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Early and Late Language Start at Private Schools in Turkey*

Saban CEPIK[a]
Zirve University

Hedayat SARANDI
Zirve University

Abstract

This study examines the interaction effect of age in L2 attainment. It explores whether success in foreign language learning at early childhood grades varies depending on age. It also addresses the beliefs of foreign language teachers regarding the variables under review. Eighty-three 11 year-old language learners who started learning English at different ages were placed into two groups. The initial exposure of the early starters was 5-6 and of the late starters, 9-10. A set of language proficiency tests covering all four-language skills were given to the participants to determine the possible differences in the proficiency of the two groups. Also, qualitative data was collected from 6 teachers through a questionnaire that aimed to elicit their beliefs regarding the effect of age on L2 attainment. The findings showed that the early starters did not perform significantly better than the late starters in any of measures. The teachers, however, indicted that the early language learners had more positive attitude towards English compared to the late starters. Findings underscore that language attainment may involve a lot of variables and that early age may not take account of the whole issue.

Key Words

Early Childhood Language Instruction, Age Period, Length of Instruction, Early Starters, Late Starters.

The issue regarding the relationship between age and language learning has both theoretical and practical value. On theoretical ground, it relates to one of the key issues in language acquisition: whether there is a difference between adult and child language acquisition or if Universal Grammar (UG) is still functional for adult second language learners (Mayo & Lecumberri, 2003). Questions like these are of the utmost importance for the researcher of SLA (Long, 2007). On the practical side, however, the age-related issue involves the key decision of when to introduce second language into the classroom settings (Mayo & Lecumberri, 2003), and whether or not it is possible to attain native-like proficiency after a certain age. Such questions fall into the interest range of a large number of people including language planner, language teachers, parents and language learners themselves. The issue has gained an added importance in Turkey owing to Turkey's relatively unsuccessful history of English language teaching. Koru and Akessson (2011), for example, in a study conducted by TEPAV (Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey) reported the results of the English Proficiency Index in which Turkey ranks 43 among 44 countries. The researchers argued that the so-

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a **Saban CEPIK, Ph.D.,** is an assistant professor and director of the English Preparatory School and Chair of the English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) department at Zirve University in Gaziantep/Turkey. Dr. Cepik's research interests include teaching methodology, comparative study in language learning and teaching, pedagogical beliefs of language teachers, curricula frameworks in language teaching at schools and in higher education: Correspondence: Assist. Prof. Saban CEPİK, Zirve University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language Teaching, Kızılhisar Campus 27260 Gaziantep/Turkey. E-mail: saban.cepik@zirve.edu.tr Tel: +90 342 211 6830/6952.

called late introduction of English into language classes is one of the main reasons, among others, for the lack of success in language learning in Turkey. The present research study aims to explore this issue hoping that its findings may cast light on the long-running argument regarding the relationship between age and language learning.

The Earlier, the Better?

The idea that an early introduction of a second language leads to a higher level of language proficiency appears to be accepted around the world (Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian, 2000). It is assumed that an early start of second language learning provides the time that learners need for the daunting task of learning a second language. Furthermore, early starters are arguably endowed with the ability to "sponge" the new language and become more proficient (Cenoz, 2003; Heighington, 1996). In fact as Torras, Tragant, and García (1997, p. 142) put it, "The younger they are, the more they are like sponges, the more they absorb, the more they retain."

Theoretically, the idea of the supremacy of young learners over late learners is fueled by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). Originally proposed for the first language, CPH claims that there is a certain time restriction outside which the learning of a new language becomes difficult, if not impossible. It is argued that the facility for the initial unconscious acquisition of a certain language through exposure disappears after puberty and that learning a foreign language becomes more of a conscious and effortful endeavor afterwards that does not bring the same results (Lennenberg, 1967). One reason for this is the maturation changes, such as lateralization and plasticity-loss, that brain goes through which in turn affects the processing of a new language. In lateralization, different hemispheres of the brain take up separate responsibilities, allocating language-related activities to the left hemisphere. In terms of plasticity, a process called myelination is reduced resulting in the hardening of neural cords and the transportation of neural impulses (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000).

Maturational factors are only one of the reasons that accounts for the superior performance of young language learners. Gass and Selinker (2008) offer social, psychological, cognitive and neurological reasons to account for why adults are not as good as children in language learning. In terms of social and psychological factors, adults' willingness to adhere to their identity and ego may prevent them from picking up a new accent and approaching native-like mastery of the target language. Furthermore, adults have more developed cognitive skills compared to children, and use analytical approaches to learning a second language, which are less productive compared to children who rely more on their language acquisition devices and implicit learning. Finally, compared to adults, children have access to more modified language, which results in a better language input. Other reasons are offered for the low performance of adults. Herschensohn (2008) attributes the difficulty of learning a second language to the learners' L1. She argues that it is the perfection of the L1 language system that somehow prevents the older learners accessing the internal language learning mechanism. Bridsong (1999) considers the loss of UG after puberty, and changes in memory capacity (and processing) as two reasons, among others, for the poor performance of adults in terms of learning a second language.

The bulk of studies appear to show that in the ESL context younger learners are better than older ones, when considering the ultimate proficiency attainment. This is mainly so for phonology although there is evidence for the success of young leaners in other language areas as well (Gass & Selinker, 2008). In pronunciation, for example, several studies show that the age at which second language learning started has a great bearing on the foreign accent (Yeni-Komshian, Feldge, & Liu, 2000; Yeni-Komshian Robbin, & Flege 2001). Tahta, Wood, and Loewenthal (1981) found that the ability of American children to imitate Armenian and French intonational pattern reduced significantly after the age of 8. Moyer (1999) found that German adult students, despite ample exposure to English both in and out of classroom and having high motivation, failed to attain a native-like accent (see Gass & Selinker).

Similar findings were reported for syntax. Patkowski (1980) found that out of 33 people who started learning a second language before the age of 14, all except one achieved native or near-native mastery of syntax whereas the majority of the people who started their second language after 14 remain at a comparatively lower proficiency level. Likewise, Johnson and Newport's study (1989) examined the syntactic knowledge of a group of Chinese and Japanese immigrants who arrived at the US at different times and found that those who arrived earlier achieved native-like mastery in grammatical tests, whereas late arrivals varied widely in this regard.

Voices of Concern!

While CPH is mainly accepted in first language acquisition, its existence and role in L2 is still debated. For one thing, it is argued that the decline in the acquisition of different language areas through age is not as abrupt as predicted by CPH. In fact it is rather gradual. This has caused some to use the term "sensitive" period rather than critical (see Long 1990, for example). Second, puberty may not be the right borderline as some language areas may start to deteriorate earlier. Foreign accent, for example, may start to reveal itself at any time after the age of 6 (Yeni-Komshian et. al., 2000; Yeni-Komshian et. al., 2001). There are others who argue that CPH fails to take full account of the issue. Singleton and Ryan (2004, p. 18), for example, raises the point that age-related decline in learning ability may be the result of multiple factors, and that to attribute it solely to maturation and neurobiological phenomena as theorized by CPH is not justified by the latest data. He concludes, "The idea of a critical period for language development may well have had its day."

Perhaps the most severe criticism against CPH comes from the records of successful adult language learners. Some researchers, drawing upon studies whose findings revealed variations in the performance of late language learners, show that at least some of the late language learners managed to reach a native or native-like proficiency level. They argue that if CPH holds true, then all late learners should perform at a level lower than that of both young learners and native speakers (Marinova-Todd, 2003). The results of research show, however, that this is not necessarily the case. Marinova-Todd reports a surprising study by Birdsong (1992), where some late-learner near-native speakers performed better than native speakers. There are other studies that show that native-like proficiency, at least for some adults, is possible (see Juff & Harrington, 1995; White & Genesee, 1996 in syntax; Bongarets, 1999 in pronunciation).

Another issue is that if the argument in favor of CPH is valid in terms of final achievement, it is not so in terms of the speed of acquisition. In fact, with regard to the rate of acquisition, the opposite holds true, and adults become better (faster) language learners, though young learners usually catch up with them in the long run (Snow & Hoefnagle-Hohle, 1978). There are of course other fallacies regarding the inefficiency of adult language learners. Marinova-Todd et al. (2000, p. 27), for example, argue that children learning a second language go through a similarly effortful endeavor as adults. They also argue that it is premature to attribute the differences in language proficiency between adults and children to neurobiological factors such as lateralization and plasticity. Scovel (2000), voiced similar concerns, making the point that biological explanations such as lateralization can only account for the speech differences between adults and children, as speech has neuro-motor etiology that can be affected by the loss of plasticity. However, it is not yet clear how lack of plasticity in adults may result in poor morphosyntactic knowledge. Furthermore, the researchers also contended that the relatively lower achievement of adults compared to children may not be due to CPH but to factors such as lack of motivation, commitment and lack of support from the context in which the new language is learned (Marinova-Todd et al.).

Several studies' findings cast doubts on the assumption that late starters are not good language learners. White and Genesee (1996) found that some French adult English-language learners were able to perform at a level not different from native speakers on certain language structures that tap UG access. The researcher concluded that even older language learners can achieve native-like competency, and that access to UG is not reduced through age, which they consider as evidence against CPH. Bialystock (1997) examined two studies that looked at the acquisition of French gender marking and the acquisition of English syntax by non-native speakers, and found that it was the length of residence, not the age of arrival, that accounted for the success of second language learners leading the researcher to argue against the role of maturational factors. Slavoff and Johnson (1995) showed that the idea of early starters eventually overtaking late starters is not necessarily true. In their study, they compared the grammatical performances of young language learners who arrived at the US at different ages (7-12) and found no meaningful differences between early and late starter. Even at the level of pronunciation, the findings of several studies show that some language learners who started their education late can attain native-like pronunciation (see for example cited in Bongaerts, 1997; Bongaerts, Mennen, & Van der Slik, 2000; Marinova-Todd, 2003; Palmen, Bongaerts, & Schils, 1997).

What these studies show is that late starters are not necessarily doomed to failure. Overall, while the bulk of the studies show that early starters are generally more successful, some variation in the performance of adult language learners is also observed.

Such variations, while casting doubts on the strong version of CPH (Nikolov & Mihaljevic-Djigunoic, 2006), do not refute it completely. The key question is perhaps not whether or not age differences exist, but what could be the source of the discrepancy between early and late language learning (Scovel, 2000). A lot of non-maturational factors could work alongside the biological ones affecting the learning abilities of language learners as they grow up Nikolov & Mihaljevic-Djigunoic (2006).

EFL vs. ESL Settings

One of the important features of the studies that have examined the relationship between age and language learning is that they are mainly conducted in ESL settings. The findings of these studies are later extrapolated to the EFL environment though these two settings have striking differences (Muñoz, 2008, 2010). Muñoz (2008), for example, criticizes the hasty generalization of studies carried out in naturalistic learning contexts to formal learning contexts since each learning context has its own unique features. The two contexts are different on several grounds including quality and quantity of the input that students receive, the objective of language classes, and the proficiency level of language teachers (see Muñoz, 2008, 2010; Nikolov & Mihaljevic-Djigunoic, 2006).

Several studies that compared late and early starters of English in EFL setting in Spain found that in a great number of language measures older learners outperformed the younger ones (Cenoz, 2003; Lecumberri & Gallardo, 2003; Mayo, 2003; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2003; Muñoz, 2003). Cenoz, for example, compared the performance of three groups of language learners on different language proficiency tests (oral production, writing, cloze test, reading) and found that overall the general trend observed after 600 hours of exposure was that the oldest group (fifth year of secondary school, age 16 years) presents the highest level of proficiency in English followed by the intermediate group (second year of secondary school, age 12). Of all three groups, the lowest scores correspond to the youngest group (fifth year of primary school, age 10).

García Mayo (2003) examined Basque/Spanish language learners learning English as a foreign language to find out if the length of exposure to English has any effect on their performance in grammaticality judgment tests (GJT) and metalinguistic awareness test. The findings showed that the length of exposure resulted in the better performance of the participants in the grammaticality judgment test. Moreover, once the length of exposure held constant, it was the older learners who significantly outperformed the younger group both on GJT and metalinguistic tests. The researcher interpreted the findings as evidence that early language introduction is effective only when instruction hours are used in an efficient way.

Lasagabaster and Doiz (2003) explored whether the written proficiency of Spanish students who were learning English was related to their age. The results showed that the writing scores of the participants increased with their age group. Of three different age groups, the oldest group outperformed the other two groups and the youngest group was significantly outperformed by both of the older learners' groups, leading the researchers to suggest that cognitive development had a positive impact on the writing performance of language learners.

Muñoz (2003) compared early and late starter Catalan-speaking Spanish students who were learning English, in terms of listening comprehension performance and the comprehension and production parts of oral interviews at two different times. The results show that the older group statistically outperformed the younger one on both productive and receptive measures of the interview but not in the listening comprehension tests. The research attributed the significant performance of older learners in the interview to the active role and successful negotiation that they used during the interview, while such an interactive role may not have been possible in the listening comprehension where their role was more of input recipients.

There are also some studies that examined the effects of both age and length of instruction on the performance of language learners in EFL settings. Oller and Nagata (1974), at several stages, explored the performance of Japanese students who were exposed to English for different lengths of time, using a cloze test. In their study, students in three different grades were mixed. There were students who had received early exposure to English and students who had not been. Their findings showed that the difference between the early and late starters, though significant at initial stages, became insignificant in the upper levels.

Similar findings were reported in Burstall, Jamieson, Cohen, and Hargreaves (1974). In their study English students learning French had different experiences in terms of prior exposure to the target language. While some of them had received primary school instruction in French, others had not.

The results showed that the superior performance of students with prior French knowledge diminished through time in all measures except for the test of listening. Similar to Oller and Nagata (1974) these findings suggest that the advantage that early language learners enjoy at the beginning of language instruction may not last long.

A different result, however, emerged from a study conducted recently. Domínguez and Pessoa (2005) compared 32 English native speakers studying Spanish in the sixth grade. 27 of these students had been receiving Spanish lessons since they were in Kindergarten and 5 others had only been learning Spanish for a year when the study was conducted. The results showed that except for reading tasks, the earlier starters outperformed the late starters in oral communication (listening and speaking) as well as writing. The early starters also proved to be more confident in using Spanish compared to the late starters. The researchers interpreted the findings as a sign of the potential advantages of an early start.

Overall, the bulk of the studies show that when the length of instruction is constant, the late starters are at an advantage. Not many studies, however, examined the effect of different amount of instruction for the students who were in the same age group, and the results gained from these studies were inconclusive. While Burstall et al. (1974) and Oller and Nagata (1974) found that the earlier positive effect of longer instruction disappears through time, Domínguez and Pessoa's (2005) findings contradicted this. Further studies may cast light in this issue. Indeed, this is the objective of the present study.

It is also noteworthy that the recent history of English as a foreign language in Turkey began with the Foreign Language Education and Teaching Act of 1983 and the Primary Education Act of 1997, which paved the way for radical changes in ELT curriculum in Turkey. With respect to the foreign language education in Turkey, the most significant innovation brought by the above-mentioned laws was the integration of foreign language education into the national curriculum starting from the 6th grade. The starting age was subsequently further reduced to as low as the 4th grade, the aim being to continually adjust and standardize English language teaching in line with the norms of the EU, later the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Ever since, English as a foreign language has been introduced in grade four in primary schools run by the state though some private schools may start it earlier.

Method

Research Questions

In the lights of the issues raised above, the present study was conducted to find answers to the following research questions

1. Do early starters perform better than late starters in different measures of language proficiency in EFL context of Turkey?

The study also intends to triangulate the findings of the research question mentioned above with the insights and opinions of language teachers about different types of language learners. More specifically, it intends to find the answer to the following second research question.

2. What is the perception of language teachers regarding the early and late starter students? Which groups of learners do language teachers perceive as successful?

Research Model

Quantitative and qualitative research models were used to collect data. Quantitative data were collected using quasi-experimental method where language learners with different amount of exposure to English language were selected from intact groups and their language proficiency was measured. In this sense, the length of instruction was independent variable and the proficiency level of language learners was dependent variable. Qualitative data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire through which teachers' opinions about the success of language learners with different starting age for a foreign language were elicited.

Context and Participants

The participants of the study were 83 male and female sixth grade students at a private elementary school in Gaziantep, Turkey. The ages of the students at the time of testing were 11 and 12. The study was carried out at the end of the first semester, academic year 2011-2012. Two groups of the students were selected according to the age at which they started to learn the English. The first group represented the early beginners who had started learning English in the first grade and in kindergarten, and the second group represented the late beginners who had started to learn English language when they were in the fourth grade. The two groups were later mixed and both the late and early starters received two years of English lan-

guage instruction until they reached grade 6. The English instruction hours at school were 6 hours till the fourth grade and 7 hours for the fifth grade and above per week. The age and estimated amount of instruction of the two different age groups was shown in the Table 1 below. All the participants were Turkish and started to learn English in Turkey. The data of those students who received foreign language instruction outside the school were excluded from the data analysis.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the Students Participating in the Study

	Age of first exposure	Age at the time of testing	Estimated amount of instruction
Early age group	5-6 years old	11-12yrs old	992 hrs
Late age group	9-10 years old	11-12 yrs old	406 hrs

Six language teachers who had the experience of teaching the late and early starters in the same school were also selected to respond to a questionnaire aiming to elicit the teachers view over the effectiveness of instruction and early language learning.

Data Collection

The data was collected in two different ways; first, a questionnaire sent to 6 English language teachers of the school, second, a full language test given to the students. The interview posed the following questions:

1. Are there any differences between the students who have had previous experience of learning English and those who were exposed to English in 4th grades (the late starters)? If yes, in which language areas are the differences more noticeable? Do the differences create any problems in terms of teaching? How do you usually deal with these problems?
2. Does the difference between these students carry over to the next levels (later classes)? If yes, how is the existing proficiency gap filled, if at all?

Peer debriefing, avoiding researcher's bias and negative case analysis were used to take care of the validity issues of the qualitative data. First, different stages of data collection and analyses were monitored by two researchers who had a considerable experience in qualitative research. Second, since the data for this part was collected on-line where the researchers had no direct contact with the teachers, it is believed that teachers could not be affected by the possible bias of researchers. Third, before drawing any conclusion in either direction, the data was meticulously monitored for the counter evidence.

The second data was collected from a series of tests administered to the students to measure their language proficiency in all skills; first, they took a computer-based test that consisted of a cloze test, vocabulary, and reading tests. This was followed by a writing test and speaking test. The computer-based test was taken from a web 2.0-based program called 7/24 for teaching and testing language learners on line. A selection of elementary and pre-intermediate level test material was made to suit the level of the participants. The program included different sections mainly taping the students' vocabulary, grammar and reading knowledge. The cloze test included some multiple-choice grammar questions, some gap-filling questions (asking prepositions, adjectives, and auxiliary verbs), picture-vocabulary matching (asking professions) and daily conversations (asking hobbies, ages, families, and parents' profession). The vocabulary part included questions about colors, animals and some daily life activities. The reading part consisted of two short passages of beginning level followed by some comprehension questions.

In the writing test, students were asked to write an imaginary story to a family in England where they were supposedly going to stay for a summer vacation, explaining about themselves, their daily life, their hobbies, their interest etc. The task was completed in a classroom with no time limit allotted. Two assessors graded each writing, and an average grade was taken as the final score. To ensure the reliability of the scores, a holistic approach suggested by Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey (1981) was applied to grade students writing. Scales were used to measure different aspects of writing including content/ organization/ vocabulary/ language usage and mechanics. Following Lasagabaster and Doiz (2003), these criteria carried the weight of 30, 20, 20, 25, 5 points respectively culminating to a total score of 100. In cases where more than 25 points discrepancy between scores were observed a third assessor graded the paper. In this case, the grade of the assessor who showed the highest variance was removed and the average of two closest grades was calculated to represent the score of the participants. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the final judgments of the raters was 0.80 (p= 0.000).

In the speaking test, pupils were asked to answer several questions to elicit mainly the use of simple present tense. The last question addressed the use of simple past tense. These questions included "what is your name? where are you from? where do you live? how many people are there in your family? what does your father do? what are your hobbies? what do you do in your free time? what did you do last weekend? The performance of the participants was graded based on fluency, communication, accuracy, and vocabulary choice. Similar to writing test, to guarantee reliability, two independent graders assessed the oral performance and an average grade was calculated. A similar process to writing was applied for the speaking once a 25 percent of discrepancy was observed between the scores. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the final judgments of the raters was 0.85 (p= 0.000).

Results

Results of Interview with the school Language Teachers

The first item of questionnaire read as

1. Are there any differences between the students who have had previous experience of learning English and those who were exposed to English in 4th grades (the late starters)? If yes, in which language areas are the differences more noticeable? Does the difference create any problems in terms of teaching? How do you usually deal with it?

In terms of language teachers' perception, the majority of language teachers believed that early language learners performed better in language classes. However, 5 out of 6 teachers mentioned that the superior performance of early starters were in oral communication, mainly pronunciation. Some also mentioned that earlier starters were better in terms of vocabulary. However, only two teachers out of 6 mentioned, surprisingly, that late starters were better at grammar and cognitively demanding tasks and that they were very eager at language learning. Also, all of them agreed that the early starters have the self-confidence to express themselves easily. For example, one of the language teachers wrote:

> *I have experience working with second and fourth grade students. I think early starters are better than late starters. They are more interested in new languages. As a child, they want to learn everything. There are some differences between early learners and late learners in terms of their language skills. For example; early learners are better at listening and speaking. Their pronunciation is much better than late learners. They can pronounce the words better. Most of them acquire the language because they cannot write and read properly. They memorize what they hear. Their brains are like an empty disc. They like repetition. On the other hand, late learners are better at grammar. Because they start to learn a new language after they learn their mother tongues' grammatical rules. Knowing grammatical rules makes their job easier. They don't want to speak in English because they are afraid of making mistakes, but early learners say what they want. They are not afraid of making mistakes.*

The interview data suggested that the teachers consistently argued that "the level system" through which students are assigned to their appropriate levels should be applied, so as not to face the expected and predicted problems in the language classes in the schools. Here, two teachers comment on the differences between the two groups of the students and mention how they deal with the problems;

> *'The students who start learning English from the 1st grade use English better than those who start later. They practice English more actively and willingly. They have confidence and their pronunciation is better. But those who start learning English at 4th grade are more enthusiastic and dynamic. They are curious and have pleasure to use English. And, of course, these differences create problems. But we deal with them by putting students into different level and teaching them according to their knowledge.'*

The second question asked how persistent the differences between students' proficiency levels were. It read:

2. Does the difference between these students carry over to the next levels (later classes)? If yes, how is the existing proficiency gap filled, if at all?

Generally teachers believe that the gap can be filled if the students are well motivated and supported by their teachers. But the most significant thing is to group the students according to their level. Another language teacher expressed his ideas as follows:

> *As long as the English teacher who is in charge of the new learners of English can manage to motivate these students, the*

gap between the old comers and the new comers close approximately in one educational year. But this may happen if the setting system is applied. If there is no setting system and the students are mixed in one class, then the new comers need to be given extra courses to fill the gap.

Some teachers say that it is inevitable to experience the problem at the later classes, but teacher support may minimize the problem. Here is how an experienced teacher commented with this regard:

As far as I have experienced during my teaching life, students who have problem in the early years of learning English carry over all these problems to their further learning. But if the teacher gives more exposure to the late starters, they may solve the problem.

Results of Proficiency Language Tests

Below are the descriptive statistics collected for the different groups of the students in different language measures.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistic of Late Early Starters in Different Language Proficiency Tests

Speaking			
Groups	N	Mean	SD
Early starter	47	67	19
Later starter	33	65	17
Writing			
Groups	N	Mean	SD
Early starter	49	79	15
Later starter	34	78	14
Reading			
Groups	N	Mean	SD
Early starter	19	15	23
Later starter	29	13	25
Cloze test			
Groups	N	Mean	SD
Early starter	19	34	39
Later starter	29	39	43
Vocabulary			
Groups	N	Mean	SD
Early starter	19	61	40
Later starter	29	64	41

In order to detect whether the different amount of instruction that late and early starters had received resulted in different performance of the language learners in different language measures independent T-tests (SPSS 16) were run on data. The results of data analysis revealed that in none of the measures used in the study the difference between two groups reached a significant level (Speaking: F=0.33 p=0.855, Writing: F=0.104 p=0.748, Reading: F=0.30 p=0.864, Close test: F=0.238 p=0.628, Vocabulary: F=0.002 p=0.965).

Discussion

The first research question asked if the students who started language learning earlier had any advantages over the language learners who started later. The findings show that early starters had no advantage over late ones in any of the measures used in the study. Thus our findings confirm earlier studies of Burstall et al. (1974) and Oller and Nagata (1974) and contradict those of Domínguez and Pessoa (2005). It is also in line with the majority of studies conducted in EFL settings whose findings did not reveal any advantage for an early start (Cenoz, 2003; Lecumberri & Gallardo, 2003; Mayo, 2003; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2003; Muñoz, 2003).

The first reason to account for the findings is the learning context in which the study was conducted. As mentioned earlier, the exposure received in EFL contexts both in terms of quality and quantity is not significant compared to ESL settings (Muñoz, 2010). Hence, it could be argued that the amount and intensity of the instruction that younger learners received may not have been sufficient enough to create a significant difference. The difference between the early and late starters was about 586 hours. One may argue that this amount of extra time may not to be enough to create any noticeable change in an EFL setting. Another possibility is that the types of tasks that young learners had dealt with may not be cognitively challenging, and as such might have failed to stretch their inter-language beyond rudimentary levels (see Nikolov & Mialjevic-Djigunoic, 2006 for a similar argument). The effectiveness of instruction offered to language learners might also depend on the types of processing employed by the language learners. Young learners learn mainly implicitly while adults' learning is mainly explicit (DeKeyser, 2010). In this sense, the mechanism used by older language learners fit the formal instruction used in the great majority of language classes in EFL settings (Muñoz, 2008) including Turkey. In other words, the late starters' learning mechanism might have allowed them to

benefit from form-focused language classes and hence they managed to cover the gap.

Another reason for the present findings is that the early and late starters were mixed in the classes. As mentioned previously, early starters who had had 3 years of instruction beginning from the first grade were mixed with the other language learners who had no former instruction upon their arrival into the new language setting. It could rightly be argued that school system worked in such a way that the preliminary higher proficiency of early starters was leveled so that the instruction could be conducted in a smooth manner (see Stern, 1976; Muñoz, 2008 for a similar argument). The following statement from one of the teachers reflects this point:

> *When I ask a question, early learners reply it in few seconds. This situation went on a few months, then, I started to give extra homework to the late learners. We memorized new songs with them…. Now they are good at English especially in grammar.*

This statement shows that the instruction may not have been distributed fairly between the different age groups and while the earlier language learners were not challenged, the other group received some extra instruction.

Psychological variables may also affect the effectiveness of instruction. Moyer's (2004) study on successful immigrants in Germany showed that age factor and length of residence contributed little to the final attainment in learning the German language. 74% of the variance in attainment was related to psychological factors. Marinova-Todd (2003) argues that the right time for the introduction of high quality instruction is when children are motivated, not when they are necessarily young. In our case, it is possible that at least some of the older students were motivated to cover the existing gap and catch up with the earlier language learners up with the earlier language learners.

The second research question asked about theperception of language teachers in respect of the effectiveness of early language learning. As the results of the study showed the majority of language teachers believed that early language learners were better at pronunciation and vocabulary. However, the findings of our study showed no difference in language proficiency of the two groups in terms of any measures used in the study. One reason to account for the seemingly contradicting results as far as pronunciation was concerned was that in speaking tests that we applied we did not include a component to assess the pronunciation of the students. This was mainly so because the proficiency level of the students was low and the difference between the accents of the language learners did not appear noticeable at the time of the testing. The limited range of vocabulary chosen for the present test compared to what students usually use in the classroom might be another reason for the existing discrepancy. The vocabulary used in the study was limited to some colors, animals and daily life activity, which may not be broad enough to reflect the language areas that students encounter in their language classes. However, it is interesting to note that the language teachers believed that the late starters were good at grammar, and cognitively challenging skills such as reading and writing. Obviously, these skills and language areas match the brain maturation that these learners possessed at the time of language testing.

Conclusion and Implications

Though the common belief is that early language starters have some advantages over the later ones, the results of the present study, as far as the students' language proficiency is concerned, do not indicate that this is necessarily the case. The early language learners in our study failed to perform better in any of language measures. The lack of discernable proficiency differences in the measures applied implies that intensity and quality of programs used for the early starters may not be effective enough to create a profound change in their linguistic competence. This underscores the need for the reevaluation of the materials and syllabi used for early starters so that the time and resources dedicated to this group are used in a more efficient way.

However, one should be careful not to misinterpret the findings of the present study as evidence that starting age has no effect on language learning. For one thing, the testing instruments applied in the present study did not allow us to measure the possible pronunciation supremacy (and to a lesser extend the vocabulary advantage) of the early starters, as suggested in the comments of language teachers. Furthermore, there was no measurement of the willingness of early language learners to initiate conversations and interactions in the classrooms as the teachers ascribed to early starters. As Cenoz (2003) points out, early language learners has more positive attitude towards language learning, which in the long-run may result in a better language development.

Moreover, one may argue that early language instruction provides the opportunity to handle the difficult process of learning a new language in an extended time as opposed to an intensive one. In this sense, the earlier starters have more time to process the language implicitly, which may result in a more profound and engrained learning, even though this is not readily reflected in their performance in the language tests they take in their classes. It also introduces children to a new culture and receives the positive attitudes of students (see also Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2003). Overall, further studies are required to examine if early starters become more successful language learners in the later stages of their education, in the secondary school for example.

Finally, it should be born in mind that age is only one of the factors involved in language learning. There are other variables at work, alongside age, such as the length of the instruction, methods of teaching, students' motivation, ability to simulate a positive learning environment. that could affect the final linguistic attainment of students. The introduction of the new language in the early ages can be more effective if it is accompanied by professional teaching instructors, appropriate materials, right methodology, sufficient time, etc. Otherwise, to expect that an early start on its own would lead to ultimate success in foreign language learning is too unrealistic.

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