Missing the Mark?
Looking at recent language acquisition policy decisions in Japan through the lens of SLA research

Peter Longcope*

Introduction

One area of interest within sociolinguistics is the study of language policy. Studying language policy allows researchers to understand how governments and other organizations can affect the ways that languages are used by individuals. One type of language policy that governments often implement is related to language acquisition. This acquisition can be related to immigrants’ acquisition of the dominant language of the country, but it can also be related to citizens’ acquisition of second languages. Regardless, it can be informative to compare these language acquisition policy decisions to findings within the field of second language acquisition to understand what may be expected from these policy decisions.

Japanese Language Acquisition Policy

Recently, the Japanese government implemented a number of language acquisition policy decisions in an effort to improve English education in Japan. Included in these decisions was the policy to introduce English language activities in the third and fourth years of elementary school (i.e., for eight and nine year old children) and English language classes in the fifth and sixth years of elementary school (i.e., for 10 and 11 year old children). Prior to these decisions, children in Japan did not begin to study English until they were first year students in junior high school, that is until they were

* 专修大学文学部准教授
The policy states that eight- and nine-year-olds will participate in English language activities one to two times per week, and that 10- and 11-year-olds will receive 3 English classes a week. This amounts to roughly 120 hours of English exposure by the end of the students’ fourth year of elementary school and then an additional 120 hours of exposure in each of the following two years. So altogether, the policy would have students receiving an estimated 360 hours of English exposure prior to reaching junior high school, or before they reach 12 years of age.

As Singleton (2014) points out, many countries have begun including foreign language instruction in their elementary school curricula, so these language acquisition policy decisions that the Japanese government has made are certainly not unique. Singleton continues that one of the main reasons countries implement these types of policies is because there is an impression that young children learn languages better than older children and adults. Research has certainly shown that, with respect to second language acquisition, young children can benefit from living in contexts where the child’s second language is the dominant language within the community. In fact, even though older children and adults initially show greater progress in learning the second language than young children, after a certain amount of time, in these contexts, young children are likely to not only equal the progress of older children and adults, but even surpass them (DeKeyser, 2012; Singleton, 2014). However, it is not necessarily the case that these results apply to all contexts, especially contexts like English in Japan, that is foreign language contexts, where the second language of the child, English in the case of Japan, is a minority language of the community and so the amount of meaningful exposure children receive outside of the classroom is negligible.

This paper will look at a few studies that investigate whether or not the results that have been found in second language contexts are replicated in foreign language contexts. If the results are in fact replicated, one would expect to find that young learners would be able to attain equal levels of language proficiency as older learners.
given the same amount of exposure.

Grammaticality Judgments

García Mayo (2003) compared grammaticality judgment scores of two groups of EFL learners after four years (or 394 hours) of exposure and again after six years (or 594 hours) of exposure. The first group of learners had initially begun studying English between the ages of eight and nine while the second group of learners had initially begun studying English between the ages of 11 and 12. All learners in the study were Basque/Spanish bilinguals. As Basque and Spanish are considered pro-drop languages and English is not a pro-drop language, García Mayo had the grammaticality judgments focus on four aspects of the pro-drop parameter.

García Mayo (2003) reports that after both four years of exposure and six years of exposure, the learners who started later consistently outperformed the learners who started earlier. More specifically, She found that the learners who were first exposed to English at a later age were less likely to misidentify ungrammatical sentences as correct. They were also more likely than the earlier starters to identify ungrammatical sentences as incorrect. Furthermore, she found that the learners who started at a later age showed much greater metalinguistic awareness than the learners who started at an earlier age, as the students who started later were far more likely to be able to correct ungrammatical sentences than the students who started earlier. In all three comparisons, the differences between the students who started studying when older and the students who started studying when younger were statistically significant. What these results indicate is that even after six years of English exposure, the learners who started at a later age had a better understanding of English grammar than the learners who started at an earlier age.

Foreign Language Sounds: Reception and Production

García Lecumberri and Gallardo (2003) focused on the ability of
learners to recognize and produce sounds in a foreign language. In their study, they looked at three different groups of learners: the first group had received their first exposure to the foreign language (English) at the age of four; the second group had received their first exposure to English at the age of eight; and the third group had received their first exposure to English at the age of 11. At the time of testing, all learners were in their sixth year of English study.

García Lecumberri and Gallardo (2003) found that the learners that started the latest were superior to the other two groups at distinguishing consonant differences in minimal pairs. The consonant sounds were specifically selected based on previous research; examples of minimal pairs used in the study were given as *goat−coat* for initial position contrasts and *bag−back* for final position contrasts (p. 121). They also found that the learners that started the latest were superior to the learners that started the earliest at distinguishing vowel differences in minimal pairs. As with the consonant minimal pairs, the minimal pairs for vowel sounds were selected based on past research; examples of minimal pairs used in the study were given as *good−god* and *ban−barn* (p. 121).

García Lecumberri and Gallardo (2003) also had a native-speaker judge rate the learners’ degree of foreign accent and their general intelligibility. In the case of both foreign accent and general intelligibility, little difference was found between the group of students whose first exposure was at four years old and the group of students whose first exposure was at eight years old. However, the group of students whose first exposure was at 11 years old was found to have less of a foreign accent and to have higher intelligibility than the other two groups. In discussing these findings, though, García Lecumberri and Gallardo issue two important caveats. First of all, they point out that analysis of the learners’ speech production indicated that the learners in all three groups “employ[ed] transfer as their main TL pronunciation strategy” (p. 125). The second point they make is that even though the learners who started the latest were found to have less of a foreign accent and to be more intelligible than the other two groups, they were still found to have a fairly strong foreign accent and to have low intelligibility scores.
Written Production

Lasagabaster and Doiz (2003) looked at the impact that age of first exposure had on written production. They looked at three groups of learners: learners whose first exposure to English had been between four and five years of age, learners whose first exposure to English had been between eight and nine years of age, and learners whose first exposure had been between 11 and 12 years of age. At the time of the study, all learners had been studying English for eight years and had received roughly 700 hours of instruction. In their study, Lasagabaster and Doiz looked at written production as judged from a holistic perspective as well as from the perspective of fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

With respect to the holistic scoring of the writing, the learners who had started the earliest had scores that were lower to a statistically significant degree than each of the other two groups. Furthermore, the learners who had started the latest had scores that were higher to a statistically significant degree than the learners who had started at an age midway between the other two groups. Thus, with respect to aspects of writing related to content, organization, language use, and mechanics, the learners who were first exposed to English at a later age consistently performed better than learners who had first been exposed to English at an earlier age.

Similar results were also found with respect to the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of the learners' writing. The learners who had first been exposed to English when they were older were found to outperform the learners who had first been exposed to English when they were younger in all three areas. In fact, Lasagabaster and Doiz (2003) state,

> the older the students are: (1) the more extended their texts are, made up of longer sentences (fluency); (2) the greater lexical, syntactical and discoursal complexity is shown in their texts; and (3) the lower the number of errors encountered by the evaluators is, as the older students’ texts are more accurate (p. 155).
So as was the case with the studies discussed earlier that looked at grammaticality judgments and foreign language sounds, learners who had first been exposed to English at an older age were found not only to have better organized writing, but also to write more fluently, with more complexity, and more accurately.

Conclusion: Age of First Exposure and Foreign Language Education

As can be seen from the above discussion, in contrast to the recent Japanese language acquisition policy decisions, earlier exposure to a second language does not appear to lead to superior performance in foreign language contexts. In each of the studies discussed above, learners who had first been exposed to the language at an older age outperformed learners who had first been exposed to the language at a younger age. This was true with respect to the acquisition of the foreign language’s grammar system (García Mayo, 2003), the acquisition of the foreign language sound system, both reception and production (García Lecumberri and Gallardo, 2003), and writing ability (Lasagabaster and Doiz, 2003). In fact, all of these studies stated that their findings were in line with findings of research that had been done previously. So while it might be the case that younger learners may benefit from learning a second language in a second language setting, where they are likely to receive meaningful exposure to the language in the community, the same cannot be said when they are learning the language in a foreign language setting, where there is not likely to be any meaningful exposure to the language outside the language classroom.

The issue of the processes different aged children use to learn languages can help to understand the different results in the two different language settings. As DeKeyser (2012) and Singleton (2014) point out, young children rely heavily on implicit learning when acquiring languages. This means that they are able to make use of repeated exposure to the language being used in meaningful ways during their everyday activities in order to learn the language. Of course, this implicit learning only begins to take effect after ex-
tremely large amounts of exposure to the language, which is why, as was discussed above, older children and adults initially learn the language more quickly, even in second language settings, but before too long younger children will catch up and surpass them. It is this repeated exposure to the language being used in meaningful ways that allows the younger children to catch up to and surpass older children and adults. However, in foreign language settings where exposure to the second language is so severely limited, younger children have no opportunity to learn the language implicitly and so may have no opportunity to catch up to older children and adults.

In contrast to young children, older children and adults tend to make use of explicit learning when acquiring languages (DeKeyser, 2012; Singleton, 2014). This use of explicit learning is one of the main factors that allows older children and adults to initially learn second languages more quickly than young children when living in settings where the language is the dominant language of the community. As Lasagabaster and Doiz (2003) state, because older children (and adults) are cognitively more mature than young children, they are better equipped to make use of explicit learning, and when exposure to the second language is significantly limited, as it is in foreign language settings, it is necessary to learn the language explicitly. Given the roles of implicit learning and explicit learning in the different language settings, and given the differences between the abilities of young children and older children to make use of implicit and explicit learning, the findings of the studies discussed above are not surprising.

Since it is known that older children and adults initially learn faster in second language settings only to have young children catch up over time, the question may be asked if the same result is possible in foreign language settings. The studies discussed above only look at exposure of up to six to eight years, so it might still be possible for longer exposure to lead to similar results as found in second language settings. In fact, Singleton (1989, in García Lecumberri and Gallardo, 2003) estimates that it would take 18 years of instruction for early exposure in a foreign language setting to result
in younger learners being able to catch up to older learners. This estimated length of time is significant in that the Japanese policy has students begin their exposure to English in the third grade of elementary school. This would mean that students who finish school after graduating from high school would have received a total of only 10 years of English instruction and those who leave school after graduating college would receive, at most, only 14 years of instruction. In both cases, the total number of years of English instruction these students would receive from their educational experiences would fall well short of the estimated 18 years.

Implications for Language Acquisition Policy

As Singleton (2014) states in paraphrasing Bruer, “one of the dangers of focusing on maturational issues in discussing learning is that it prompts us to pay too much attention to when learning occurs and too little attention to the conditions of learning” (p. 32; italics in original). In the case of the Japanese policy being discussed, the main focus is on when to begin English language classes rather than on how they are to be taught. Given the relevant research, which indicates that starting earlier does not necessarily lead to greater learning, it might be wise to think more about how to teach students English. In addressing this issue, García Mayo (2003) recommends finding ways to effectively use the hours of exposure so that the language will be used for instruction and communication within the classroom. She continues by suggesting that content-based language instruction be considered as one possible solution to this problem.

References
