An increasing number of Dutch primary schools is choosing to lower the starting age for English lessons to the age of four. However, despite the rising popularity of early-English education, little is known about its effects on pupils’ development. The overarching question of this thesis is whether the development of executive functions, phonological awareness, and the perception of English speech sounds of early-English pupils is different from that of their mainstream peers, and whether it resembles that of English-Dutch (simultaneous) bilingual children. This thesis also reports on the reliability of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (4th edition) as a measure of English vocabulary in children learning English as a second language.

The thesis shows that Early-English pupils do not demonstrate better executive functions, phonological awareness, or English speech sound perception than mainstream pupils, and that they do not always obtain a higher level of English vocabulary than mainstream pupils. In all three groups (mainstream, early-English, and bilingual), children whose Dutch and English vocabularies are more balanced show better switching skills. Bilingual children clearly obtain higher levels of English vocabulary, and also show significantly better perception of English speech sounds. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (4th edition) appears not to be a reliable test of English vocabulary in inexperienced second-language learners. It does become more reliable when used with more experienced learners.

In summary, early-English education may influence pupils’ cognitive and linguistic development, but these influences are very limited and not comparable to those gained by being raised bilingually.


Cognitive and linguistic development of mainstream, early-English, and bilingual primary-school pupils in the Netherlands