

Starting foreign-language teaching earlier: Improving the quality of L2 education or taking the easy way out?

Christián Abello Contesse

Universidad de Sevilla
Palos de la Frontera S/N
41004 Sevilla
España
christian.abello@auna.com

Resumen

Aunque la polémica sobre la hipótesis del periodo crítico (HPC) se ha vuelto recurrente en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de lenguas no maternas (L2), la afirmación de que durante el periodo entre los 2 y los 12 años los niños pueden adquirir lenguas con mayor facilidad y rapidez se ha reactivado últimamente debido a las demandas sociales en diversos países para mejorar los resultados de la enseñanza de L2 en instituciones públicas. Este trabajo examina el papel implícito/explicito de la HPC en las reformas educativas recientes, que han generado una tendencia internacional a iniciar precozmente la enseñanza de la L2, especialmente la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera/internacional. Se sostiene que la HPC se ha convertido en un poderoso instrumento que permite que los responsables de la educación pública pasen por alto los resultados de las investigaciones empíricas, afirmando proporcionar una “enseñanza de calidad” en L2 simplemente porque la edad obligatoria de inicio es inferior.

Palabras clave: hipótesis del periodo crítico (HPC), el factor edad, adquisición de una lengua no materna, inicio precoz de la enseñanza de la L2, el inglés como lengua no materna

Abstract

Although issues regarding the critical period hypothesis (CPH) have become recurrent in the fields of foreign language (L2) teaching and learning, the claim that there is a period extending from ages 2-12 during which children can acquire language more easily and rapidly has recently been revived as a result of social demands in various countries for improved outcomes in the area of L2 teaching in public schools. The focus of this paper is on the implicit/explicit role played by the CPH in recent educational reforms that have resulted in an international trend toward an early start in L2 teaching, particularly the teaching of English as a foreign/international language. The paper argues that the CPH has become a powerful instrument, one that allows educational policymakers to ignore the findings of empirical research and claim to offer “quality L2 teaching” by simply reducing the required starting age.

Key Words: critical period hypothesis (CPH), the age factor, second language acquisition (SLA), an “early start” in L2 teaching, English as a foreign/international language (EFL/EIL)

Introduction

It is well known that the lay observer tends to see some kind of intuitive relationship between starting early in a foreign language (L2) and managing to achieve an advanced level of proficiency in it. What is surprising, however, is that over the last 10 years or so this very same logic has found its way into mass media reports, magazines for L2 teachers, and even official departments of education. This paper is intended to offer a critical view of the notion that systematically reducing the age at which English or some other foreign language (EFL/L2) is introduced at school will yield better outcomes, that is, higher levels of competence and performance towards the end of the learning process. To that end, the implicit/explicit role of the critical period hypothesis (henceforth CPH) in second language acquisition (SLA) and educational policymaking is analyzed; emphasis is placed on the effects of the CPH on recent reforms that have resulted in an international trend toward an early start in EFL/L2 teaching. The findings of empirical research on early-start school programs over the last three decades are reviewed and contrasted with current L2 trends in the public-school systems in 20 countries around the world. Recent L2 reforms and policies adopted in countries as dissimilar as Korea and Spain, for example, appear to follow the “new trend”. In Korea, educational authorities decided to lower the starting age from the seventh to the third grade beginning in 1997. In Spain, authorities decided to continue reducing the starting age for the first foreign language from the third grade to kindergarten, at age five, in 2006 (see section on Spanish educational reforms). However, as will be shown in the remainder of this paper, the prime motivation for changes such as these is often sociopolitical rather than educational or psycholinguistic; it is argued that age reduction reforms are unlikely to be effective in practice as they are typically not accompanied by other equally important measures, often more complex and costly to implement.

The age factor and the critical period hypothesis (CPH) in second language acquisition

The effects related to the age at which learners are first exposed to an L2 constitute a topic that has been present in informal discussion for centuries. The most frequent claim is that children are “superior” to adults in regard to the level of

proficiency likely to be attained, that is, the younger the learner, the quicker the learning process and the better the outcome. The notion that *foreign* languages should be taught beginning in preschool or the early elementary grades has become commonplace in the media. In a special report on brain development in the first three years of life published in *TIME* magazine, it is claimed that one of the lessons that can be drawn from the new findings is that “it is clear that foreign languages should be taught in elementary school, if not before” (Nash, 1997: 56). Essentially the same idea has been reiterated in assertions like the following which appeared in a magazine for EFL teachers in which a single CPH-based study is cited by the writer to recommend what she deems to be the optimal age for starting L2 English: “Teaching English to infants is becoming increasingly popular. The long-term effects are validated by research such as that by Johnson and Newport which supports the view that the only way a child will learn a spoken language and know it like a mother tongue as an adult is if she has learnt it before the age of seven” (Doron, 2001: 26).

But, are such strong recommendations to start L2 teaching/learning around the age of five or six the right “lesson” to draw upon? On the one hand, it seems fair to ask whether first language acquisition and/or naturalistic second-language acquisition should be used as suitable reference models for *foreign* language learning in a classroom setting with limited to minimal exposure to the target language (often less than three hours a week). And, on the other, one can ask whether the *classroom* implications and applications suggested in the information reported in the media are based on empirical *educational* research as opposed to untested theoretical assumptions, informed speculation, or folk wisdom. It is worth noting that the Johnson and Newport (1989) study—cited by Doron (2001)—is typically praised in much of the literature as having provided unambiguous evidence for the CPH in L2 acquisition. Nevertheless, the same paper has been severely criticized on various counts by several researchers (*e.g.*, Bialystok and Hakuta, 1994; Kellerman, 1997; Percival, Howerd, and Hill, 1994; etc.). From the perspective of foreign/second language teaching, it may be claimed that the data-gathering procedure used in the Johnson and Newport (1989) study (*i.e.*, asking a group of 46 Korean and Chinese participants, immigrants to the USA, to take a *grammaticality judgement test* based on 276 audiotaped sentences that tested 12 rules of English morphology and syntax) clearly lacks face validity. Kellerman (1997) states:

I am doubtful whether their 1989 paper or the virtual replication by Johnson (1992) really have very much to contribute to the important ‘critical period for L2 acquisition’ debate [...]. My reservations concern the method and materials they use and the way they (and others) interpret their data. (1997: 220)

The age factor is a long-standing variable that belongs to an active research area in the field of second language acquisition (SLA): the study of individual differences (IDs) in the acquisition process and product. Empirical studies in this research tradition have usually sought to determine the connections between a particular individual factor (*e.g.*, age, motivation, or personality), on the one hand, and learning rate and/or ultimate attainment in the L2, on the other. The concept of “ultimate attainment” may be defined as the relatively stable L2 proficiency level that learners achieve towards the end of their language learning process.

A distinctive proposal within the age factor is the CPH and its role in L2 acquisition. The CPH basically postulates that if the acquisition of an L2 begins between the ages of two and twelve (*i.e.*, the limited period closes at puberty), the learning process will be easy and the product will be complete (*i.e.*, as is usually the case in normal L1 acquisition), while learners who begin their learning *after* this point –a kind of biological border– will find the process difficult and time-consuming, and the final outcome will be incomplete. Due to its highly controversial status in SLA, many researchers have suggested alternative proposals to account for the notions involved in the original hypothesis. Consequently, the straightforward neurobiological explanation that went largely unquestioned in the 70s and 80s has evolved into a considerably more complex set of options that represent the five, or more, stances which exist at present. Thus, current references can be found in the scholarly literature not only to (i) a global critical period ending at puberty (original proposal), but also to (ii) multiple critical periods (according to the specific component of the L2 under study, such as phonology or syntax), (iii) the non-existence of one or more critical periods, (iv) a global “sensitive” period, and (v) a “gradual and continual decline” in the acquisition of an L2.

As regards the origin of the CPH, there are at least three revealing facts that must be kept in mind in current debates concerning L2 acquisition. First, the early conceptions of the CPH (Penfield and Roberts, 1959; Lenneberg, 1967) were made outside of the field of SLA *per se* (specifically, in neurology, neurosurgery, and neurolinguistics). Second, the theoretical rationale provided by the proponents of

the CPH was based on arguments in favor of the innate biological nature of the human capacity to acquire a native language. Third, its implications and possible applications addressed the process of *L1 acquisition* by looking at the relearning of impaired L1 skills by native speakers of English. Since its formulation in the 60s, the CPH has been linked to nativist proposals which gave rise to the *innatist theory* of first language (L1) acquisition advocated by the theoretical linguist Noam Chomsky, emphasizing the essential role that biological contributions (as opposed to the child's social life and cultural experience) appear to play in L1 development. As a result of the various language and non-language features that are shared by the great majority of children learning a *first* language in a monolingual environment, the arguments for a critical period have been considerably less controversial in the field of first language acquisition (FLA).

In SLA the CPH is also strongly associated with the innatist/Universal Grammar (UG) perspective (*e.g.*, White, 1989; 2003, etc.). However, even second language researchers working within the UG framework differ in their interpretations of the exact role played by the hypothesis. In fact, the debate on the role of the CPH in L2 acquisition continues to be far from settled. Some SLA researchers—such as Scovel (1969, 1988, 2006)—have been studying CPH-based arguments for nearly four decades and have yet to obtain the conclusive results (*i.e.*, its effects beyond *phonological* acquisition) that one might rightfully expect given the categorical assertions involved in the original proposal. Singleton (2003), another renowned specialist in the age factor in SLA, recently acknowledged that “the idea of a critical period for language development may well have had its day” (2003: 18).

One of the most deep-rooted myths concerning the CPH is probably the erroneous interpretation that it constitutes a recently-validated, hard-and-fast principle (*i.e.*, an “absolute rule”) in the field of SLA that is applicable to *any* second language acquisition context (*i.e.*, naturalistic, mixed, or instructed). However, one should bear in mind that the CPH is by no means a new or recent proposition in SLA; its formulation was made over 40 years ago by the German-American neurologist Eric Lenneberg (1967), who was not a second language researcher or an L2 classroom practitioner. In brief, Lenneberg's proposition was not based on the ability of children, adolescents or adults under *normal* circumstances (*i.e.*, without disabilities) to learn an *additional* language or L2. However, since the late 60s the fundamental aspects of the CPH have been employed by certain language-learning theories to predict that if language

acquisition, either first *or second*, begins after puberty, the final product will be incomplete.

It is worth noting, however, that the allegedly adverse effects of the CPH on L2 acquisition (resulting in “incomplete” mastery of the second *language* by teenagers and adults) appear to be very selective in terms of the L2 *system as a whole*. CPH-effects are usually claimed to be obvious when it comes to *phonology* (as reflected in so-called “foreign” accents), mixed or relative when it comes to *morphological* and *syntactic* proficiency, and simply ignored when it comes to *lexical* and *semantic* proficiency (ironically, two central components of language acquisition, both first and second). In addition, a relevant aspect related to the application of the CPH that is frequently overlooked is the fact that the basic measurement criterion it employs seems incoherent when it comes to testing *non-native* proficiency (Abello-Contesse *et al.*, 2006). Regardless of the component or skill being measured in an L2, if the key criterion to be applied is complete “native-speaker”/“native-like” competence and performance, that is, the proficiency type that educated *monolingual native* speakers of the target language supposedly have, then it is obvious that such a criterion is inappropriate. By definition, the learner-user of a *non-native* language is not –and can *never* become– a *native* speaker of the language he or she is learning, nor is he/she a *monolingual* speaker any more. On the one hand, it should be clear that the concept which does in fact offer a valid, group-appropriate criterion for L2 measurement is that of the fluent *bilingual* or *multilingual* speaker and, on the other, it should be recognized that the speculative opposition between “completeness” in early-starting learners (*i.e.*, child L2 acquisition) versus “incompleteness” in late-starting learners (*i.e.*, adult L2 acquisition) does not offer a rigorous, empirical distinction to the debate on the age factor in L2 learning.

Empirical research studying individuals who started learning two first languages simultaneously –or a second language sequentially at a very early age– can show that “complete” acquisition is not only a question of an early start and internal neurobiological mechanisms, as is often claimed. In other words, substantial, sustained/uninterrupted, and qualitative *input* and *output* in the weaker or second language are *also* essential for language proficiency to become “complete” (on the assumption that the notion of “completeness” as a mental state is psychologically real). As shown in a recent study on inflectional morphology and semantics that addressed the preterite/imperfect contrast in Spanish

(Montrul, 2002), researchers working within a generative framework may actually find an unexpected similarity in learning outcomes between the contexts of bilingual first-language acquisition (BFLA) and adult foreign/second language acquisition (SLA). Montrul (2002) acknowledges the central role that input seems to have played in her simultaneous bilingual subjects:

But since a robust 87% of the US-born [Spanish-English] bilinguals made errors similar to the errors made by adult intermediate and advanced English-speaking L2 learners of Spanish (*i.e.*, monolingual English speakers who started learning Spanish after puberty), one can only speculate that those subjects who spoke both English and Spanish at home received insufficient exposure to Spanish as children, either in terms of the amount, quality, or continuity of input needed to attain full proficiency, and never acquired Spanish completely as children, particularly the simultaneous bilinguals. (2002: 58)

In addition, affective/emotional factors (*e.g.*, motivation and attitudes) also play a crucial role in achieving high levels of language proficiency, irrespective of the learner's starting age. Schumann (1994) rejects Long's (1990) claim that wide variation in learners' motivation has relatively little effect on first or second language acquisition by young children. Schumann (1994) asserts that, due to *motivational* reasons, many young children exposed to two different languages (*e.g.*, their parents' language as well as the community language) acquire deficient receptive and productive skills in the parental/minority language, develop receptive but not productive skills in it, or even fail to acquire the parental language.

Empirical research on early-start school programs: What the findings indicate regarding learning outcomes at different ages

Should an L2 be introduced at an earlier or later age in schools? As far as empirical studies conducted in school settings are concerned, research has not only shown a lack of a direct correlation between an earlier starting age and more successful learning, but also a trend for *older* children and *teenagers* to be more efficient L2 learners. In fact, various studies carried out within the context of conventional school programs based on explicit instruction that is limited to a few hours a week (*i.e.*, traditional, "drip-feed" programs) have revealed a systematic tendency in which learners who begin their contact with the L2 *later* (*e.g.*, at the age of 11

or 12) display *higher* levels of proficiency in the language features tested than those who begin earlier (*e.g.*, at the age of eight or nine). As Harley and Wang (1997) assert: “More mature learners generally make faster initial progress in acquiring morphosyntactic and lexical aspects of a second language” (1997: 44). In fact, empirical studies have shown that the greater cognitive maturity, analytical capacity, and improved efficiency in the processing of information possessed by older learners allow them to catch up with those who began earlier, thus neutralizing their potential initial advantage. Furthermore, what is particularly revealing is that the same findings can be obtained in immersion-style, bilingual-education programs (*e.g.*, late French immersion in Canada) in which students are exposed to the L2 much more extensively and where the L2 is the medium through which specific curricular content is taught.

The information summarized in Table 1 shows an overview of research on the relative advantages of an earlier versus a later start in foreign-language teaching and learning; the overview is intended as a representative sample rather than an exhaustive account, and it includes seven empirical studies using various testing measures and conducted in different educational systems in the last three decades; the studies share a focus on foreign- rather than second-language learning contexts, that is, settings where input and interaction in the L2 are mainly or exclusively limited to the classroom.

At least two important conclusions can be drawn from these studies in regard to learner age at commencement of instruction and how it affects L2 learning. The first is that, contrary to what the lay observer might believe, this particular line of empirical research based on how learning outcome varies with starting age has a very long tradition in the fields of foreign/second language teaching and SLA. The second is that the findings invariably confirm that older L2 learners, aged nine to thirteen approximately, show both a *faster learning rate* at the initial stages and *higher levels of proficiency* than younger learners, aged four to eight approximately. In other words, in a learning context where access to input and instruction in the L2 is typically limited to a few hours a week (except for the immersion situation) in an institutional rather than a naturalistic setting, *older* learners have consistently been found to be quicker and more efficient than younger learners.

In this regard, Genesee (1988) warns that, “Thus, there is insufficient conceptual and empirical reason to justify making educational decisions on the basis

Table 1. An overview of research on the relative advantages of an earlier vs. a later start in L2 teaching

Research project & author(s)	Country	Period / Time	Target language	Main focus	Results
NFER project (Burstall et al., 1974)	Britain	1964-1974	French (FFL)	Evaluates the relative advantages of an earlier start in the L2 (age eight rather than age eleven) in Britain.	This 10-year study shows that the early introduction of an L2 is not detrimental to other school subjects, but the L2 superiority associated with an early start is considered to be unfounded by the authors.
IEA studies (Carroll, 1975; Lewis & Massad, 1975)	International team	1968-1975	French (FFL) & English (EFL)	Compares different patterns of L2 teaching – including different starting ages – in various countries.	The main factor in L2 proficiency is the amount of instructional time provided. Students who start L2 study at relatively older ages make faster progress than those who start early.
(Oller & Nagato, 1974)	Japan	Early 1970s	English (FFL)	Evaluates the long-term effects of L2 instruction (in grade 1) among groups of Japanese students who started learning EFL in grade 1 and grade 7.	In grade 11, the students who started learning EFL in grade 1 perform no better on a written cloze test than those who started in grade 7. Early and late starters are mixed in the same classes.
EPAL project (Holmstrand, 1982)	Sweden	1970-1980	English (EFL)	Assesses the relative merits of starting to learn FFL in either grade 1 (= seven-year-olds) or in grade 3 (= nine-year-olds).	Before completion, the project's aim is the early introduction of EFL in grades 1 or 2. However, no differences are found in grade 6 between students who had started EFL in grade 1 and in grade 3. Thus, EFL is introduced in grade 4 in the 80s (shortage of well-trained teachers).
Early vs. late immersion (Genesee, 1981; Swain, 1981)	Canada	Early 1980s	French (FSL/FFL)	Comparison of two very different program types: early total immersion (age five–13, K to grade 8) and late partial immersion (age 12–13, grades 7 & 8 only).	With less than one-third as many hours of instruction in L2 French, late starters (1,400 hours) equal or surpass early starters (5,000 hours). Early starters are only superior on the listening comprehension test.
BAF project (Muñoz, 1999; 2006)	Spain	1995-2005	English (EFL)	Compares the learning rate of English by early starters (eight-year-olds) and late starters (11-year-olds). Students are bilingual in Spanish and Catalan.	Older starters show a faster learning rate in initial stages of L2 acquisition (after 200 and 416 hours), especially in the learning of grammatical features. However, in the long run (726 hours), the older starters' advantage disappears.
The development of English (EFL) competence (Cenoz, 2003)	Spain	2000-2003	English (EFL)	Compares the level of FL proficiency among three groups of learners (bilingual in Spanish and Basque) who received 600 hours of instruction, but started learning EFL at three different ages: four, eight and 11 years old respectively.	Older learners obtain significantly higher results than younger learners in most of the oral and written proficiency measures used. The study provides additional evidence to confirm that older learners learn more quickly than younger learners.

of the CPH". (1988: 104). In fact, even SLA researchers who are explicitly in favor of the CPH acknowledge the fact that there are at least two important prerequisites for the CPH to apply effectively (*e.g.*, Patkowski, 1990), and they are: sustained conditions of *naturalistic* language acquisition and *favorable* sociolinguistic circumstances (as opposed to drip-feed learning in a classroom environment). Nevertheless, the notion that the CPH is a specialized prediction that applies to naturalistic L1 or L2 acquisition under favorable social and linguistic conditions (*e.g.*, massive amounts of meaningful input) does not appear to be regarded as a valid distinction in the area of educational policymaking.

When L2 teaching starts in school systems around the world: An overview of current trends in 20 countries

A questionnaire (see Appendix) was sent electronically to colleagues in some 40 countries in three different world regions; the purpose of the survey was to compare policies currently implemented in their public education systems with the findings of the empirical studies on the relative advantages of an earlier and a later start reviewed earlier in this paper. Responses were received from 20 countries (45% located in Europe, 35% in Latin America, and 20% in the Asia-Pacific region). As shown in Table 2, the survey inquired about five characteristics related to the start in EFL/L2 teaching in these public school systems, that is, compulsory age level, grade level, program continuity, instructional time, and recent age-related reforms.

Given that secondary education often begins in or around grade 7 in many countries (*i.e.*, around the ages of 11-13), the sample shows that foreign-language teaching is introduced in elementary/primary education, more specifically, between grades 1 and 5, in the vast majority of the school systems analyzed (70%). As far as *age level* is concerned, in 30% of the participating countries the age level at which L2 instruction is either compulsory or highly recommended in the public sector is 8 or 9 years of age. Each of the other age levels identified (*i.e.*, 6 & 7, 10 & 11, and 12 & 13) accounts for 20% of the total each. The exceptions (10%) are Spain where the compulsory age is currently five, and Paraguay where it is 15. Many respondents also commented that the current trend in private schools in their countries is to start teaching an L2 –typically English– either in or around the first grade of primary school, at the age of six.

Table 2. Age, grade level, etc. at which L2 teaching is introduced in 20 countries

Country	Compulsory age level	Compulsory grade level	Program continuity / Progression ensured	Weekly hours of instruction (initially)	Reform to introduce EFL/L2 at lower grades
Argentina	Nine years old	Grade 4	Partly	Three hours/wk (40-min. periods)	Yes, from grade 10 to 4 (1993/1997)
Belgium (Brussels region)	13 years old	Grade 7	N/A No (if started earlier)	Three hours/wk (50-min. periods)	No
Brazil	11 years old	Grade 5	No	Two hours/wk (50-min. periods)	No
Chile	10 / 11 years old	Grade 5	No	Two-three hours/wk (45-min. periods)	Yes, from grade 7 to 5
China	Nine years old	Grade 3	Partly	Two-three hours/wk (40-min. periods)	Yes, from grade 5 to 3 (2001)
Colombia	N/A (according to grade level)	Grade 1	No	Two-three hours/wk (45-min. periods)	Yes, from grade 6 to 1 (1995)
Denmark	N/A (according to grade level)	Grade 3	Yes	Two-three hours/wk	Yes, from grade 4 to 3
France	Seven years old	Grade 2	Partly	Two and a half hours/wk	Yes, from grade 4 to 2 (2005)
Greece	Eight / nine years old	Grade 3	Yes	Three hours/wk	Yes, from grade 4 to 3 (2004)
Hungary	10 / 11 years old	Grades 4 / 5	No	Two-three hours/wk (45-min. periods)	No
Italy	Six years old	Grade 1 (English only)	Yes (Common European Framework)	Two hours/wk	Yes, from grade 3 to 1 (2003)

Table 2. Age, grade level, etc. at which L2 teaching is introduced in 20 countries (continued)

Country	Compulsory age level	Compulsory grade level	Program continuity / Progression ensured	Weekly hours of instruction (initially)	Reform to introduce EFL/L2 at lower grades
Japan	12 / 13 years old	Grade 7	N/A No (if started earlier)	Three hours/wk (50-min. periods)	Yes, optional in grades 6-3 (2002)
Korea	Eight / nine years old	Grade 3	No	One-two hours/wk	Yes, from grade 7 to 3 (1997)
Mexico	12 / 13 years old	Grade 7	N/A No (if started earlier)	Three hours/wk	No
Paraguay	15 years old	Grade 10	N/A No (if started earlier)	Two hours/wk (40-min. periods)	No
Serbia	11 / 12 years old	Grade 5	Partly	Four-three hours/wk (45-min. periods)	Yes, from grade 5 to 1 (2005)
Spain	Three-six years old (mainly five)	Kindergarten	N/A	Two-three hours/wk (55-min. periods)	Yes, from grade 3 to kindergarten (2006-07)
Taiwan	Six / seven years old	Grade 1	Partly	One-two hours/wk (40-min. periods)	Yes, from grade 5 to 1 (2001)
Turkey	Nine years old	Grade 4	Partly	Two hours/wk	Yes, from grade 6 to 4
Venezuela	12 years old	Grade 7	N/A No (if started earlier)	Three hours/wk (45-min. periods)	No

Concerning *grade level*, in 35% of the countries surveyed the grades in which L2 instruction is compulsory are grades 3 or 4. Two of the other grade levels identified, grades 1 & 2 as well as 7 & 8, account for 20% of the total each, whereas grades 5 & 6 account for 15%. At one extreme there is the Spanish situation (5%) where the compulsory grade for L2 instruction is Kindergarten (or earlier in preschool), while at the other there is the Paraguayan situation (5%) where L2 instruction is compulsory starting in grade 10.

As regards *program continuity and progression*, that is, planned development between early, middle, and late instructional cycles in the school system, 35% of the participating countries offer only partial continuity; one example of this situation is Turkey, where the textbooks used for EFL are prepared according to a progressive syllabus developed by the Turkish Ministry of Education. On the other hand, 25% of the countries do not ensure continuity of the early-start program being implemented, such as Brazil, where continuing students are usually treated as false beginners when they enter secondary school. It is important to note that progressive follow-up cycles for early-start learners who move on to higher educational levels are consistently available in only 15% of the countries involved; an example of this situation would be the Italian system where the expected L2 outcomes are currently determined according to the proficiency levels identified in the Common European Framework, recently developed by the Council of Europe (Morrow, 2004). Italian students are expected to attain level A1 at the end of primary school, B1 at the end of lower secondary school, and level B2 at the end of higher secondary school. Finally, in the remaining 25% of the countries, continuity is not applicable since there are no early-start programs being implemented.

Concerning *weekly instructional time*, in 35% of the educational systems researched, the total number of hours per week devoted to input/interaction and instructional activities is limited to two and a half hours in the first two or three years of instruction, followed by a total of three hours a week (30%), two hours (20%), one and a half hours (10%), and three and a half hours (5%). In other words, in the great majority of the countries surveyed (85%), the total time allotted to the L2 ranges from a minimum of two to a maximum of three hours a week. In addition, it is worth pointing out that a regular lesson rarely covers 60 minutes; depending on individual educational systems, a class period can range from a minimum of only 40 to a maximum of 55 minutes. Consequently, in a country

such as China, with an average of two and a half hours per week in 40-minute periods, weekly instructional time is limited to one hour and 40 minutes.

Finally, 70% of the countries sampled have experienced an educational *reform* within the last decade or so aimed at introducing the teaching of an L2 at lower grade levels; in several cases, such as Chile, Denmark, and Turkey the age reduction has been moderate, with students beginning one or two years earlier, whereas in other cases, such as Argentina and Colombia, it has been considerably drastic, with L2 instruction starting six and five years earlier.

As the above comparison has shown, there is very little connection in practice between the findings of the empirical studies on learner age, on the one hand, and the educational policies currently implemented in most of these 20 countries, on the other. In fact, the policies adopted tend to be the *opposite* of what the research findings suggest. Public educational policies on L2 teaching adopted by departments of education in various countries show that, faced with generally unsatisfactory results in the language(s) being taught and/or increasing social demands for higher levels of L2 proficiency (particularly in EU countries at present with reference to English), such institutions have responded by introducing reform after reform which consist mainly or exclusively in lowering the starting age for L2 teaching. These official entities appear to do so in the naive belief that the key is to introduce the institutional teaching/learning processes as early as possible and that such a notion is strongly supported by scientific evidence from SLA in general and the CPH in particular. In the area of educational policymaking the notion of the CPH as a specialized prediction (*i.e.*, one that is generally thought to apply to naturalistic L1 acquisition, and less frequently, to *naturalistic* L2 acquisition) has been increasingly ignored. It is unfortunate that the most frequent application of the CPH in language education has been a gross misinterpretation of its nature, that is, the idea that “the earlier, the better” is a valid prediction in *any* learning circumstance. This happens partly as a result of the lack of direct participation that second-language specialists have in educational policymaking. In addition, political and financial matters are frequently more involved in L2 policies than it may seem on the surface; as Spolsky (1989) warns, “Educational systems usually arrive first at a decision of optimal learning age on *political* or *economic* grounds and then seek educational justification for their decision” (1989: 91). It is worth noting that the political benefits involved in official decisions to reduce the starting age in recent educational reforms in various parts

of the world seem to indicate that political leaders and educational authorities consider an age reduction to be not only a comparatively inexpensive way to improve long-term outcomes, but also a more “visible” decision from a sociopolitical perspective.

Last but not least, it should also be pointed out that beyond the implementation of early-start policies at the official level, *pedagogical guidelines* for the early introduction of an L2 in school programs—classroom practices and assessment procedures often based on EFL—, have also become a growing trend over the last decade with an increasing presence in the literature on L2 teacher education. The pedagogical phenomenon has come to be known as an “early start in EFL/L2 teaching” and “teaching EFL/L2s to young learners”, and it is usually based on children aged 6-12 (Cameron, 2001; Nikolov and Curtain, 2000; Moon, 2000; Pinter, 2006; etc.). Although an attempt to determine which of these tendencies was more influential *earlier* in specific countries (*i.e.*, the early-start policies, the pedagogical guidelines, or possibly both) can sometimes lead to a chicken and egg situation, it is reasonably clear that in many countries, such as in Spain, the early-start policies were established first.

The case of Spanish educational reforms in the last 20 years: Building sound L2 policies or castles in Spain?

As the overview of current educational trends in 20 countries has shown, Spain is the only country where foreign-language teaching in public education begins in kindergarten –or even earlier– at present. This is significant since the growing international practice of an “early start” mentioned above rarely means beginning foreign language instruction at the *preschool* level (although this might be the case in the future). According to the survey results presented in Table 2 above, only in three countries (*i.e.*, Colombia, Italy, and Taiwan) does L2 learning begin in the first year of primary education –at age six or seven– and in none of them does it start before this level. Indeed, most of the countries surveyed start L2 instruction at some point between the third and fifth grade of elementary school (ages eight to eleven, approximately). Due to this rather exceptional condition, additional background information about the Spanish situation is provided in this section.

An official document by the Andalusian Regional Government’s Department of Education where the new foreign-language policy for Andalusian society is

described, lauds CPH-based claims regarding the importance of an early start in L2 teaching (Consejería de Educación, Junta de Andalucía, 2005). The document is particularly relevant in that it identifies the official position held by educational authorities in one of the largest and most densely populated regions in Spain. Among other things, the document emphasizes the notion that children's phonological perception skills are supposedly lost at the age of 11, and accordingly argues for early-start teaching:

The number of speech sounds that a child is able to discern is much higher than that of an adult or even an adolescent. This ability, however, diminishes very quickly. The critical age for a breakdown that is difficult to retrieve later on is 11 [...]. At this age children start experiencing serious difficulty in clearly discerning speech sounds which are unfamiliar to them in their native language, and likewise also have difficulty producing them [...]. These premises lead us to advocate early-start teaching of the first foreign language. (2005: 53)

Table 3. Foreign-language teaching reforms in Spain in the last 20 years (1987-2007)

Period	Compulsory age level	Compulsory grade level	Program continuity/ Progression ensured	Weekly hours of instruction (initially)	Reform to introduce L2 at lower grades
(1986-1993)	11 years old	Grade 6	Partly	Two-three hours/wk (55-min. periods)	Yes, from grade 6 to 3 (1993)
(1994-2006)	Eight years old	Grade 3	Partly	Two hours/wk (55-min. periods)	Yes, from grade 3 to K (2006-07)
(2007-?)	Three-six years old (mainly 5)	Kindergarten (preschool, stage 2)	(?)	(?)	(?)

The situation in Spain in the last 20 years is particularly revealing regarding repeated reforms in the starting age for foreign-language teaching/learning in free public education. As shown in Table 3, in the late 80s and early 90s, students typically began to learn their first foreign language in the sixth grade, at age 11. Later, the educational authorities decided to lower the starting age from sixth grade to third grade, at age eight (1993 reform) and, later, from third grade to preschool, between the ages of three and six (2005-06 reform). In its teaching

guidelines and principles for pre-school education, the new Organic Law for Education (LOE in Spanish) specifies that from the 2006-07 school year the teaching/learning of the first foreign language will begin during the second phase of preschool instruction, that is, from ages three to six, especially in the last year (at age five-six). It also specifies that a second L2 may be offered either at the end of primary or the beginning of secondary education as an optional subject (B.O.E. number 106, May 4, 2006). Some of the administrative changes related to the new law went into effect during the 2006-2007 school year while the pedagogical and language changes are scheduled to become effective during the 2007-2008 school year. Consequently, the information available at present is limited to the gradual implementation of the changes included in the reform. However, the notorious lack of reference to relevant quantitative and qualitative aspects (*e.g.*, weekly hours of instruction and teachers' proficiency standards likely to offer an appropriate *spoken* model of the L2) seems to limit the new reform to a strong sense of *déjà vu*, that is, more extensive "drip-feed" instruction. Regarding the key role played by L2 teaching time with very young learners, specifically concerning *intensity* of input, Lightbown and Spada (1999) comment:

We have often seen second or foreign language programs which begin with very young learners but offer only minimal contact with the language... One or two hours a week will not produce very advanced second language learners, no matter how young they were when they began (1999: 68).

Unfortunately, the lack of a coherent relationship that was pointed out earlier between the findings of the empirical studies (Table 1) and the educational policies implemented at present (Table 2) seems to be even more evident in the Spanish situation. In actual fact, the national Ministry of Education as well as some of the regional Departments of Education have recently provided financial support for major research projects (*e.g.*, Cenoz, 2003; Muñoz, 2006) with little or no attention being paid later on to their most significant outcomes.

Clearly, the results of the empirical studies would *not* predict any major L2 improvements as a result of the latest reform described above; however, some years will be needed before empirical data about its effects can become available.

Concluding remarks

This paper has looked at the age factor and the CPH in second language acquisition. It has also described the implicit/explicit role played by the CPH in educational policymaking leading to an international trend toward an early start in L2/EFL education.

The results of school-based research on L2 learning outcomes at different ages have shown that older children and young teenagers are generally faster and more successful learners than younger children. In fact, in institutional settings where sustained availability of input and interaction is the exception rather than the rule, as is typically the case in classroom L2 learning, the basic prediction made by the CPH has *never* been confirmed empirically. A representative sample of empirical studies was reviewed in this paper, and the findings were compared with current L2 trends in various educational systems; the analysis of an L2 teaching survey aimed at determining policies implemented in public education in 20 countries has shown that recent reforms to introduce an L2 at lower age and grade levels have been implemented in most of the countries surveyed, an increasingly “popular” tendency—often stronger in the private sector—that finds no support in actual research findings. In regard to educational implications and applications, even SLA researchers who openly support the CPH, such as DeKeyser and Larson-Hall (2005), warn us against simplistic conclusions:

Regardless of one’s view on the critical period, it is important not to overinterpret its implications for educational practice. The observation that “earlier is better” only applies to certain kinds of learning which schools typically cannot provide. Therefore, the implication of CP research seems to be that instruction should be adapted to the age of the learner, *not* [original emphasis] that learners should necessarily be taught at a young age (2005: 88).

From an academic viewpoint, it is unfortunate that the research findings discussed above have not been powerful enough to influence informed educational policymaking in the area of EFL/L2 teaching. Alarmingly, the empirical message that L2 researchers have been sending out for the last 30 years, does not appear to be the same message that our educational authorities have used in their public decisions and reforms. Given the obvious contradiction, it is clear that there is

still a need to emphasize that official decisions to lower the starting age for classroom L2 learning have long been unjustified as, on their own, they have proven to be insufficient in producing improved L2 outcomes.

Furthermore, it has been argued that although an early start in EFL/L2 teaching cannot be justified by CPH-based claims alone, misinterpretations regarding the range of application of the CPH have made it a powerful and risky sociopolitical instrument at a time when social demands to improve the outcomes of L2 education appear to be growing in many parts of the world. The CPH has become a powerful instrument in that it allows educational policy makers to ignore the empirical results of long-standing research on age effects; it is risky in that it is used to argue that L2 learning will become more effective by simply reducing the learners' starting age; this, in turn, permits relatively inexpensive educational actions that are likely to have high public visibility and social impact. In sum, the CPH seems to come in handy these days as a sort of "respectable" cover term for traditional folk wisdom.

References

- ABELLO-CONTESE, C., CHACÓN-BELTRÁN, R., LÓPEZ-JIMÉNEZ, M. D. & M. M. TORREBLANCA-LÓPEZ (eds.) (2006). *Age in L2 acquisition and teaching*, Bern: Peter Lang.
- BIALYSTOK, E. & K. HAKUTA (1994). *In other words: The science and psychology of second language acquisition*. New York: Basic Books.
- B.O.E. (BOLETÍN OFICIAL DEL ESTADO / OFFICIAL SPANISH GAZETTE) (2006). 106, May 4.
- BURSTALL, C., M. JAMIESON, S. COHEN & M. HARGREAVES (1974). *Primary French in the balance*. Slough: NFER Publishing Company.
- CAMERON, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- CARROLL, J. B. (1975). *The teaching of French as a foreign language in eight countries*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- CENOS, J. (2003). The influence of age on the acquisition of English: General proficiency, attitudes and code-mixing. In M. P. García Mayo & M. L. García Lecumberri (eds.). *Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language* (pp. 77-93). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- CONSEJERÍA DE EDUCACIÓN. JUNTA DE ANDALUCÍA (2005). *Plan de fomento del plurilingüismo. Una política lingüística para la sociedad andaluza*. Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía.
- DEKEYSER, R. & J. LARSON-HALL (2005). What does the critical period really mean? In J. F. Kroll & A.M.B. de Groot (eds.). *Handbook of bilingualism. Psycholinguistic approaches* (pp. 88-108). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DORON, H. (2001). Teaching infants. *English Teaching Professional*, 21: 26.

- GENESEEE, F. (1988). Neuropsychology and second language acquisition. In L. M. Beebe (ed.), *Issues in second language acquisition. Multiple perspectives* (pp. 81-112). New York: Newbury House Publishers.
- — — (1981). A comparison of early and late second language learning. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 13: 115-127.
- HARLEY, B. & W. WONG (1997). The critical period hypothesis: Where are we now? In A. M. B. de Groot & J. F. Kroll (eds.), *Tutorials in bilingualism. Psychological perspectives* (pp. 19-51). Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- HOLMSTRAND, L. S. E. (1982). *English in the elementary school*. Stockholm/Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International.
- JOHNSON, J. (1992). Critical period effects in second language acquisition: The effect of written versus auditory materials on the assessment of grammatical competence. *Language Learning*, 42: 217-248.
- JOHNSON, J. & E. NEWPORT (1989). Critical period effects in second language learning: The influence of maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language. *Cognitive Psychology*, 21: 60-99.
- KELLERMAN, E. (1997). Age before beauty. Johnson and Newport revisited. In L. Eubank, L. Selinker & M. Sharwood Smith (eds.). *The current state of interlanguage* (pp. 219-231). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- LENNEBERG, E. H. (1967). *Biological foundations of language*. New York: Wiley.
- LEWIS, E. G. & C. E. MASSAD (1975). *The teaching of English as a foreign language in ten countries*. New York: Wiley.
- LIGHTBOWN, P. M. & N. SPADA (1999). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LONG, M. H. (1990). Maturational constraints on language development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 12: 251-285.
- MONTRUL, S. (2002). Incomplete acquisition and attrition of Spanish tense/aspect distinctions in adult bilinguals. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 5 (1): 39-68.
- MOON, J. (2000). *Children learning English*. Oxford: Macmillan.
- MORROW, K. (ed.) (2004). *Insights from the Common European Framework*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MUÑOZ, C. (2006). The BAF Project: Research on the effects of age on foreign language acquisition. In C. Abello-Contesse, R. Chacón-Beltrán, M. D. López-Jiménez & M. M. Torreblanca-López (eds.). *Age in L2 acquisition and teaching* (pp. 81-92). Bern: Peter Lang.

- — — (1999). The effects of age on instructed foreign language acquisition. In S. Fernández, R. Valdeón, D. García, A. Ojanguren, M. Urdiales & A. Antón (eds.). *Essays in English language teaching. A review of the communicative approach* (pp. 1-22). Oviedo: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Oviedo.
- NASH, M. J. (1997). Fertile minds. *Time*, 146: 48-56.
- NIKOLOV, M. & H. CURTAIN (eds.) (2000). *An early start: Young learners and modern languages in Europe and beyond*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- OLLER, J. & N. NAGATO (1974). The long-term effect of FLES: An experiment. *Modern Language Journal*, 58: 15-19.
- PATKOWSKI, M. (1990). Age and accent in a second language: A reply to James Emil Flege. *Applied Linguistics*, 11 (1): 73-89.
- PENFIELD, W. & L. ROBERTS (1959). *Speech and brain mechanisms*. New York: Atheneum.
- PERCIVAL, V., F. HOWERD & B. HILL (1994). Age of arrival vs. time of arrival: A reconsideration of Johnson and Newport 1989. *University of Hawai'i Working Papers in ESL*, 12: 141-151.
- PINTER, A. (2006). *Teaching young language learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SCHUMANN, J. H. (1994). Where is cognition? Emotion and cognition in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 16 (2): 231-242.
- SCOVEL, T. (2006). Age, acquisition, and accent. In C. Abello-Contesse, R. Chacón-Beltrán, M. D. López-Jiménez & M. M. Torreblanca-López (eds.). *Age in L2 acquisition and teaching* (pp. 112-132). Bern: Peter Lang.
- — — (1988). *A time to speak: A psycholinguistic inquiry into the critical period for human speech*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- — — (1969). Foreign accents, language acquisition and cerebral dominance. *Language Learning*, 19: 245-253.
- SINGLETON, D. (2003). Critical period or general age factor(s)? In P. García Mayo & M. L. García Lecumberri (eds.). *Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language* (pp. 3-22). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- SPOLSKY, B. (1989). *Conditions for second language learning. Introduction to a general theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SWAIN, M. (1981). Time and timing in bilingual education. *Language Learning*, 31: 1-16.
- WHITE, L. (2003). *Second language acquisition and universal grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- — — (1989). *Universal grammar and second language acquisition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Appendix

The “Start in an L2” Questionnaire

1. Is there a specific *age* (or *age level*) at which foreign-language (L2) teaching becomes mandatory (or strongly recommended) in public (*i.e.*, state) schools in your country at present? If so, please give details below.
2. Is there a specific *grade level* (*e.g.*, 4th grade in elementary schools) at which L2 teaching becomes mandatory (or strongly recommended) in public schools in your country at present? If so, please give details below.
3. In the event that L2 teaching starts early in your country, is *continuity and/or progression* of the early-start program ensured at later stages of the public school system? (*e.g.*, continuing L2 students are not treated as false beginners again at the outset of high school). If so, how is this continuity and/or progression ensured in practice?
4. What is the *amount of time* (*i.e.*, the total number of hours per week) assigned to L2 teaching in your country during the first two or three years of instruction? How many minutes does the regular “school lesson” include?
5. Has there been any *educational reform* introduced by the Ministry/Department of Education (or equivalent office) in your country in the last 10 years or so in order to *lower* the age at which L2s were taught in schools? If so, please indicate the previous and present grade levels, and the year the (latest) reform became effective (*e.g.*, from grade 6 to 3 from 2001).

Respondent’s background

Name:

Country of origin (or permanent residence):

E-mail address:

Profession:

Present position:

Institution:

Town & country:

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

