

Anyone who is good at German learns English better

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Your literacy skills in your first language heavily influence the learning of a foreign language. Thus, anyone who reads and writes German well is likely to transfer this advantage to English—regardless of the age of onset of foreign language learning. Foreign language lessons at an early age, however, pay off less than was previously assumed. In fact, they can even have a negative impact on the first language in the short run.

"A tree must be bent while it is young," as one saying about learning a foreign language goes. In other words, the earlier you start learning a foreign language systematically, the better the language level will be in the long run. The second widely held view is that you need to be solid in your first language (L1) in order to develop good literacy skills in the foreign language. Linguist Simone Pfenninger from the University of Zurich has been examining these two myths in her five-year study involving Swiss high-school children in order to identify the optimal starting age for learning German as a language of literacy and English as a foreign language. The partial results she has just published reveal that anyone who reads and writes German well is likely to carry over this advantage to English - and, interestingly, regardless of the age of onset of foreign language learning or the [biological age](#). The study also shows that students who are given early exposure to English do not maintain a clear advantage for more than a relatively short period over students who begin to learn the language only at secondary level. In fact, early foreign language learning can even have a [negative impact](#) on the L1 in the short run.

Positive and negative influences of German on English researched

For five years, the UZH scientist has been studying the extent to which starting age, biological age and L1 skills - Swiss or High German - influence the development of English proficiency. In order to test their skills in German and English, the [literacy skills](#) of 200 randomly selected high-school children in the Canton of Zurich were tested at the beginning and towards the end of their obligatory schooling in the senior grades. One group had begun English lessons in primary school at the age of eight, while the second group had only started English in high school at the age of thirteen.

Besides the positive influence of German on English, the negative influences and transfer of structures from the L1 to the foreign language were also studied in the areas of syntax and morphology. "After all, as the mother tongue becomes increasingly entrenched, you might also expect an increasing negative influence of the L1 on English," explains Pfenninger.

As the results showed, foreign language lessons at an early age did not have a beneficial impact either in the long or in the short term. Already after six months learners who had started five years later had caught up with the early learners and sometimes even surpassed them, e.g. in terms of morpho-syntactic accuracy and complexity, syntactic fluency, grammaticality judgment, and content-related and structural aspects of written expression. However, the early learners had a larger vocabulary at the first measurement and less of a tendency to fill the gaps in their vocabulary in the foreign language with so-called "code-switching" into German. "By the second assessment, shortly before the final high-school exams, there were no longer any differences between early and late starters," says Pfenninger.

Late starters had better German writing skills

According to the study's author, the slightly disappointing results for early foreign [language learning](#) can be attributed to the following reasons (among others): at the beginning of high school, the late learners exhibited significantly better German writing skills than the early learners, who had already been taught German, English and French in elementary school. The late learners therefore began foreign language lessons with a more favorable foundation in the language of literacy. By the second assessment five years later, however, this advantage had disappeared.

Moreover, the link between German and English writing skills also displayed a positive and significant correlation: "Anyone who is good at German can carry over this advantage to the foreign language, utterly regardless of the age when they start learning the foreign language or their biological age," sums up Pfenninger. Therefore, the results of this study have shown so far that, where success is concerned, this does not relate for the most part to age of onset or length of the exposure to the [foreign language](#)

More information: Pfenninger, Simone E. The Literacy Factor in the Optimal Age Debate: a 5-Year Longitudinal Study. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. December 10, 2014. [DOI: 10.1080/13670050.2014.972334](#)

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