

## **“Beyond age effects – Facets, facts and factors of foreign language instruction in Switzerland”**

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### **SUMMARY OF RESEARCH PROJECT**

In recent years, numerous educational authorities in European countries, including Switzerland, have brought forward the starting age of language instruction in elementary schools, which has resulted in so-called “Early English” and “Early French” programs. In most cases, the decision to introduce early foreign language programs was based on the assumption that age of the onset of instruction was the most important and robust predictor of success in foreign language learning in an instructional setting. However, research findings from instructional settings have consistently shown that the “earlier = better” trend discernible in respect of the acquisition of additional languages in naturalistic settings is nowhere to be found in respect of the learning of languages by children, adolescents and young adults at school (e.g. García-Lecumberri & Gallardo, 2003; Larson-Hall, 2008; Montrul, 2008; Moyer, 2004, 2013; Muñoz, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2011; Singleton, 1995, 2005; Singleton & Kinsella, 2014; for recent reviews see Muñoz & Singleton, 2011; Singleton & Ryan, 2004; Singleton & Skrzypek, 2014). Thus, in light of their rather unimpressive impact, early foreign language programs are currently under scrutiny in many countries, and the question has arisen as to how an earlier age of onset can be exploited more effectively.

This study is the first and only longitudinal study in Switzerland that systematically and empirically analyzes unexplored issues regarding the amount and type of English input needed for early starters to surpass late starters and be able to retain their learning advantage in the long term. The main aim of the project is to focus on the interaction of age with non-maturational factors, such as situation of learning (e.g. type of instruction, extracurricular use of English), motivation, learner styles and the role of additional languages, making use of the most advanced techniques and statistical methods in quantitative and qualitative approaches to the age factor (mixed-effects modeling and the mixed methods approach, see Baayen et al., 2008; Jaeger, 2008; Pfenninger and Singleton in prep. a; Quené and van den Bergh, 2008). Using cross-sectional data from over 400 Swiss learners of English as well as longitudinal data from the same student cohort between 2009 and 2014 (200 Swiss learners) makes it possible to examine in real time and in a thorough and detailed manner the relationships among (1) onset variables, (2) the full array of learners’ experience, contexts, attitudes and orientations and (3) ultimate school achievement at the end of the period of normal schooling in Switzerland<sup>1</sup>, measured in terms of written and spoken fluency, complexity, morphosyntactic accuracy and receptive and productive vocabulary (in English and in Standard German), as well as listening skills, motivation and learning strategies.

So far the results have shown that, where success is concerned, this does not relate for the most part to age of onset or length of the exposure to the target language (see Pfenninger and Singleton in prep. b). 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. For instance, results suggest that within six months of English instruction in secondary school (“Gymnasium”), late starters catch up with early starters as far as the accurate production of English and grammaticality judgments in English morphosyntax are concerned (see Pfenninger 2011, 2013a, 2013b). While there are some modest effects for an early starting age at the first measurement, e.g., with regard to L4 fluency and code-switching (see Pfenninger 2014), there are no statistical differences between the groups when input levels become very high (i.e. at the end of secondary school). This result can be attributed to a variety of factors. A close analysis of the interplay of a range of variables (including age of onset) shows that effects of instruction (e.g. immersion instruction, see Pfenninger 2014), general literacy skills (Pfenninger 2014), and affective variables (e.g. motivation, see Pfenninger 2012) are much stronger than age effects for a range of productive and receptive skills. Age does seem to matter in language learning, but only in the best-case scenario, i.e. when it is associated with enough significant exposure, and when students with high motivation and a good foundation in their language of literacy (Standard German) receive a combination of explicit English instruction and communicative exposure.

The simple and stark lesson that we learn from this research is this: starting a program of foreign language instruction in the early years of a child’s schooling experience can never absolve us from paying very close attention indeed to optimizing the circumstances under which teaching is delivered and learning is promoted in such a program. If circumstances in which the program proceeds are unfavorable, the age factor,

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., at the end of academically oriented high schools (“Gymnasium”).

whatever its nature may be, will not rescue the situation, whose outcome may range from the unimpressive to the disastrous (see Singleton & Skrzypek 2014: 6). Clearly, for educators, teachers and policy-makers, as well as for theorists, it is of compelling interest to know more about the end state of foreign language instruction, since such research has important implications for multilingual education when making decisions about (1) early instruction of different languages in elementary school and (2) later instruction through different languages in secondary school.

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