

Early English lessons have lasting effects

March 18 2022



In Germany, children start to learn english in primary school. Credit: RUB, Marquard

An international research team has examined how English lessons in primary school affect language proficiency in this subject in secondary school. Children who started learning English in the first grade of primary school performed significantly better in listening and reading

comprehension in grade nine than children who started in grade three. The study was a continuation of an earlier paper that had only covered the period up to the seventh grade and couldn't find any such learning advantage.

The team headed by Professor Markus Ritter from Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB) and Dr. Nils Jäkel from the University of Oulu, Finland, in cooperation with Dr. Michael Schurig from the Technical University of Dortmund, describes their findings in the journal *System*. The study will be published in the June 2022 edition, but is already freely accessible online. The researchers are collaborating within the university consortium UNIC: European University of Post-Industrial Cities.

Data from North Rhine-Westphalia

The study included data from around 3,000 students who participated in a [longitudinal study](#) conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, between 2010 and 2014. The same data had also been used in the previous study, the results of which the researchers had published in 2017. At that time, they had compared two cohorts, one of which had started English lessons in grade one, the other in grade three. In grades five and seven, they had compared both cohorts in terms of English reading and listening comprehension. The new analysis incorporated another set of data collected in 2016 to measure the English performance of the same [children](#) in grade nine.

The previous study had found that children who had started English lessons earlier in [primary school](#) performed worse in reading and listening comprehension in grade seven than children who had not started English lessons until grade three. However, the new analysis showed that, in grade nine, the early starters in English performed better than the late starters in English.

Additional background variables such as gender, language of origin or [cognitive abilities](#) could not account for the difference between the poorer performance in the [seventh grade](#) and the late learning gains in the ninth grade.

Transition between school types decisive

"We believe the most plausible explanation is that lessons following the transition period in [secondary school](#) have been increasingly adapted to the needs of children who start to take English lessons at an early stage," concludes Nils Jäkel, formerly at RUB, now at the University of Oulu.

"This explanation is in line with research that considers the transition between school types to play a key role in the long-term success of English language education across school boundaries."

With this in mind, it is crucial to optimize the didactic coordination and alignment of English classes at the intersection of school types. In addition, it may be that pupils benefit in the long run from more implicit language lessons in primary school.

"We see a high need for research to elaborate factors for successful language education, and we recommend well-coordinated, evidence-based measures in [educational policy](#) overall," say the researchers.

More information: Nils Jaekel et al, The impact of early foreign language learning on language proficiency development from middle to high school, *System* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.system.2022.102763](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2022.102763)

Provided by Ruhr-Universitaet-Bochum

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