The earlier, the better? Differences in socio-cognitive and affective factors between early and late Danish learners of EFL in a large-scale study.

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The benefits of early starting EFL instruction are not well documented. The present questionnaire study therefore investigated the difference between first-graders’ (7 years) and third-graders’ (9 years) EFL learning in terms of socio-cognitive and affective factors: self-esteem, anxiety and growth mindset (e.g., Dweck, 2000) in a large sample (n=295) of young first-time Danish learners of English. Children completed the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) and the Test for Reception of Grammar (TROG) before and after one year of language instruction.

Regarding the psychological characteristics of the two age-groups, results showed that on composite indices of five-point Likert scales, third-graders reported higher self-esteem (3.9) than first-graders (3.7). This resonates with general findings in developmental psychology that younger children are more optimistic about their own abilities than older children. Relatedly, third-graders reported significantly more anxiety (3.0) than first-graders (2.6). Third-graders on the other hand had a growth mindset to a higher degree (4) than first-graders (3.7).

Concerning EFL gains, self-esteem was related to higher language scores before instruction for third-graders (r=.3) but less so for first-graders (r=.15). Self-esteem was more strongly related to gains on the TROG for both grades (r=.26) than the PPVT.

Having a growth mindset was related to higher language scores before any instruction in English (r=.2) for first-graders, but not third-graders. A growth mindset did not correlate with gains while were somewhat related to language scores one year later (r=.18) for first-graders.

Anxiety did not correlate with first-graders’ language scores, while it correlated negatively with third-graders’ PPVT and TROG scores (r=-.25), and further correlated negatively with their gains during one year of instruction (r=-.22), leaving third-graders with post-test language scores negatively correlated with anxiety (r=.4). For all correlations and difference-scores reported above: P<.05.


Keywords: "anxiety", "self-esteem", "mindset".