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Primary school pupils enjoy learning English and French

New study shows diverse synergy effects of early foreign language learning

The latest Pisa study published in December 2023 showed that German pupils still have major deficits in German and Mathematics. The poor performance in IGLU 2021



(*Internationale Grundschul-Lese-Untersuchung*, International Primary School Reading Assessment) also underlines this finding. Against this backdrop, foreign language teaching in primary schools is struggling: politicians are calling for a reduction or even abolition of English lessons in favour of the two main subjects. In her study "KiwiS" (Kinder wollen internationale Sprachen, Children want international languages), English as a foreign language expert Prof. Dr. Jutta Rymarczyk investigated how primary school pupils themselves assess foreign language lessons. The study shows that English and French are very popular with children. The children are also in favour of beginning a foreign language at an early age in primary school. The majority of children with a first language other than German would also like to learn English as early as possible, according to a further result.

Educational policy background

Education policymakers often respond to weaknesses in German and Mathematics performance by intervening in foreign language teaching. The start of English and French in Baden-Wuerttemberg, for example, was moved from the first to the third grade in the 2020/2021 school year, and North Rhine-Westphalia followed suit in the 2021/2022 school year. Protests from foreign language teaching experts in various federal German states went unheard.

In most European countries, foreign language lessons are part of the primary school curriculum. In 2021, almost 85 per cent of primary

school pupils learned English, around five per cent learned French, and 3.5 per cent learned German across the EU, according to the "Foreign Language Learning Statistics 2023" survey by the European Commission's statistics portal "Eurostat". Between 2013 and 2021, the proportion of primary school pupils learning two or more foreign languages in the European Union rose from 4.6 per cent to 7.2 per cent.

Study at primary schools in Baden-Wuerttemberg

Against this educational policy backdrop, Prof. Dr. Jutta Rymarczyk conducted the "KiwiS" study on early foreign language learning among children in Year 3 and 4 at primary schools in Baden-Wuerttemberg in the second half of last year. After previous studies focussed on teachers, parents, and experts in foreign language learning, the children themselves were now to be heard in a survey. Their respective motivation is a decisive factor for learning success in primary school. Among other things, it was determined whether the children wanted foreign language lessons (English or French, depending on the region) beginning in first, third, or fifth grade; how much they enjoyed the lessons; and whether they would prefer more German or Mathematics lessons to learning foreign languages. The questionnaires were made available to the children online and in paper form at their primary schools. Most of the contact with the primary schools was established via the trainee teachers at the seminar locations.

43 per cent of children surveyed are in favour of foreign language lessons from Year 1 onwards

Initial results show that most of the children surveyed (n=1,624) are in favour of foreign language lessons in primary school. At 43.35 per cent, slightly more children voted in favour of beginning in Year 1 rather than in Year 3 (42.55 per cent). Only just under ten per cent are in favour of foreign language lessons starting in Year 5.

The majority of children enjoy the lessons "a lot" to "very much" (n=1,355). 686 children, around 42 per cent of all respondents, stated that they were multilingual. Many of these children would like to have foreign language lessons from Year 1 onwards (42.42 per cent).

According to Professor Rymarczyk, the finding that almost half of the multilingual children wish they could start with foreign language lessons right at the beginning of their school career is particularly striking. These children often have difficulties following lessons

taught in German. "In English or French lessons, however, they have a sense of achievement because they have experience learning a second language or have already mastered this language to a certain extent," the English teaching expert concludes. This experience is emphasised by the statement of a German-Turkish speaking girl: "Bitte streichen sie nicht diese zwei Stunden Englisch. Es macht mir sehr Spaß und es ist die einzige Fach, die ich sehr gut kann" (Please don't cancel these two hours of English. I really enjoy it, and it's the only subject I can do very well.) Study director Rymarczyk explains on the basis of these results, "In any case, they have the same linguistic prerequisites in foreign language lessons as the children with German as their first language: everyone is in the same boat here. This gives them a sense of security. In addition to the sense of achievement and recognition from the peer group, this is of great importance for the development of self-esteem and identity."

According to the English teaching expert, as far as foreign language teaching in German primary schools in an international context is concerned, in order to remain compatible at the European level, it is necessary for German education policy to provide pupils with the same learning conditions that have long been established in neighbouring countries.

Internationally, Germany can only achieve this by beginning foreign language teaching at primary school level. The primary school pupils in the "KiwiS" study are clearly ready for this.