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Influences of early English language teaching on oral fluency

Stephana de Wolf, Nienke Smit, and
Wander Lowie

Elementary-level foreign language education is currently receiving a lot of attention in the literature on second language learning, and has emerged as an important educational policy issue. The present study aims to contribute to this discussion by focusing on the fluency benefits gained from early foreign language teaching. The participants were 23 early-start language learners and 29 late starters, all 10–12 years old and in the final grade of a Dutch elementary school (Year 8). A picture description task was used as a basis for comparing the fluency of the two groups. A questionnaire was also employed to investigate the influence of external factors such as motivation, attitude towards English, and exposure to English outside school. The present study found a marginal advantage for early starters in terms of oral fluency. Moreover, the results of this study show that exposure outside school has a greater impact on oral fluency than early language teaching alone.

Background

In 2002, the European Council called for further action in the field of multilingualism. The Council suggested that all European pupils from then on needed to improve their skills in two foreign languages, preferably by receiving foreign language instruction from a very early age. In the Netherlands, English is the dominant foreign language and has been mandatory in the last two years of elementary education since 1986. Aligned with the European Council ambitions and with the assumption that an early start is beneficial for second language (L2) learning, the Dutch government wanted to reinforce the position of foreign languages in the elementary school curriculum. A growing number of Dutch schools now offer English from the age of 4 onwards. This study investigates the assumed advantages of early English language teaching by looking at evidence from oral fluency measures. Pupils starting in Grade 7 or 8 (10–12 years old) in this study will be referred to as ‘late’ starters, whereas pupils starting at the age of 4 (Grade 1) will be referred to as ‘early’ starters.

The Dutch authorities seem to adopt a positive attitude towards the possibility of offering English in Grade 1, but opinions differ greatly when it comes to the effectiveness of early-start language teaching. On the one hand, it has been argued that the earlier pupils start learning a

L2, the better the results are expected to be. [Unsworth, Persson, Prins, and De Bot \(2015\)](#) studied short-term gains and their results show that early learners (4–5 year olds) on EFL programmes outperform early learners who were not in such programmes and who did not receive English instruction. After one or two years of instruction, early learners in their study performed better on receptive grammar and receptive vocabulary tasks than the control group, showing the short-term positive effects of early English instruction. On the other hand, the added value of early English language teaching has been called into question. [Aarts and Ronde \(2006\)](#) found that after two years of English language teaching, early starters' receptive skills are limited, their level of production is low, they are not able to create sentences and, in addition, their vocabulary is limited. Although their receptive skills seem to improve, no benefits of early language teaching are found in their productive skills. In a study focusing on 8 year olds versus 11 year olds in Catalonia, [Mora \(2006\)](#) found that late starters outperform early starters in terms of oral fluency. Overall, however, the differences in conclusions between the studies may be due to different input conditions. For example, Unsworth *et al.* (ibid.) state that English classroom exposure of more than one or two hours per week is necessary for early language teaching to be effective. Based on a review of earlier studies, [Herder and De Bot \(2005\)](#) also conclude that a communicative curriculum in which there is extensive exposure to input in combination with sufficient instruction time (three to five hours per week) may be required to make an early start beneficial. This is further supported by [Lightbown and Spada \(2006\)](#) who believe that being taught English for a limited time per week will cause frustration, as the learner will have the feeling of having studied English for several years, without making significant/considerable progress.

In addition to the number of hours of instruction, studies have emphasized the importance of out-of-school exposure, especially in contexts where the L2 has a strong presence. Whereas Unsworth *et al.* (op.cit.) did not find evidence that out-of-school exposure correlates with children's vocabulary or grammar, [Naber and Lowie \(2012\)](#) show that out-of-school exposure is more important for L2 acquisition than is classroom exposure. The difference between their findings and Unsworth *et al.*'s findings may be caused by the difference in age groups. Whereas Unsworth *et al.* (op.cit.) focused on pupils aged 4–5 years old, Naber and Lowie (ibid.) focused on 11–12-year-old pupils. The ELLiE research project ([Enever 2011](#)) also showed that exposure outside school is an important predictor for both reading and listening skills in the L2. This holds for both regular curricula and immersion programmes.

Existing studies on the effectiveness of an early start on oral L2 production have mainly focused on the ability of the L2 learner to produce error-free speech ([Housen and Kuiken 2009](#)). However, the level of English of the participants in the present study, pupils at elementary level, is remarkably low and contains numerous deviations from native-speaker norms. In our study, we therefore focus on the oral fluency of elementary-level pupils rather than accuracy.

Oral fluency

The label ‘oral fluency’ is used for a variety of different constructs (Segalowitz 2010). For instance, Lennon (1990) refers to the broad sense of fluency, meaning the global oral proficiency in which a fluent speaker has a high command of the foreign or second language. Oral fluency is highly relevant for L2 learning, as one of the goals of learning a L2 is to achieve speech production at the pace of a native speaker ‘impeded by silent pauses and hesitations, filled pauses, self-corrections, repetitions, false starts, and the like’ (Lennon *ibid.*:390).

In the current article, fluency is defined as ‘perceptions of ease, eloquence, and “smoothness” of speech’ (Housen and Kuiken *ibid.*: 463) and is a general measure of a person’s spoken language proficiency. Fluency is related to learners’ control over their L2 linguistic knowledge, as reflected by the speed and ease with which they access relevant L2 information to communicate meaning in real time, with control improving as the learner automatizes the process of gaining access to the lexicon. Kormos and Dénes (2004) investigated the linguistic and temporal variables which can predict native and non-native speaking teachers’ perceptions of oral fluency. They conclude that oral fluency is primarily a prosodic phenomenon. The present study focuses on the temporal dimension of oral fluency of early and late starters. In addition, since in-school exposure and EFL instruction are not the only factors contributing to pupils’ L2 development, control variables such as the student’s attitude towards English and the exposure to English outside school were taken into account to ensure that any differences between early and late starters could be attributed to instruction. This leads to the following research questions:

- 1 Do early starters outperform late starters in terms of oral fluency?
- 2 What is the effect of exposure to English outside school on oral fluency?

The study Participants

The data set for this study was obtained from CITO (Dutch National Institute for Educational Measurement), which collected speech samples in which randomly selected pupils carried out a picture description task as part of CITO’s report on the impact of early foreign language learning on children’s English language skills (Geurts and Hemker 2013). The focus of their study was primarily on task-focused activities and their recordings were not analysed for speaking skills. Five Dutch schools offering early English language teaching and six regular Dutch schools participated in the CITO study, and all schools sent pupils to take part in the activity. The participants were divided into early starters and late starters (Table 1).

Procedure

CITO’s tape-recorded speech samples were used for the current study. The samples, which had an average length of two to three minutes, consisted of a picture description task wherein six pictures, arranged in logical order, were used as an elicitation instrument (Figure 1; Geurts and Hemker *ibid.*). The speaker was asked to narrate the story while looking at the stimuli. Segalowitz (*op.cit.*) stresses the advantage of this type of task as it allows the researcher to elicit a topic without putting specific words or sentence constructions in the participants’ mouths, and without making participants retrieve a story from their memories. In this way, the participant delivers natural speech. Kormos and Dénes (*op.cit.*) argue

Education	No. pupils	No. schools	EFL starting age (years)	Age (years)	Male	Female	Dutch L1	English L1	Other L1
Late starters	29	6	8–9	10–12	14	15	24	0	5
Early starters	23	5	4	10–12	8	15	20	0	3

TABLE 1
Overview of participants

furthermore that a picture description task is favourable as it provides fixed content, thereby eliminating the influencing factor of having to produce different kinds of content.

In order to gain precise temporal measures of all variables, the speech samples were analysed with the help of PRAAT computer software. [De Jong and Wempe \(2009\)](#) presented a script written in the software program PRAAT, which automatically detects syllable nuclei in order to calculate speech rate. In their study, de Jong and Wempe (*ibid.*) found that the script provides a reliable means of measuring speech rate in terms of number of syllables per time unit, which is useful when comparing speakers and tasks.

Based on findings in Kormos and Dénes (*op.cit.*), Segalowitz (*op.cit.*), and [de Jong, Groenhout, Schoonen, and Hulstijn \(2013\)](#), the audio fragments in this study were analysed on the following 11 measures: speech rate, which is the number of syllables articulated per minute; articulation rate, which is the mean number of syllables formed per minute over the entire period spent speaking during the speech sample; average syllable duration in seconds; mean length of utterance in syllables; and mean length of utterance in seconds, which is the average number of syllables produced in utterances between pauses longer than .25 seconds (Kormos and Dénes *op.cit.*). Additional predictors of fluency are: number of pauses per minute in total time; number of pauses per minute in speaking time; mean pause duration; phonation-time ratio, which is the proportion of the time which was taken to produce the speech samples; number of filled pauses (such as ‘ehm’, ‘er’, and ‘mm’); and the number of disfluencies per minute.

All measures were either automatically generated by the PRAAT script (de Jong and Wempe *ibid.*), such as the speech rate, the number of pauses, the number of syllables, and the syllable duration, or were calculated based on these data.

After the picture description task, pupils were asked to fill in a questionnaire investigating their attitude towards English and their out-of-school exposure (see Appendix). The questionnaire was created by CITO⁴ and was used to compare the group samples.

Since it is assumed that exposure to English outside school may have a greater influence than the lessons offered at school (Enever *op.cit.*), this factor was added to the study as a variable in order to gather a more complete picture in the form of questionnaires. The questionnaires focused on the pupils’ attitude towards English and their out-of-school

FIGURE 1
Picture description task

Geurts, B. and B. Hemker. 2013. *Balans van het Engels aan het Einde van de Basisschool. Uitkomsten van de Vierde Peiling in 2012*. PPON-reeks nr. 52. Arnhem: CITO. Reproduced with permission from CITO.

exposure. Attitude was operationalized as the students' willingness to watch DVDs without subtitles and read English books and messages on the internet. The questionnaire also investigated the degree to which pupils liked English, thought it was important, and used it in their daily lives. The exposure index is a weighted, normalized average of all questions with respect to exposure. The four variables used for the index are: reading magazines or books, writing emails, writing postcards or letters, and playing computer games.

Results

Early versus late starters

A Mann-Whitney *U*-test was conducted to determine whether there were any significant differences between the performance of early English language learners and late English language learners with respect to the 11 measures of fluency.

The results in Table 2 show that early starters produce longer utterances and fewer filled pauses than late starters. With regard to the remaining nine variables, Table 2 does not show significant results, which means there is not enough evidence to state that young starters outperform older starters for these measurements.

Variable	Group	Obs.	Mean	SD	Z	P
Speech rate	Late starters	29	1.539	.669	.866	.3865
	Early starters	23	1.706	.700		
Articulation rate	Late starters	29	3.338	.337	.304	.7611
	Early starters	23	3.395	.440		
Mean syllable duration	Late starters	29	.302	.030	-.341	.7332
	Early starters	23	.299	.035		
Mean length of utterance in syllable	Late starters	29	4.404	2.114	1.806	.0710
	Early starters	23	5.493	3.178		
Mean length of utterance in seconds	Late starters	29	1.298	.542	1.981	.0476**
	Early starters	23	1.602	.875		
Number of pauses per minute (total time)	Late starters	29	.341	.094	-.341	.7332
	Early starters	23	.321	.119		
Number of pauses per minute (speaking time)	Late starters	29	.830	.266	-1.870	.0615
	Early starters	23	.692	.231		
Mean pause duration	Late starters	29	1.858	1.229	-.304	.7611
	Early starters	23	2.069	1.930		
Phonation-time ratio	Late starters	29	.451	.163	.709	.4781
	Early starters	23	.498	.182		
Filled pauses per minute (speaking time)	Late starters	29	.220	.209	-2.071	.0384**
	Early starters	23	.104	.090		
Dysfluencies per minute (speaking time)	Late starters	29	.096	.067	-.157	.8754
	Early starters	23	.097	.074		

Note: asterisks indicate statistical significance at the **5 per cent level

TABLE 2

Comparison of the linguistic measures of late starters and early starters

Exposure to English outside school

The results from the exposure questionnaire were measured by means of a regression analysis and are shown in [Table 3](#). Exposure outside school is clearly a significant factor. On 8 of the 11 measures of fluency, the table shows a relationship between exposure and fluency for both late and early learners. Exposure is positively correlated with speech rate, articulation rate, mean length of utterance in syllables and seconds, and phonation-time ratio. For every unit increase in exposure, an increase is expected for these fluency measures. Exposure is negatively associated with mean syllable duration, number of pauses per minute speaking time, and mean pause duration. This means that the more a student is exposed to English outside school, the lower the student's syllable duration when speaking English. In addition, with more out-of-school exposure, a student will produce fewer pauses and the pauses will have a shorter duration. This can be interpreted as a positive effect on the level of fluency. The results of these questionnaires were compared and show that there is no significant difference between the groups in terms of exposure ($SD\ 24.86$, $P = .55$) and attitude, implying that the groups cannot be distinguished on this variable. Therefore, it can be concluded that exposure has a strong, direct influence on fluency for both early and late starters.

Dependent variables	Independent variables	
	Late starters = 1	Exposure index
Speech rate	-.245 (-1.73)	.018** (6.52)
Articulation rate	-.087 (-.91)	.007** (3.73)
Average syllable duration	.006 (.78)	-.001** (-3.75)
Mean length of utterance in syllables	-1.301 (-1.99)	.051** (3.88)
Mean length of utterance in seconds	-.352 (-1.92)	.011** (3.13)
No. of pauses p.m. total time	.018 (.61)	.001 (.95)
No. of pauses p.m. speaking	.161** (2.74)	-.006** (-4.73)
Phonation-time ratio	-.065 (-1.75)	.004** (5.99)
No. of filled pauses	.122* (2.64)	-.001 (-1.58)
No. of dysfluencies	.001 (.05)	-.000 (-1.15)
Mean pause duration	-.106 (-.26)	-.025** (-3.03)

Notes: asterisks indicate statistical significance at the **1 and *5 per cent levels; numbers in parentheses are absolute values of *t*-statistic.

TABLE 3
Results regression analysis
exposure

Discussion

In this article, we examined data from early English language learners and late English language learners to investigate the impact of early English language teaching in elementary schools on oral fluency. In addition, we have set out to determine the extent to which oral fluency is influenced by out-of-school exposure.

The present study found a marginal difference between early and late starters on 11 measures of oral fluency. On 2 of the 11 fluency variables, early starters outperform late starters: early starters produce longer utterances and fewer filled pauses than late starters. According to Naber and Lowie (op.cit.), a reason for similar performance in terms of oral fluency might be that late starters are familiar with language concepts, which they can easily translate into the new foreign language. Because of this prior knowledge, older starters will effortlessly catch up with the early starters (also see [Corda, Phielix, and Krijnen 2012](#)).

A possible explanation for the finding that the production of utterances is faster for early starters than for late starters and their number of filled pauses per minute is lower, is that words which are frequently accessed from the mental lexicon are easier to retrieve. The more frequently a language is used, the easier and faster word retrieval will become. In other words, early starters

have been dealing with the English language for six more years than late starters. It might therefore be easier for them to produce longer utterances and fewer pauses as they can access the mental lexicon more easily. Early language learners probably access the words more easily, which results in a decreased number of pauses and increased utterances.

According to several researchers (for example Unsworth *et al.* op.cit.), oral fluency is not solely determined by the differences between an early or a late start. The present study shows that exposure outside school has a greater impact on oral fluency than early language teaching alone. This is in line with the findings in the ELLiE research project (Enever op.cit.) and the studies by Naber and Lowie (op.cit.) and Corda *et al.* (op.cit.), who showed that exposure outside school is far more influential than English offered at school for other measures of language proficiency (for example receptive and productive vocabulary and listening comprehension). Our study shows that with regard to oral fluency, out-of-school exposure has a positive effect on the speech rate, articulation rate, mean syllable duration, mean length of utterances in both syllables and seconds, number of pauses per minute speaking time, phonation-time ratio, and the mean pause duration. An important issue for educational policymakers, teachers, and curriculum developers, however, is to gain insight into pupils' out-of-school exposure. Out-of-school exposure should be taken into account when making decisions about the nature and focus of an EFL curriculum for early learners, deciding on the starting age of instructed EFL and the number of teaching hours available in the curriculum. More research is needed with a larger sample size to see if integrating out-of-school exposure in a consistent EFL curriculum in elementary schools would result in improvements in oral fluency. The type and amount of input is highly important for language production (Lightbown and Spada op.cit.).

Our results seem to suggest that early foreign language teaching will only be successful if out-of-school exposure complements EFL instruction in elementary schools. The influence of exposure on an early start and vice versa could offer opportunities for practitioners to embrace out-of-school exposure, for instance by encouraging pupils to bring into class language they encounter on the internet, in games, in books, and in music, and use these inputs as springboards for language learning.

Limitations and further research

Judging from the raw data, it is questionable whether all 11 variables were effective indicators to spot the differences between the groups. Though not taken into account in this study, the students' L1 behaviour could be taken into consideration when using a picture description task. If the student often pauses during L1 speech, the student may probably also do so in the L2, so it may be insightful to have L1 behaviour as a baseline as many fluency measures can be predicted on the basis of L1 behaviour (de Jong *et al.* op.cit.). Another possible explanation for our finding may be that fluency measures such as speech rate, articulation rate, the number of disfluencies, and the number and duration of (silent and filled) pauses are not sufficiently sensitive to show an effect for these learners, and are thus less valid in indicating the differences between early and late starters.

The present study shows that exposure outside school has a greater effect on oral fluency than early language teaching alone. There may be

a two-way interaction between early language teaching and exposure, but a larger research project is needed to explore this further. Though not taken into account in the current study, students who are often exposed to English may be more willing to participate in an early EFL programme. This may also imply that students who are already in an EFL programme will not avoid English exposure outside school. This possibly beneficial interaction has not been investigated in this study and could be explored in future research. Further research on the long-term effects of early English language teaching is also needed to investigate to what extent an early-start advantage will remain in secondary education and higher education or vocational training education courses.

Recommendations

One recommendation arising from this study is that it is desirable to design instructed early foreign language programmes in which students are motivated to experience out-of-school exposure to English, for instance by encouraging students to watch television or videos with English subtitles, or to play online games and explore websites, and to use this as input for classroom activities.

In terms of timetable decisions in schools, since exposure is so influential for oral fluency, it may be beneficial to offer a shorter but intensive programme rather than an extensive course spread out over several years, regardless of the starting age. A small amount of time spent on English language teaching per week will probably not be beneficial and may even cause frustration as learners will have the feeling of having studied English for several years without making tremendous progress (Unsworth *et al.* op.cit.). Based on our findings, and to avoid frustration, we would encourage teachers to explore ways of integrating out-of-school exposure in early English programmes. Providing structure and teacher guidance is recommended in order to make sure out-of-school input is comprehensible, but letting students self-select topics of interest is important as well. Once teachers know what students are really interested in, they could mine out-of-school input for salient language, lexicalized sentences, and formulaic language. In school, it may also be useful to reinforce vocabulary that students have already encountered outside school, for instance in activities that focus on categorizing, ordering, and selecting words, and by encouraging learners to produce speech utterances based on the words they know but have never used. Teachers could use storytelling and drama activities based on the videos their pupils watch, songs they listen to, and games they play online. Working with tasks and projects that are linked to the world outside school may help teachers to engage their learners and may help learners to develop their English in class. The effects of an EFL curriculum that integrates the outside world is an interesting area to explore in future research.

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Note

- ¹ The data from the questionnaire were generously provided by CITO for the present study.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for students

Please note that the following questionnaire is not the original one provided by CITO and furthermore solely contains the questions used in this study. Additionally, the questionnaire was translated from Dutch to English.

1 Yasmin says: 'I like English as a subject at school'. Do you agree?

A. No, I don't like it	B. No opinion	C. Yes, I like it	D. Unknown
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2 Tom says: 'For my future, it is important to know English'. Do you agree?

A. No, I don't think English is that important	B. No opinion	C. Yes, I think it is important	D. Unknown
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3 Imagine you have just received a DVD with an English cartoon which you really want to watch, but the movie is without subtitles. What are you going to do?

A. I stop watching	B. I try to follow it	C. I am going to watch it	D. Unknown
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4 Mark says: 'I am not afraid to speak English, nor to make any mistakes'. Do you agree?

A. No, I don't dare to do so, I am afraid to make mistakes	B. Yes, I dare to do so, but I am afraid to make mistakes	C. Yes, I dare to do so, even though I make mistakes	D. Unknown
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5 Imagine you receive a book that you really want to read, but it is in English. What are you going to do?

A. I stop reading	B. I try to read it	C. I will read it	D. Unknown
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6 Imagine you are looking for information on the Internet about a topic of your interests. You find an English website. What are you going to do?

A. I will skip it	B. I will use a translation programme	C. Unknown	D. I will try to read it	E. I can read it
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7 How often do you read an English book or magazine in your spare time?

A. Never	B. Sometimes	C. Often	D. Unknown
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8 How often do you write an English email in your spare time?

A. Never	B. Sometimes	C. Often	D. Unknown
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9 How often do you write an English letter or postcard in your spare time?

A. Never	B. Sometimes	C. Often	D. Unknown
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10 How many times did you go on holidays to an English speaking country?

A. Never (0 times)	B. Sometimes (1–2 times)	C. Often (3–4 times)	D. Very often (5 times or more)	E. Unknown
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11 How often do you speak English outside school?

A. Not so often, almost never	B. Sometimes	C. Often	D. Never
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12 How many times do you watch English videos on the Internet?

A. Never (0 times a week)	B. Sometimes (once a week)	C. Often (2–3 times a week)	D. Very often (7 times a week)	E. Unknown
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13 How often do you play English computer games?

A. Never (0 times a week)	B. Sometimes (once a week)	C. Often (2–3 times a week)	D. Very often (7 times a week)	E. Unknown
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14 How often do you read an English book or magazine?

A. Never (0 times a week)	B. Sometimes (once a week)	C. Often (2–3 times a week)	D. Very often (7 times a week)
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15 How often do you watch an English movie with subtitles?

A. Never (0 times a week)	B. Sometimes (once a week)	C. Often (2–3 times a week)	D. Very often (7 times a week)
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16 How often do you listen to English songs?

A. Never (0 times a week)	B. Sometimes (once a week)	C. Often (2–3 times a week)	D. Very often (7 times a week)
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17 How often do you read English websites with English information?

A. Never (0 times a week)	B. Sometimes (once a week)	C. Often (2–3 times a week)	D. Very often (7 times a week)
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18 How often do you watch English TV with subtitles?

A. Never (0 times a week)	B. Sometimes (once a week)	C. Often (2–3 times a week)	D. Very often (7 times a week)
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19 Do you speak English at home?

A. No, we don't speak English at home	B. Yes, we speak English at home	C. Unknown
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20 What is your mother tongue?

A. Dutch	B. A mix of languages	C. Another language, namely: _____	D. Unknown
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21 What language do you speak at home?

A. Dutch	B. A mix of languages	C. Another language, namely: _____	D. Unknown
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22 What is the second language spoken at home?

A. Dutch	B. English	C. Another language: _____
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