

The Cognitive Impact of Early Foreign Language Learning. The Case of an Experimental School

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a longitudinal research that took place in Thessaloniki during 2010-11 and 2011-12, in two primary schools: the 3rd experimental school and the 2nd school (control), both located in the western part of the city. The experimental school introduces English as a FL (EFL) from Grade 1 and follows an intensive programme as English is taught for five hours per week. The control school introduces EFL in Grade 3.

The reported results are part of a larger research that explored the cognitive impact of Early Foreign Language Learning (EFLL) in an instructed context, in an attempt to explain individual differences in the acquisition of L2 English vocabulary. The informants were tested twice: before the experimental group had any exposure to EFL (i.e. at the beginning of Grade 1) and at the end of Grade 2, i.e. after the two-year EFL schooling of the experimental group.

Foreign language aptitude research on very young learners [1, 2] suggests that children's cognitive skills, i.e. memory (e.g. associative memory, recoding ability) as well as analytic skills (e.g. inductive reasoning, visual perception), which are already established at the age of 6/7, relate closely to learners' FL learning (FLL) success.

The study examines whether EFLL has a beneficial effect and can further enhance any of these non-verbal skills. Also, seen from an Information Processing perspective it explores whether, apart from Phonological Short-Term Memory that is very often indicated in the relevant bibliography [3-8], there is another variable (e.g. complex Working Memory (WM)) that can predict FL vocabulary acquisition at this early stage of FLL.

The research findings indicate that EFLL boosts certain cognitive skills and that the attention controller (i.e. the central executive) of WM is implicated in FL comprehension and production.

References

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