences between Beginning and Continuing students seemed to disappear after the second year of senior school (Year 8). For Listening and Speaking, sample-size problems make it more difficult to establish this trend.

One question which arises from this study is this: if, as in the case of Reading, there are no differences, why not? Despite the fact that time and again researchers have found that there is no advantage, is it not still reasonable to expect that there should be? Are we, in other words, selling our continuing students short in some way?

A further question is: if, as in the case of Writing, there are differences in proficiency levels, why do they disappear so quickly? As mentioned earlier, the same class instructional materials are used in the same sequence with both beginning and continuing students. Is this teaching practice demotivating to continuing students? That is, is there adequate recognition of prior learning by

teachers? Could it be that the policy of recombining the two streams after Year 8 is precisely the reason why there is no difference between Beginning and Continuing students by the end of Year 9?

Finally, given the results for Speaking and Listening, is it possible that real differences both exist and persist but are simply not recognised by language programs? Here the problem may be systemic: foreign language instruction in the primary school tends to be integrated with the curriculum and communicative in nature. Secondary school foreign language instruction, on the other hand, is formal to the point where, by Year 12, native speakers of the language may actually be disadvantaged (Elder 1997). That is, the emphasis of secondary school foreign language instruction is less on proficiency and more on the importance of language study as academic endeavour.

The qualitative differences in the speech of the beginning and continuing students (noted by the assessors) is particularly interesting. What does the Continuing students' tendency to list vocabulary rather than use connected speech tell us about how language is taught in the primary school?

To return to the original question posed by the teachers at PLC:

Are the current placement procedures justified?

Based on the results of this study, yes.

Could they should be improved?

Probably. It may be worthwhile, for example, using different teaching materials for Continuing students and maintaining the separation of the two streams beyond Year 8. For a more definitive answer to these questions further research is needed. For this reason, a further study, this time broadening the sample to include students from additional schools, has been initiated (for completion in July 1998).

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