

## **English? No Way**

A student whose German is poor often fails in English tests as well. A recent language learning study shows an enormous performance gap. And weaknesses of the teaching system: sometimes the students cannot get a word in edgewise, while the teacher speaks twice as much as all the students put together.

In English as a high school subject, there is “a very significant achievement peak” consisting of the students in the top 10 to 15% who speak effortless and excellent English. They are able to do far better than the curriculum requires of them. What has to be set against this is the fact that only a third of the students in public schools and integrated common schools attain the standard learning goals. This is one of the results of the study “Deutsch Englisch Schuelerleistungen International” (Desi) reported in *Die Welt*.

Students who perform poorly in German as a school subject hardly do any better in English. Their knowledge of German critically impacts on their success in learning English: students whose parents speak no German show the lowest achievement levels, while children with a multilingual upbringing attain significantly better scores.

This is the first time that a study has been able to demonstrate that students who have learnt German as a foreign language find it easier to go on and learn English than their fellow students do. Their achievement advantage is estimated as “a saving of at least half a year of schooling”, say scholars at the Deutsche Institut fuer Internationale Paedagogische Forschung on the basis of a survey commissioned by the conference of culture ministers. For this survey, 11000 students were questioned and tested at the beginning and at the end of their ninth grade.

Their study confirms a research result obtained at Basel University, where Georges Luedi, a linguist, has found that students who learn a second language at an early point in their schooling benefit also in their study of their mother tongue. Children begin to puzzle over why German has so many articles and English has just one, and this makes them learn.

So, in Baden-Wuerttemberg, from 2003 onwards, children have been saying “Good morning” to their teachers from day one of school, and teachers have been falling over each other to distribute achievement awards. Even the kindergartens in international schools teach foreign languages; audio cassettes like “Englisch lernen mit Benjamin Bluemchen” for children between three and six underscore this trend.

### **When the cake speaks, the crumbs keep quiet**

During a lesson, however, students tend to keep quiet. English language classrooms are usually places where the teacher does all the talking. The Tagesspiegel reports that teachers observed in the context of the Desi study speak twice as much as all the students put together. Students answer half the questions the teacher asks them in three seconds. Teachers are seldom willing to give them more time to formulate their replies. But the Desi study shows that performance improves when students are able to do more talking during language lessons – when the teacher is willing to wait longer for the student’s answer.

To begin the teaching of English as early as elementary school is an option education theorist Elsbeth Stern of Max Planck Institute for Educational Research, Berlin, does not favour. “Our schools are such huge construction sites that we cannot afford the luxury of establishing a new discipline without having first worked out the pedagogy or done research on the effects of what is being proposed”, she told the weekly *Die Zeit*.

Stern encourages elementary schools to do some meaningful analysis of the costs and benefits of the practices so far, since there is as yet no serious understanding of how to run foreign language teaching programmes for children that young. Stern puts it like this: “Children are bound to pick up a couple of foreign words. Given that they do, just how does it help them if the teacher at school sings an English song with them once or twice a week and then says ‘The weather is fine, now we go outside?’”

Even for German as a school subject, about half the students at public schools and integrated common schools face major difficulties in such tasks as writing letters and identifying elementary grammatical errors, says *Die Welt*, citing the Desi study.

At the end of the ninth grade, only a third of the students reach the point of being able to make conscious use of grammatical concepts and to compose nearly error-free texts in normal style. The study finds that it is at that age that proficiency growth attains significant levels. One finding is that ninth grade girls are more than a match for their male classmates.

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