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Foreword: A personal account of foreign language learning and some additional thoughts.

Annick De Houwer

University of Erfurt, Germany

I can still remember my first French lessons at the age of six, in my Dutch-medium primary school in Flanders, Belgium (I was raised in Dutch). I was supposed to make sense of text in some strange spelling (I already knew how to read in Dutch) and answer the teacher's questions about it. There were some pictures but not many. Also, I remember having to choose between the definite articles "le" and "la" to put in front of names of things on a worksheet. In primary school we had a bit of French every day, but our teacher mainly spoke Dutch to us. I had no idea what kind of people spoke French and why I had to learn it. It was just one of those things a kid had to do. But my grandparents were always very pleased when I had good grades in Dutch and French and I was rewarded with extra pocket money. I don't remember ever having to speak in French or singing French songs in primary school. The first time I heard French songs was when I was an adolescent and heard some French hits on the radio. The language sounded strange to me and appeared fully dissociated from what I had heard from my primary school teachers. In secondary school we had French lessons for about four hours a week, but now our French teachers sounded much more like those singers on the radio, and we all realized they spoke good French. In class we were now called upon to speak some French, but mostly we were doing written work and learning word lists with their Dutch translations by heart. At the end of secondary school, I could read Sartre and write short

French essays about French novels we had to read. But when on holiday in Tunisia I wanted to converse with people in French it was very hard and cumbersome.

Contrast this to my learning of English and German (I won't mention Latin, which clearly had another status as I started to formally learn it at secondary school at the rate of 9 hours per week in the first year). As a preschooler, I had overheard people speak English when I lived in Asia with my family, but I never spoke it myself, and nobody spoke it to me (I went to a Dutch preschool). I only started to learn English at school at the age of 14. However, I found that I already knew everything my teacher was trying to teach us; also, I thought she had a dreadful accent, and I knew she made mistakes. How could this be? I had heard visitors to my home speak English to my parents, and once in a while, my mother gave me a few hints about how to greet people in English. It was so odd that you had to answer with the same question people asked you (*How do you do?*). Starting at age eight, I loved watching *Zorro* on TV. It was the only program I was allowed to watch, once a week, and it was in English with Dutch subtitles. My parents were avid readers and there were plenty of English books at home, and also *TIME* magazine. I couldn't read any of it but was very interested. On approaching puberty, I started listening to pop songs, and the first record I bought was Simon and Garfunkel's album *Bridge over troubled water*, which had the lyrics to all the songs on the back. I started to try and sing along. Then I discovered The Beatles and got myself the lyrics and music to their songs so I could sing them and accompany myself on the guitar. I started reading an English biography of The Beatles when I was 15. I understood only a third of it but the next English book I read (my father's suggestion), Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*, went much better already (all without a dictionary). My English TV viewing had much increased since I was eight, and I watched about 5 hours of English shows with Dutch subtitles a week. We went to London a few times and I could easily make myself understood in English.

My story for German is a bit similar, although German was not nearly as present in my home as was English. I did have some cousins who spoke Swiss German, though, and I occasionally heard them speak it amongst them (they all could speak some Dutch at the time). Sometimes my father

would take me along on brief business trips to Germany, and occasionally we had visitors who spoke German and no English. When I was 14 there was a new German detective series on TV, with Dutch subtitles, and we watched this regularly for about two years. The actors spoke very clearly and I soon got used to hearing and understanding German. German lessons at school were few and far between, and the teacher was nice but didn't speak much German to us. All I really learned was: "aus bei mit nach von zu seit - mit Dativ!" (a series of German prepositions that take the dative case). At 18, I made the acquaintance of a German student in Brussels and her Dutch was in the beginning stages so we spoke German, although I had hardly spoken any German before (just a bit here and there during visits to Germany and Austria). This went well. A few years later I read many of Hermann Hesse's books in German.

Why did I not really learn to communicate in French, although I had started to learn it at age six? Why were my other newly found languages, English and German, so much easier to use, even though I really did not learn them at school, and only started to hear them frequently at age 11 and 14, respectively? Maybe I was just not the type who likes to learn a language through formal lessons. Yet, I did manage to learn quite a bit of Spanish through formal lessons starting at age 20, first through private tutors, then through independent study at Stanford University, where my Spanish grades were straight A's. And I did manage to learn enough Latin by the end of secondary school so I could write short essays in it after six years of formal instruction through the grammar-translation method. But then again, I had started learning Latin and Spanish much later in life than French. Perhaps I was just no good as a young language learner? After all, I didn't start speaking any foreign languages until I was 14.

The book you are about to read tries to offer answers to such questions and focuses on the role of age in the learning of foreign languages. There are many contradictory ideas about the importance of age in learning foreign languages, or, indeed, in learning second languages, that is, new languages that you need for day to day communication. The distinction between foreign and second languages isn't always that clear, though, and can shift in a person's life. In my case, French,

English and German have all become second languages at different times in my life, because I've lived in regions where they were the main language of communication. Now I consider all of them as "my" languages (cf. Kohn, 2011).

Regardless of whether you want to make a distinction between foreign and second languages, people get very emotional about the age factor in language learning. I have heard both professional linguists (that is, scholars who systematically approach the study of language and language-related aspects) and non-linguists argue quite heatedly about whether age is an important factor or not. This book presents the different points that are made in such debates amongst scholars, and tries to do so in a clear-headed way. This is important, because the issue seems to deeply touch people's feelings. Often, people use age as an excuse for why they did not learn a particular language, while others wave age away and say it's all in the effort you put into it. Other people get confused about the age factor: although several of my students in Germany had had English lessons from the age of eight, and deeply believed that you should start to learn a foreign language as early as possible, they were embarrassed to have to admit that their level of English was really not as good as they would expect, given that they had started to learn it so early. In this book, Amelia Lambelet and Raphael Berthele succeed admirably in dissecting the various issues that could have played a role in such experiences.

More and more, educational policies regarding foreign language education assume that for it to succeed it must start at an early age. As Lambelet and Berthele rightly state, many of these educational policies are also intensely political. The authors have decided not to discuss those educational policies and their possible reasons. Instead they focus on the evidence that is available from studies in applied linguistics that can inform the question to what extent age relates to success in new language learning. I take the liberty of adding a few points that policy makers may want to consider. In Europe, with few exceptions the introduction of a foreign language at the (pre-)primary level usually concerns the same single language in a particular country or region. As I pointed out earlier (De Houwer, 2004; 2014), investing in the same single language can be a dangerous choice.

Sociopolitical circumstances can rapidly change, and can lead to other languages becoming relatively more important. If one has laid all one's eggs in a single language-basket, so to speak, one may end up with a lot of human and economic cost that could have been avoided. Another aspect to consider is that early language learning can be a negative experience for young children and can demotivate them towards foreign languages for their entire school career and perhaps even beyond. As Lambelet and Berthele point out, motivation is of prime importance in foreign language learning. I was lucky to have grandparents who gave me pocket money when I did well in French, a language I was in no way otherwise motivated to learn!

Language policies also extend to the media. Foreign language exposure through media can be supportive in foreign language learning. This probably partly explains my success with English and German. It also explains why in research under my direction in Flanders 374 eleven and twelve-year-olds who had not had any personal contact with English or English language teaching knew quite a bit of English anyhow. Children who had greater exposure to English media knew more English (Kuppens & De Houwer, 2006). Especially English television viewing with Dutch subtitling was an important factor (Kuppens, 2007). Verspoor and colleagues (2011) in the Netherlands found a similar advantage from English media exposure to English as a foreign language learning. In most large countries in Europe and North America, television viewing cannot support foreign language learning much, since programs are all in the countries' main language. Large commercial interests likely prohibit any fundamental changes towards a more multilingual media landscape. This constitutes a missed opportunity for language learners.

An idea supporting the notion that foreign language learning needs to start early in order to be successful is the idea of a biologically based critical period. Lambelet and Berthele discuss this idea at length and are to be applauded for the nuance they bring to the task. For reasons I have outlined in De Houwer (2014) I am skeptical of the idea of a critical period, even for learning to sound native-like (see also De Houwer, 1982; for a discussion of methodological issues that could help settle the matter see Schmid and Hopp, 2014). For instance, using a native-like accent in a foreign

language can symbolize an identity one does not wish to portray. Furthermore, being able to speak with a good accent in a foreign language and being able to switch between accents requires practice. I partly attribute my ease in sounding fairly native-like in four languages to a practicing exercise I did the year I was 16: for about half an hour every day I would read aloud short expository texts in four languages (Dutch, French, German and English, not necessarily in that order) that were each others' translations (these were in my guitar book). That way I learnt to re-set my articulatory organs for each language, so to speak, and I could read a sentence or word again when I had said it wrong. There was no audience to worry about, I did not need to form the sentences or look for words, and so I could focus solely on what I sounded like.

Finally it needs to be mentioned that young children can learn to speak in several languages but also that they can easily forget one of them. Such language attrition is fairly common (De Houwer, 2009). Attrition occurs in older people as well, both in a language they learned from birth and in second languages (e.g., Schmid, 2014). What the phenomenon of language attrition means for the debate on the age factor in foreign language learning still needs to be explored. The book you are about to read furnishes the necessary background needed to start investigating this issue while clarifying many others.

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