



The younger the better?

Comparing 5, 7 and 11 year olds learning French in
the classroom

Florence Myles

University of Essex

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Outline of talk

1. Description of project
2. Research questions
3. Results
 - Vocabulary
 - Grammar
 - Attitudes, motivation, learning strategies
 - Link between linguistic development, literacy and working memory
4. Conclusion
5. Short film of a year 3 class

1. Description of project

Research context

- Worldwide enthusiasm for including second language instruction in the primary school curriculum.
- Underlying assumption: Younger = better
 - ‘learners’ aptitudes will be tapped into at the earliest opportunity when they are most receptive’ (DfES 2002)
- But mixed research evidence on young learners, especially when looking differentially at route of development, rate and eventual attainment
- Most research on classroom learners agrees that older starters consistently outperform younger ones (Munoz 2006)
- BUT: studies are often not easily comparable, as context of learning varies widely (e.g. no. of hours per week; country etc.)

Overall research aims

- Document the development of linguistic competence among young classroom learners of French at three different starting ages, and identify similarities and differences
- Compare rates of development at different ages after the same amount of classroom exposure
- Relate learner development to patterns of classroom input and interaction (verbal and nonverbal)
- Document and compare children's classroom learning strategies and attitudes to language learning

Research agenda

- Vocabulary
- Grammar
- Attitudes, motivation and learning strategies
- The role of gesture in foreign language learning
- Relationships between different aspects of development (linguistic, literacy, working memory)

Empirical design

- Participants
- Classroom input
- Data collection and analysis
- Testing

Empirical design: participants

73 young learners in two schools, all L1 English

- Year 1 (5/6 year-olds, n = 27)
- Year 3 (7/8 year-olds, n = 26)
- Year 7 (11/12 year-olds, n = 18)

No previous instruction in target language (French)

Vocabulary pre-test showed only 6 words known above chance level:

Bonjour – madame – oui – un – deux - trois

Empirical design: classroom input

- Part-time qualified teacher (employed by project):
 - 38 hours of French instruction for each group of learners
 - 19 weeks at the rate of two weekly hours
- A common set of pedagogic principles delivered in an age-appropriate way
- An oral approach, literacy in supporting role only
- All lessons audio and video recorded + transcription + observation notes
- Gesture coding (all classroom input)

Overview of actual classroom input (Year 3)

Mean words per lesson (teacher input, 32 lessons)	Types (raw counts)	Tokens (raw counts)
French	234.8	1511.8
English	538.8	2947.8

Total French input (32 lessons): 677 types*, 48377 tokens

* Count edited to exclude proper names etc

Empirical design: testing

Four testing cycles:

- Pre-instruction tests
- Mid-instruction tests (after 18 hours teaching)
- Post-instruction tests (after 38 hours teaching)
- Delayed post-tests (2 months after end of teaching)

Tests relevant for this paper:

- Receptive vocabulary test (M, P, D)
- Elicited imitation test (M, P, D)
- Working memory test (P)
- School literacy measures
- Focus groups

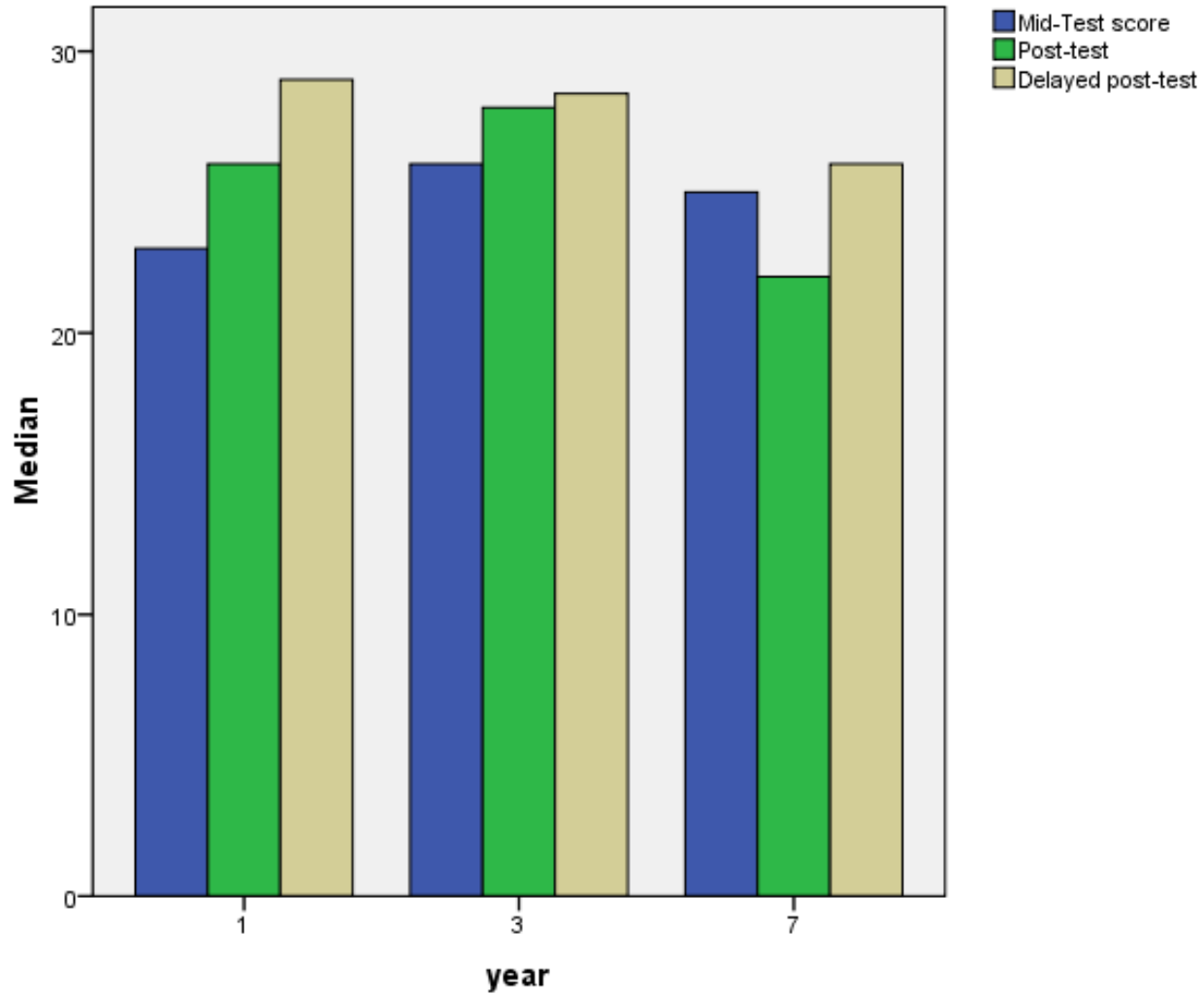
2. Research questions (this paper)

- Comparison of groups for receptive vocabulary development
- Comparison of groups for grammar development
- Comparison of groups for attitudes, motivation, learning strategies
- Influence of working memory
- Influence of literacy

3. Results

3.1 Vocabulary

Results (receptive vocabulary)



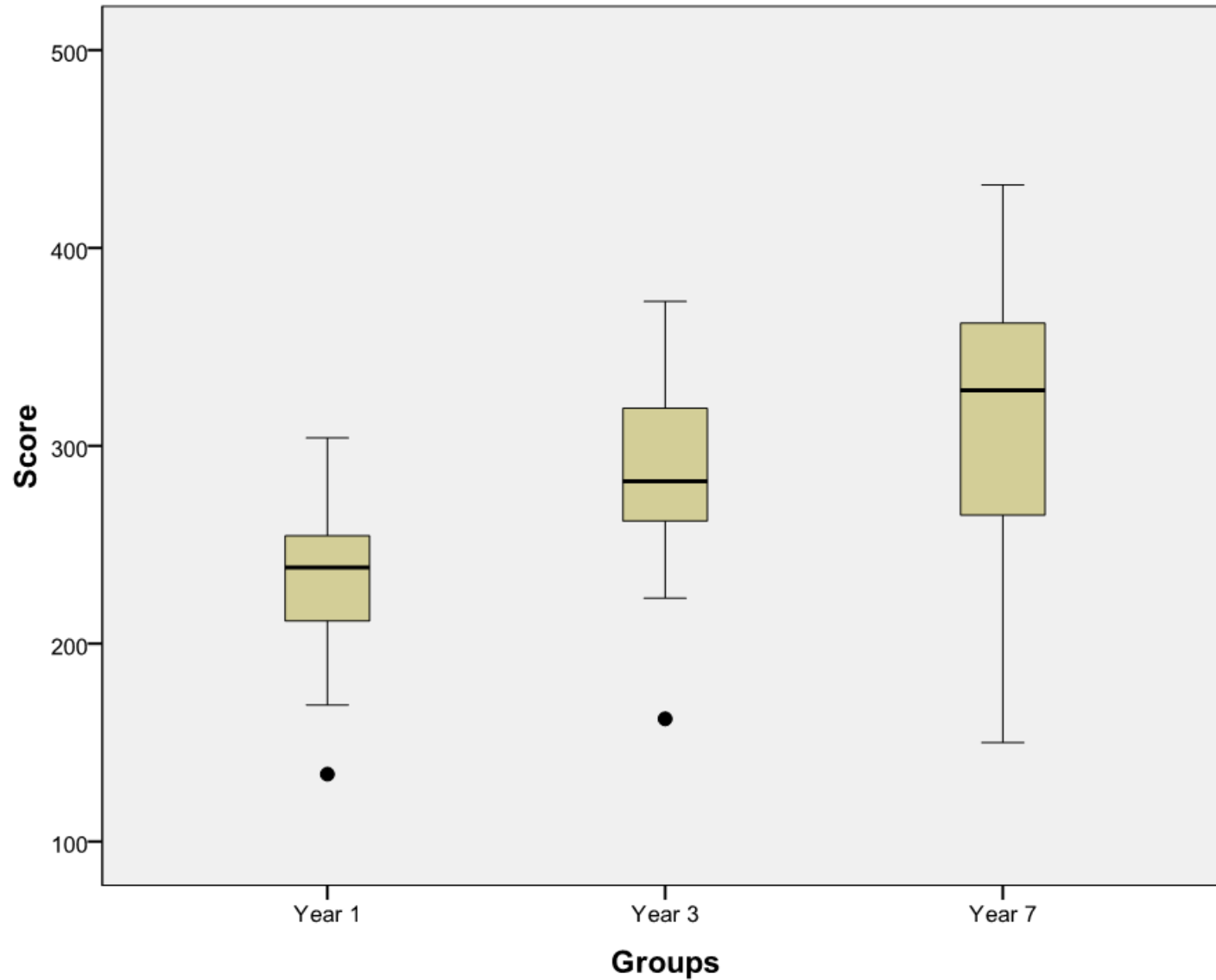
Summary: receptive vocabulary

- Frequency is the single most important factor in word learning
- Recency is more important for younger learners
- No influence of songs
- Motivation/ engagement highly influential for test performance

3.2 Development of grammar

- Results
- Comments

Results (grammar)



Summary: grammar

- Clear progression according to year group
- Earlier does not seem to be better as far as grammar development is concerned
- Longer utterances are difficult for all years, but particularly for year 1 learners
- Familiar items are repeated more accurately

3.3 Attitudes, motivation and learning strategies (5 and 7 year olds only)

- Methodology
- Results
- Conclusion

Methodology

- Focus groups (3-6 children per group)
- Discussion around following broad questions:
 - Do you like learning French? What do you like/dislike about it?
 - Do you think it's useful? Why/why not? Will you want to carry on learning French? Do you do some French outside the French class?
 - What classroom activities do you think help you most with learning French?
 - Do you do anything to try to remember words? What do you think helps you most remember the words you have learnt?
 - Would you like to meet French children? Do you think they're like you/different? What's the same/different?

Results: attitudes

- Slightly less enthusiasm for learning French in year 3
- Responses more varied in year 3, but main reason for liking French is that it is fun, in both groups
- Language highly prominent in perception of difference between them and French children in both groups
- Much more sophisticated discussion of commonalities/differences in year 3 group

Results: learning strategies

- Repeating most common strategy for both groups
- More awareness and wider range of strategies in year 3, e.g:
 - Linking a word with a picture
 - Relating a word to something familiar (e.g. a pet dog)
 - Stories
 - Around ½ like seeing words written down, other ½ finds it confusing (don't know how to pronounce them)
 - Getting incentives helps them focus (e.g. stickers)
 - Matching word to actions helps some not others

Results: motivation

- Focus in both groups is on need for communication with French people e.g. on holidays
- But much wider range of imagined situations in yr 3
- Intrinsic educational value of languages mentioned by some year 3 children
- Most children want to carry on learning French in both groups, but wider range of reasons in yr3
- Relatively little French outside class in both groups, but again wider range and more sophisticated activities in yr 3 children

Summary: attitudes, motivation and learning strategies

- The children like learning French because it is intrinsically 'fun'; some 7 year olds can see its usefulness
- Older children have more learning strategies at their disposal
- However, both groups primarily motivated by immediate enjoyment; cognitive resources still limited at age 7

3.4 Relationships between different aspects of development

– Methodology

- Receptive vocabulary development (as reported earlier)
- Grammar development (as reported earlier)
- Working memory score (non-word repetition test), e.g.
 - tirrowdge; malpirony; empliforvent; dexiptecastic; brasterer
- Literacy (SATS results)

- Correlations between these measures

Links between linguistic development, literacy and working memory

- Highly significant correlation in all year groups between working memory and grammar
- Highly significant correlation between literacy and vocabulary development in years 1 and 3
- Significant correlation between working memory and literacy in both years 1 and 3
- Significant correlation between working memory and receptive vocabulary in year 3 only
- In year 7, correlation only between WM and grammar, but much smaller group having completed all tests (=14)

Summary: WM and literacy

(excluding year 7: numbers too small)

- Children are able to use literacy to help vocabulary learning (i.e. children with less developed literacy skills are not able to make use of the written input as effectively)
- Working memory might play an important role in the development of grammar
- ??working memory in year 1 is not sufficiently developed to support vocabulary learning effectively??
- Receptive vocabulary development is linked more to long term memory (?)

4. Conclusion

Conclusions: Age differences

- Vocabulary learning
 - Little difference between the groups, however:
 - Recency is more important for year 1 learners
 - Year 1 learners are slower to learn but catch up (better than other two groups in delayed post-test)
 - Less developed working memory could be an explanation
- Grammar
 - Clear age advantage for grammar
 - Year 1 learners have comparatively more difficulty with longer utterances
- Working memory and literacy
 - Both support classroom language learning
 - Y1 make slower start because of less developed WM and literacy skills

Age differences ctd.

- Attitudes, motivation and learning strategies similar age 5 and 7 (5 year olds slightly more enthusiastic; 7 year old more cognitively sophisticated)
- Relationships between different aspects of development in children aged 5 and 7
 - Correlations between all aspects of development except between working memory and receptive vocabulary in 5 year olds
 - Working memory at age 5 is not sufficiently developed to aid receptive vocabulary learning

General conclusions and implications

- Age advantage for grammar
- Older children make use of a wider range of cognitive strategies to aid learning
- Younger children are very enthusiastic
- Working memory and literacy support language learning

Project team



- Florence Myles (Director)
- Annabelle David (Research Associate)
- Christophe dos Santos (Research Associate)
- Kevin McManus (Research Associate)
- Angela Sterling (Teacher)
- Liz O’Sullivan (Clerical)



- Rosamond Mitchell (co-Director)
- Sarah Rule (Research Associate)
- Tim Boardman (IT Developer)
- Louise Courtney (Clerical)

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