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Early Language Learning in Europe Facts & Figures and FAQs

Early Language Learning in Europe at a glance

- Belgique/België/Belgien: The French Community of Belgium places a strong emphasis on immersive learning in the école maternelle. The Flemish community offers French on a voluntary basis. French is compulsory in the pre-primary school section within the German community.
- България : Since 2001, foreign language learning has been compulsory from age 8 in Bulgaria.
- Česká republika: Since 2007/08, schools in the Czech Republic have been allowed to introduce a foreign language as a compulsory subject in the first year of primary education (for those aged 6) provided that the pupils and their parents agree.
- Danmark: English is compulsory in Denmark from levels 3 to 9.
- Deutschland: In Germany, a broad range of kindergartens have set up foreign language learning, accompanied by many private initiatives. At school, foreign language learning starts in Grades 1, 2 or 3, according to each land's legislation.
- Eesti: Some kindergartens in Estonia seem to be offering foreign language learning from age 5. Two foreign languages are compulsory in basic education, ranging from grades 1 to 9 (English, Russian, German or French).
- Éire/Ireland: In Ireland, Irish and English are taught at kindergarten level, accompanied by modern languages in primary school initiative.
- Ελλάδα: In 2005/2006, Greece introduced English as a compulsory subject from age 8.
- España: In Spain, schools have the possibility to organise a first initiation to a foreign language in the last year of "Educación infantil". One foreign language is compulsory in all cycles of primary education.
- France: France promotes early language learning at kindergarten level, offering the opportunity to learn either a foreign or sometimes a regional language. Since 2005, foreign language learning is compulsory at the école primaire from CE1 level.
- Italia: The teaching of a foreign language (mainly English) has been introduced from the first year of primary education. Primary schools can also

offer a second foreign language as an option.

- K nros/Kıbrıs: In Cyprus, English is the only foreign language taught at primary level.
- Latvija: Latvia set up a pilot project to introduce English at kindergarten level. At primary level more than half of the children study a foreign language.
- Lietuva: Lithuania incorporates experiments in early language learning in kindergarten education. Since 2008, all schools have been expected to offer early language learning.
- Luxembourg/Luxemburg: Luxembourg enables, for example, Portuguese-speaking pupils to attend language integrated classes in pre-primary and primary education. German is a compulsory subject from Grade 1 and French from the second half of Grade 2.
- Magyarország: In accordance with the flexibility granted to them, many schools in Hungary oblige their pupils to learn a foreign language prior to the stage at which this becomes compulsory for all pupils.
- Malta: Malta carries out education at kindergarten level in Maltese, although some private institutions offer English. At primary level, English is compulsory from age 5.
- Nederland: The Netherlands promote the learning of Frisian at kindergarten level. English is compulsory from age 10 but schools are free to introduce foreign language learning earlier on their own initiative.
-  sterreich: Austria's kindergartens offer English and, in certain regions, English and languages such as French, Turkish and Czech. Since 2003/2004, modern foreign languages are a compulsory subject from year one of Volksschule.
- Polska: In Poland, foreign language activities are offered in kindergarten which are, however, paid by parents.
- Portugal: Portugal set up several projects to introduce a foreign language, especially English in primary education.
- Rom nia: In Romania, there is foreign language teaching available at kindergarten level as an optional subject. At school, it is optional to learn a foreign language at grade 1 and 2, whereas it is compulsory from grade 3.
- Slovenija: In Slovenia foreign language learning is offered in kindergartens on a voluntary basis. One foreign language is compulsory at primary level.
- Slovensko: In Slovakia foreign language learning is offered in kindergartens on a voluntary basis. One foreign language is compulsory at primary level.
- Suomi/Finland: Finland offers pre-school education (not compulsory) in Finnish, Swedish, Sami, Roma and sign language. At primary level, all pupils study two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue, one of which must be the second national language (Finish or Swedish).
- Sverige: Sweden wants to support children with a mother tongue other than Swedish.. In 2007 and 2003, the education authorities did not specify the age at which all pupils had to learn a foreign language as a compulsory subject. In 2007, pupils could begin learning a foreign language as a compulsory subject between the ages of 7 and 10.
- United Kingdom: The United Kingdom plans to offer every pupil from 7 to 11 the opportunity to study foreign languages. Scotland introduced Gaelic in some pre-school centres, whereas foreign language learning is available in almost all the primary schools.

Q & A Early Language Learning Campaign

Why is early foreign-language acquisition so important? Is it really a case of “the earlier, the better”?

It is important to take advantage of small children’s full potential. Acquiring foreign languages can have a very positive effect. The new sound patterns train their conscious listening, which also helps children learn to pay more attention to their own language. This prepares them very well for the listening that they’ll have to do in school later.

The social aspects of early foreign-language learning are also interesting. Children recognize the significance of sounds, grammar, words, and sentences, but they also develop the ability to adapt themselves to things that are culturally unfamiliar.

What’s the best way to bring parents on board when it comes to early language acquisition?

It is not really necessary to convince the parents that English should be offered in kindergarten or preschool. It is much more difficult to try to make them open to other languages.

Furthermore, attention can’t only be paid to the middle class. Marginal groups and people from linguistic minorities, e.g. in cities, also need to be addressed.

It is also very important to involve the parents. Some possible approaches might be the inclusion of language courses for the parents while their five year olds play, for example, Bambini soccer, “Mommy’s learning, too” programmes in elementary schools, and mentoring activities that feature young entrepreneurs from expatriate backgrounds who are regarded as role models. Teachers - including those from preschools - who know one of the languages used in the local expatriate and immigrant community, should also be involved.

Talking about English, will this strategy actually not merely promote an even increased use of the English language, to the detriment of other EU languages?

Increased teaching of English is a general development in all parts of the educational system all over Europe. What is unfortunate is that in many cases it is even displacing those languages that had been taught traditionally in the given country or region.

Promoting the teaching and learning of other languages than English, as those of neighbouring countries in border regions, for instance, can further multilingualism. On the other hand, we can suggest to the parents and the authorities to take advantage of the greater liberty at preschool level in order to try unusual formulas and languages. There are, for example, German-Turkish kindergartens in German cities of German-Slovak kindergartens in Austrian border regions with Slovakia.

Aren't there fears and misgivings about placing excessive demands on the children?

The idea that excessive demand is being placed on the children really doesn't hold much water, especially if we're only talking about 45 minutes or so per week. Even in bilingual kindergartens, where, for example, the French teacher uses the "other" language - French in this case - in everyday life and occasionally reads the kids a story, the question of "excessive demands" can hardly enter the debate. Pressure only comes into the picture when specific results in a short timeframe are stipulated as official learning targets, when a child experiences fear due to stern treatment, or when the parents set overly ambitious goals for their children.

May early language learning harm the development of the mother tongue?

Some interference may occur, but it is quite temporary. After the age of 36 months early language learning is not reported to have caused any real problems to mother tongue learning and use. In the contrary, the awareness of the sound and rhythm of languages is strengthened, and if the child learns to write the foreign language, there tends to be a natural comparison between the two writing systems. And if one views the ability to compare things as a higher-level thought process, this is certainly trained. It is always important to be able to differentiate between superficially similar systems. The children are happy, they cooperate, and they attempt to communicate, which is the performance to be desired and expected in accordance with the curricula at this level.

May early language learning harmful for the formation of identity?

Children do not know that diversity exists and so they do not see it as such, or merely observes it in other children without experiencing it.

By learning two languages, by learning to think in two languages, children live and experience plurality, they are no longer prisoner of a monolithic identity. One of the most frequent critics about early language learning concerns the risk of creating rootless persons; in fact, it produces persons who have roots as all others, but who know that their roots are not the only possible roots, that there are as many roots as there are persons.

Does learning a foreign language at an early age also improve cognitive abilities?

The formulation is actually correct in some ways. Another language is a challenge; another language is fascinating; the materials are nice to work through. If a visitor or a kindergarten group comes from a neighbouring land, the hosts' curiosity is piqued and they want to understand their guests. There is research showing that early language learning may even improve non-verbal cognitive abilities like mathematics.

Do children who learn a foreign language at a very young age have an easier time learning additional languages?

It is easy for them if they've remained motivated through good instruction and

teachers who put them in stimulating situations where they see how the language is actually needed.

What is the role of the training the preschool and schoolteachers receive? How can it be improved?

Teachers at both levels need more knowledge and insight about language-learning processes, as well as about ways to facilitate them and methods for assessment of the effect of their efforts. It has to become easier for working teachers to do a short practical training programme or to sit in on classes at schools abroad.

What are the special challenges, including those related to the children's background? How can the multilingualism be promoted among expatriate children?

Most children of expatriates are actually already multilingual. It is of primary importance to bring both parents into the picture and that they come to understand the local school system and the values it seeks to promote. Older siblings could also be drawn in more frequently, and perhaps individual schools could set up bonus programmes to stimulate them to take part in the process.

What will happen if the children do not continue learning later on in school or if they learn a different foreign language in school? Will the efforts to start learning languages in preschool age have been useless?

The problem of continuity exists in any case, even if the children start to learn English in the kindergarten and then continue with the same language at school.

It is less serious if the first priority of early language learning is not only the acquisition of practical skills of command of a certain language, but more general. As the Action Plan 2004-20065 of the Commission puts it: "Language learning in kindergarten and primary school is effective, for it is here that key attitudes towards other languages and cultures are formed and foundations for later language learning are laid.

Even if there is less place for languages in the subsequent levels of education, early language learning will open the minds of the children and even take away the fear to learn languages considered as very difficult.

It is very well to promote early language learning and bi- or multilingual kindergartens, but in many countries no structures or support for parents exist for this purpose, or they are not always affordable for all families. What is the Commission doing to improve this?

There is a general trend all over Europe to lower the age when children start to learn foreign languages. But, of course, there are still big differences from one country to another. The competence of the Commission in this field is very limited; the Member States are the main agents responsible for reaching the goals established in Barcelona. What the Commission can do and actually does is to prioritise the issue, to

raise awareness, to support the efforts in the Member States and to create synergies.

The Commission also supports early language learning projects through its Lifelong Learning Programme.

Posted by: Editorial team