Game on! Young learners’ incidental language learning of English prior to instruction

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## Topics

## Sample

30 children who were all in the last year of primary school from two classes of a school in Ghent, Belgium. They had not had any English lessons prior to the test as English is not part of primaryschools’ curricula in Flanders. The group consisted of 16 boys and 14 girls. Eighteen
children were native speakers of Dutch, and 12 children had a multilingual background (Arabic-Dutch, Turkish-Dutch, French-Dutch, Dutch-Cape Verdean Creole).

# Abstract

In this paper the incidental language acquisition of 11-year-old Flemish children (n = 30) who have not received any formal English instruction is investigated. The study looks into children’s English proficiency and the learner characteristics that can be associated with it. In order to measure the children’s English proficiency, a receptive vocabulary test and a proficiency test (which measured listening skills, speaking skills, reading skills and writing skills) were used. Information about learner characteristics was gathered through two questionnaires (for children and parents). The results show that a significant proportion of the 11-year-olds can already perform tasks at the A2 level (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) without having had any formal instruction. The study confirms that children learn English from the input they receive through different media (especially gaming and computer use). Furthermore, the data reveal a strikingly positive attitude towards English and demonstrate that in some situations Flemish children prefer using English over their L1 with their peers.

# Outcome

"The results for listening comprehension are revealing since 12 of the 30 children had a score below 50% and 13 children had a score of 80% or higher. This could be especially challenging for foreign teachers since 40% of the children had already reached the required competence level for listening comprehension that they should achieve at the end of the second year of secondary education. This forms very heterogeneous classes at the start of formal English instruction. Yet, the results obtained for the other skills tests (reading, writing and speaking) were markedly lower than those for listening. For speaking, reading and writing more than half of the children scored less than 50%. For these skills too about 10-25% of the children had obtained the required competence level set for the end of the second year of secondary education (CEFR A2).
Factors that are related to children’s incidental acquisition of English before starting formal English instruction, the variables related to media use seemed to be most telling. The amount of gaming in English and the number of hours of computer use in English were significant predictors. Nevertheless, there were no significant differences in test results between boys and girls. This could be due to the fact that both boys (6) and girls (4) spent a lot of time gaming (more than 1 hour per day).