Exploring the transition from primary to secondary school: Insights into the perspectives of young foreign language learners

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ABSTRACT

Many European countries prioritize early foreign language exposure. In Austria, primary school pupils start learning English from year one. However, transitioning to secondary school poses challenges including limited communication between primary and secondary teachers, widespread heterogeneity in language levels, and an abrupt shift in teaching methods. In this study, we sought to accompany 35 young learners in their experiences of the transition from primary to secondary in a qualitative case study drawing on a participatory approach using focus groups in order to facilitate learners' agency. Thus, students' voices shaped the research focus, enabling a co-constructed understanding of knowledge in an iterative cycle. The findings show that the socialisation process within this transition phase affected all children in terms of adjusting to new rules, organization, orientation, teachers, and breaks. The data also revealed some domain-specific factors in respect to English as a foreign language, such as a lack of preparedness as well as a shift of methods, didactics, materials and intensity. The data suggest that future transition programmes should focus not only on academic preparedness but also on social and emotional support for young learnerss during this critical phase. Early exposure also facilitates the initiation of collaboration, co-production, and communication between schools and teachers. It also allows for a smoother transition and helps meet young learners where they are, considering their individual realities, expectations, and preferences, which in turn mitigates stressful moments in a phase of changes.

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, European Commission Language Policy has emphasized the aim that every European should learn two languages in addition to their first language during compulsory education (Council of Europe, 2002). In order to achieve this goal, foreign language teaching has become an integral part of primary school education across Europe. In the majority of European countries, it is English that is taught as a first foreign language (FL) at primary level (Eurostat, 2021).

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However, questions remain about the appropriate age to start foreign language lessons at school (Baumert et al., 2020; Drew et al., 2007). In Austria, primary school pupils are introduced to a FL, in most cases English (Buchholz, 2007), as a mandatory exercise for the last 20 years; in key stage 1 (KS1, year 1+2, age 6-8) with 32 yearly weekly hours that should happen in an integrated way (BMUKK, 2005) and in key stage 2 (KS2, year 3+4, age 8-10), completing primary level in year 4, with one hour per week. Learners were not graded but receive a notification whether they participated in the exercise or not. With a new curriculum (BMBWF, 2023) and the willingness to further increase the value of FL teaching, the mandatory exercise was lifted to a general subject with associated grades in key stage 2. Based on these developments in the context of this study, the center of didactic discussion has been placed on the transition from primary to secondary level (Chambers, 2016; Pfenninger & Lendl, 2017; Richardson, 2014).

School transitions mark critical phases in a learner's educational trajectory, requiring adaptation to new environments, expectations, and social networks. While transitions are a natural part of schooling, they can disrupt established routines and affect identity, motivation, and academic self-efficacy — especially for learners facing multiple simultaneous challenges or coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., Chambers, 2012; Nairz-Wirth et al., 2014; Richardson, 2014; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The shift from primary to secondary school is particularly complex and has been identified as a high-risk transition (Bellenberg & in Brahm, 2010), with explicit implications for FL learning, where teaching practices and student proficiency often vary greatly between settings (Böttger, 2020; Buchholz, 2007).

This study adds to existing research by focusing on how transitions specifically impact learners' expectations and adjustments. While academic outcomes have been explored to some extent, the affective and social dimensions of the transition — how pupils adjust to and navigate expectations during the transition from primary to secondary school in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) — remain largely absent from Austrian primary EFL research. Thus, the present study argues for more sustained, anticipatory, and learner-centred support measures that address the specific demands of FL learning during critical transition phases.

Literature Review

Primary – Secondary Transition in Foreign Language Education

Despite being somewhat controversial (Pfenninger & Lendl, 2017), an early start regarding FL education is not unusual in many countries in Europe including Austria which is the context of this research (Eurostat, 2021). In respect to the transition from primary to secondary, a number of challenges have been identified in respect to FL education including mismatched expectations (Burns et al., 2013), uncertainties of language learning goals (e.g., Powell et al., 2000; Richardson, 2014) as well as little awareness of the other educational level (Buchholz, 2003; Drew, Oostdam & van Toorenburg, 2007) and shifting methods (e.g., Böttger, 2015; Pfenninger & Lendl, 2017). Furthermore, problems in communication between primary and

secondary schools and their teachers can exacerbate problems in continuity, progression and motivation (e.g., Jaekel et al., 2017; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019).

Fouracre (1993), for example, identified academic discontinuities and underestimated pupils, revealing a mismatch between pupils' expectations and experiences during the transition. Similarly, Kirkpatrick (1992) reported that Australian pupils' academic performance often stagnated or declined in the first year of secondary school due to repetitive work from primary school. Moreover, Galton et al. (2000) conducted a study across nine Local Educational Authorities, with 50 primary heads, KS data for over 3,000 pupils and studies from 25 schools. Their findings showed that although schools focused more on curriculum and pedagogic issues during transitions, progress, particularly in Science and English, remained minimal. In addition, Hill et al. (1998) also found a lack of progress in foreign language learning during this transition in Australia, a pattern echoed in Scotland by Low and colleagues (1993, 1995, 1997), who noted that secondary teachers often failed to build on the pupils' primary education, resulting in redundant learning experiences. So on, Tierney and Gallastegi (2005) highlighted the inconsistent transition processes, which ranged from minimal information exchange between schools to almost no contact. In the Netherlands, Edelenbos and Johnstone (1996) observed that the introduction of compulsory foreign language learning at the primary level lacked continuity in secondary education, as prior knowledge was often ignored.

As a number of studies found (e.g., Graham, et al., 2016; Lanvers, 2017) motivation can have a major impact on the transition from primary to secondary. For example, Lanvers (2017) systematically reviewed work on motivation in language learning published between 2000 and 2016. She demonstrated that intrinsic motivation in language learning is high among primary learners, driven by personal interest and social influences. However, motivation decreased in secondary school, becoming influenced more by expectations from teachers and parents. Graham et al. (2016) reported that although motivation remained high at the start of secondary school, it significantly declined by the end of the first year. These results are in line with Chamber (2014, 2016, 2019) and Bolster et al. (2004) who outlined that enthusiasm for FL learning in primary school often diminished by year 8 due to a lack of continuity and recognition of prior learning. Richardson (2014) expressed in her survey of multiple case studies in England gathering data from pupils in their final primary school year, the beginning and the end of their first secondary school year with the help of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, that in fact transition issues were prevalent in England; many primary teachers were unaware of the languages pupils would study in secondary school, leading to repetition and a lack of motivation. This lack of information and continuity contributed to low self-efficacy, as pupils did not experience the same success in language learning as in other subjects.

In the context of this study, research in Austria by Stanzel-Tischler and Grogger (2001, 2002), for example, looked at the transition from year 4 (primary) to year 5 (secondary) in respect to English Language Teaching (ELT) involving 21 primary schools in Austria and 1749 pupils. The majority of secondary school pupils interviewed expressed not feeling prepared for the secondary school regarding English and they mentioned problems due to the methodological shift from playful to explicit methods. This has also been highlighted by Buchholz's (2007) national evaluation of FL teaching in Austrian primary schools with 4400 pupils, 320 teachers and more than 110 primary schools across Austria. Furthermore, Berger et

al. (2025), employing a multivariate hierarchical regression analysis in a study involving 188 Austrian students transitioning to secondary school during the COVID-19 pandemic, identified self-regulatory skills, personal resources, and social integration as key factors contributing to successful adaptation.

Despite these challenges, there is also ample evidence that when the transition is well managed, learners benefit. For instance, the Australian Education Research Organisation (2022) outlined in a recommendation that effective transition support can minimize social and academic problems and can help pupils grow in confidence and self-efficacy. They highlight the fact that when pupils experience the transition positively, they are more likely to cope with any opportunities in the future effectively (OneEducation, 2024). Moreover, based on the early years learning framework of the Australian Government Department of Education (DOE, 2022), the sense of identity, acceptance and belonging have also been identified as strong predictors for a positive development (O'Connor et al., 2010), wellbeing (Allen et al., 2022) and the capability to academic success (AERO, 2022; Allen et al., 2018).

These factors underscore the importance of student voices in co-constructing a positive learning environment (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014), particularly during periods of transition. This includes understanding their attitudes, emotions, motivations, stressors, and self-concept. It is also essential to explore their lived realities and address their needs (Eckhoff, 2019) by "listening and facilitating the representation of children's experiences from their own perspectives" (Prasad, 2021), through research conducted with and by children (Andrews, 2021). Cefai and Cavioni (2014) refer in their book on the social-emotional education (SEE) to a healthy and supportive classroom relationship as a key in effective teaching and learning (Hattie, 2009). In fact, they stress the emotional competencies as a major foundation for effective cognitive and social functioning (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014, p. 5) as a focus that can support pupils in developing competences such as agency, self-efficacy, problem-solving, decision-making or collaboration. It is therefore important to put learners' experiences and perceptions first by lifting the value of learners as experts of their own realities. Exploring learners' voices by actively involving them in the research process with a pedagogical focus at the same time with active participation and exploration in order to build up confidence before, during and after the transition by taking the interventions as actions of support – longitudinally.

Overall, the transition phase has the potential to make a difference as to whether learners flourish or flounder during the moment of change but also for how they cope with and face future changes (OneEducation, 2024). This study, therefore, sets out to examine learners' perspectives concerning the transition between primary and secondary schools in Austria in respect to general transition issues but also focusing distinctly on the situation regarding FL education in order to learn what the challenges are, who is flourishing, who is floundering, and what the reasons for these differences are. Using an exploratory practice with the attempt to bridge the theory-practice gap by an integration of research and pedagogy using "normal pedagogic practices as investigation tools" (Allwright, 2003, p. 127) in children's natural context and students' every-day school life done in school rather than as an additional workload with the aim to engage them best in their known interactive environment. Instead of taking time, energy and resources away from pedagogy, this research in exploratory practice assists the learning/teaching (Hanks, 2017, p. 38) supporting their agency making sure that learners'

voices are not only heard but drive and determine the research focus (Kumpulainen & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2019). Even though the project is researcher-initiated, the children will make key decisions about where, when and what outcome to create, collect or share, following the conceptual level of students as co-researchers (Fielding, 2001) and Lansdown's framework of children's participation (2005) to visualize, illustrate and reflect the lived experiences of individuals who may not otherwise have a voice (Breny & McMorrow, 2021). It is hoped in this way that the study can contribute to a blueprint for practice in how best to support all learners and ensure that this transition is successful at the time and with a view to the future.

Methodology

Aim and research questions

This study is part of a larger research project aiming to explore learners' and teachers' experiences and perceptions of the transition phase focusing on their experiences in ELT. This paper reports on primary and secondary pupils' perspectives in their final year of primary and first year of secondary in response to the research question:

- *What are the pupils' experiences with and perceptions of the transition from primary to secondary level in respect to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching?*

Data collection

In order to answer these questions, an exploratory, longitudinal case study design (Yin, 2009) was employed. In our approach, we acknowledge young learners as experts of their own lives (Gallagher, 2008) who we feel are competent to share their thoughts and opinions about their lived experiences. We sought to involve them in an authentic and meaningful way in exploring their own perspectives of their experiences with an emphasis on "supporting authentic routes for children to enact choice making over their experiences and activities" to promote children's agency within early learning environments (Eckhoff, 2019, p. viii). Our aim was to empower these learners with voice to ensure that their perspectives are not only consulted but involved in determining the content and focus of inquiry in a cyclic design (Eckhoff, 2019). Each step in data collection built on previous steps drawing on learners' perspectives and concerns.

Data collection instruments

To gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives, semi-structured interview guides were created. Following initial oral consent declaration, the interview was structured into (1) introductory questions, (2) warm-up (background information, current school perceptions), (3) perspectives, questions and wishes on transition to new school in general, (4) perspectives, expectations and wishes on transition regarding academic subjects (German, Mathematics, English), and, finally, (7) concluding remarks. For each section, obligatory main questions were formulated, leading to a total of 9 to 11 questions (depending on the phase and step). Moreover, many main questions offered optional follow-up questions. The interview

guide was written in German to facilitate a relaxed atmosphere and to allow the interviewees to speak freely without a language barrier.

Table 1. *Process outline including tools, participants and time.*

Phases	Data collection	Participants	Time
Phase 1, step 1	3 focus group interviews	15 Primary school pupils, final primary year	March 2023
Phase 1, step 2	6 focus group interviews	15 primary school pupils, final primary year 20 secondary school pupils, first year secondary	June 2023
Phase 2, step 1	3 focus group interviews	11 secondary (former primary from phase1) school pupils	October 2023
Phase 2, step 3	2 focus group interviews	9 secondary school pupils, first year secondary	January 2024

Note.
The secondary school pupils from phase 2, step1 are the primary school pupils from phase 1.
In phase 2, step3, two pupils were sick, wherefore, nine pupils in total took part at this time.

Data collection procedure

In phase 1, step 1, three focus group interviews of 5 pupils each (March 2023) explored how final year pupils in primary feel about English and their transition to the secondary school (see Table 1). The participants were approached by handing out consent sheets to primary students who had applied to the secondary school at the same Campus in order to make sure to accompany them over a longer time. The focus groups were conducted in German as this is the language of schooling in this context. The ethics were explained to the pupils orally and what will happen to the data before every activity and the beginning of the study (see below for details on ethics). The analysis of the data from phase 1 was used to inform phase 2 in an iterative cycle (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009) to feed insights into next steps to deepen the understanding and follow an analytic reflexivity based on learner voice and perspective (Berkowitz, 1997). In phase 1, step 2 (June 2023), 35 pupils (15 primary school pupils, 20 secondary school pupils) took part. In six focus group interviews those pupils from primary and secondary met (2-3 participants of each level) addressing questions and concerns they had had about the transition to secondary school generally as well as in English specifically to their peers. This phase not only had a valuable research dimension for understanding their questions and concerns around transition but had considerable positive benefits for the learners by enabling them to talk with older pupils who have completed the same transition one year previously as well as generating a sense of belonging. For the secondary school pupils, they could act as mentors for younger pupils and had their own opportunity to reflect on their experiences to foster the natural curiosity children have (Frazier et al., 2009) and extend their learning in a self-directed manner for deeper interaction, involvement and engagement (Ness, 2019, p. 74) as well as to create a "self-reflective enquiry withing the social situations" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 162). Their responses served as valuable data for the study by offering a retrospective account of the secondary pupils' experiences of the transition. At the end of phase 1, all the primary school pupils were given an information sheet and contact details about continuing working with the researchers during their first year in the secondary school. Participants for phase 2 were, therefore, volunteers from phase 1. 11 pupils agreed, which took part in three focus group interviews in October 2023 (phase 2, step 1). This interview functioned

mainly in getting to understand transition issues on ELT in this phase to understand how they experience and relate to the language specifically. Naturally, holistic aspects of general academic self-concept and learning experiences were still incorporated as relevant but these did not represent the core content.

After that another round of focus group interviews took place in January 2024 (phase 2, step 3) in order to ensure "that the participants' own meanings and perspectives are represented and not curtailed by the researchers' own agenda and knowledge" (Tong et al., 2007, p. 356), explicit member checks were employed in phase 2. During this follow-up, the initial analysis and insights from the previous interviews were shared and discussed with the learners (phase 2, step 1 & 3) being able to confirm, modify and/or verify the interview's content and initial interpretation (Harvey, 2015). As such, this participation supported their agency within documentation and reflection and ensured that learners' voices were not only heard but drove and determined the research focus (Kumpulainen & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2019), in which the researchers maintained the dual roles of facilitators and observers. This method provided opportunity for the co-constructed nature of knowledge allowing participants to reflect on, add to and engage with the interview and analysed data months after the initial interview (Birt et al., 2016). The data collection activities, therefore, served simultaneously as didactical-pedagogical actions initiating collaboration, continuity and a sense of belonging.

Data analysis

The qualitative data were audio-recorded, transcribed and anonymised at the point of transcription. The data were coded in an inductive manner with an iterative process of coding and recoding using methods of qualitative content analysis based on Mayring's qualitative content analysis (2022). This analysis is strongly research question oriented with analytical questions derived from the main aims of the project following a systematic rule-guide procedure and a gradual reduction of text segments. For the analysis the free software QCAmap (Mayring, 2020) that directly aligns to Mayring's qualitative content analysis has been used. Due to the multi-layered, iterative nature of data collection, each step informed and enriched the next. Emergent codes were systematically applied throughout the coding process, evolving step by step until they merged into three main categories: expectations, general transition adjustments, and English-related transition adjustments. These were further divided into 20 subcategories (e.g., wishes, expectations, anticipation, perceived preparedness, school norms, socialization) and two sub-subcategories (general and subject-specific). As interviews were conducted in German, raw data and codes were also done in German but have been translated into English for this article.

Ethics

For research purposes with young learners, parents gave explicit permission to audio-record, transcribe and utilize the pupils' multimodal work as data for the study. In addition, no personal data from the participants were collected, removing identifying information from reports, changing the name of communities, omitting participants' names, and using pseudonyms. All data were treated confidentially. The records of this study were kept only on password-protected

computers. Moreover, alongside the parents signing an informed consent on behalf of the children and them being asked to discuss the content of the study with their children at home, informed assent was given by children with consent forms as a multi-layered process with many opportunities to assent and dissent, in different ways, for these specific learners in these particular contexts (Urbach & Banerjee, 2019). Thus, pupils received a child-friendly information orally at the beginning of the study and before each of the activities discussing the purpose of the research. The main focus was that the involvement is voluntary and that they do not have to share anything if they do not want to. Children were furthermore guided orally through the consent form in a children-friendly language and using icons and colour-coding as language support, where they have to tick yes or no boxes according to individual aspects such as agreement to audio-record. Overall, to ensure "that both the process of research *and* the results are ethical, scientifically robust and respectful of children" (Beazley et al., 2011, p. 159), "situated" ethics, "in-situ" ethics and "ethics in practice" (Bitou & Waller, 2017; Ebrahim, 2010) were followed. As such, researchers kept a reflexivity-approach (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) throughout the research process critically analysing the dynamics between the adults and children, monitoring children for physical signs of dissent throughout, be aware that distress and embarrassment can be caused by any adult intervention into a child's life (Alderson & Morrow, 2011), and that even inauthentic representation of young learners' voices contradicts the notion of their agency (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008).

Results

Expectations

Pupils' general transition-related expectations

When the participants were interviewed in year 4 of primary, the majority of the learner expectations about secondary school were positive. Among the positive expectations, most included extra-curricular issues or non-academic subjects (e.g., sports, afternoon care, canteen) (phase1_step1_*n* = 7[12]; phase1_step2, *n* = 7; phase2_step1, *n* = 7) – this perception was ongoing after their transition to secondary school (phase2_step1, *n* = 6). Another positive expectation they stressed was the importance of "being a secondary student"[3] (phase1_step1_FGI3_P2_line4–6) as well as the possibility to go to the school's canteen (phase1_step1, *n* = 4; phase1_step2, *n* = 3).

At the same time, nine participants (*n* = 9) anticipated changes, expressing expectations such as "learning will be more intense" (phase1_step1_FGI1_P5_line230). They mentioned an increase in subjects, longer school days, more studying, and additional homework (phase1_step1_FGI3_P2). These expectations were later confirmed and emphasized in retrospect, once they had entered secondary school. They moreover sensed uncertainties illustrating school culture and social norms. Pupils (*n* = 10), for example, pictured their hope to be welcomed and to find friends as well as to find their way around the school building. Moreover, primary school pupils stressed the insecurities regarding interactions with secondary

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[1] phase_step_FocusGroupInterviewNumber_ParticipantNumber_line of quote
[2] *n* = 7 represents the amount of participants
[3] The extracts have been translated by the authors. Original transcripts are available upon request.

teachers (*n* = 8) that was demonstrated by questions they asked in phase 1, step 1: "How many class teachers are there [secondary school]?" (phase1_step1_FGI1_P3_line667) – not knowing yet that every subject would have an individual teacher. Even though learners expressed their non-existing knowledge of basic structures in the secondary school, their expectations show their anticipations that adjustments will be necessary and at the same time welcome them positively.

Pupils' English-related expectations

Regarding English they had high hopes demonstrated by their expectations to "become better in English" (phase1_step1_FGI1_P2_line263–264) stressing being able to talk and write stories in the FL. At the same time, however, pupils perceived their own active FL skills at this point as limited and were uncertain about secondary English, anticipating that English would become more intense and at the same time not feeling well prepared. In comparison, in other academic subjects such as Mathematics and German, they (*n* = 15) felt well-equipped for the secondary school, but not in English (*n* = 6) as "we barely had any English […] and if, every year the same [topics]" (phase1_step1_FGI1_P5_line192–195). Even in retrospect, six months after the entrance to the secondary school, individuals mentioned that they felt that there English skills were not very elaborated at primary level. Even though they were uncertain about content aspects, they had positive views towards their personal development and already showed high motivation. It was their low self-efficacy in English that was the most notable feature of their subject-specific data. At the same time, it was notable that the exploratory notion of the interview assisted their agency and understanding of the other level, the exchange and getting the chance to ask questions to be a critical experience in reasoning and reducing their concerns for new schooling.

Adjustments

Pupils' general transition-related adjustments

After several weeks in the new school, the breaks were still perceived to be very positive (*n* = 10) due to the given freedom and autonomy "to buy things now in the canteen, which we were not allowed in primary school" (phase2_step1_FGI2_P1_line22–24). Moreover, learners interviewed reported positive experiences, including the presence of different teachers for each lesson and the support they received from friends and former classmates, which facilitated their adaptation to the new environment.

When still in primary school (phase 1) pupils were already interested in the school rules of the secondary school (*n* = 15) asking about the length of and rules during breaks. During an exchange with the secondary school pupils (phase 1, step2), the brevity of the breaks was firstly highlighted. When the primary school pupils transitioned to secondary school, all focus groups reported on this brevity of breaks by mainly running to the canteen to get a snack and prepare for the next lesson (phase2_step1_FGI2_P4_line169–172). They moreover were still uncertain what they are allowed to do during breaks or lessons as "house rules were never discussed with us" (phase1_step2_FGI3_P1_line392). Furthermore, it was new to them that teachers had to be

greeted with "Good morning, professor" while standing up (phase 1_step2_FGI4_P2_line194), and that particularly in their first time in the new school it was difficult to locate teacher's individual preferences (*n* = 4); whereas some forbit to drink during the lessons others allow or even insist to do so. These concerns, however, subsided soon after entering the secondary school, most importantly, as former classmates in their new secondary school class functioned as major support system (*n* = 10), portrayed by P2: "If I have not had my old friends from my old school, I would not have been so brave and would have stayed shy." (phase 1_step1_FGI3_line230–232) Additionally, classmates not only helped in figuring out the rules and getting to know the other pupils in class, they also were supportive in finding their way around "in the maze" (phase 2_step1_FGI1_P2_line262) "by going together in little groups" (phase 2_step1_FGI1_P3_line272–273). By the end of phase 2 (secondary school, year 1), some of the pupils (*n* = 4) stated already that, "there is nothing unusual anymore" (phase2_step3_FGI1_P2_line25), besides the management with books, time and homework. These socialization processes mirror the broader experiences faced by all children transitioning from primary to secondary school, as they adapt to new school cultures and norms. However, in addition to these general challenges, learners also encounter domain-specific issues that further influence their adjustment.

Pupils' English-related adjustments

In terms of adjusting to English, most children in the primary school had English lessons only once a week. However, upon transitioning to secondary school, they encountered English almost daily, along with increased responsibilities such as completing homework and studying for tests (phase2_step1_FGI2_P3_line264–267).

Consequently, only several weeks after their transition, some pupils (*n* = 4) mentioned that they view English as a "normal subject" (phase2_step3_FGI2_P1_line293). They furthermore highlighted that in secondary English lessons they "learn so much more" (phase2_step3_FGI1_P2_line16) and find the secondary English "very fun" as they perceived that they "got so much better" (phase2_step1_FGI1_P1_line296) (*n* = 7). Particularly lessons that had a ludic and hands-on component (e.g., playing Simon says, crafting, watching the Grinch) was very much appreciated (phase2_step1_FGI2_P3_line400–402), but also the new touch of "studying a vocabulary list" was mentioned as joyful by individuals (phase2_step3_FGI1_P2_line276–277).

When asked about areas of uncertainty regarding English in secondary school, learners highlighted concerns related to their own language competencies, the increased intensity of instruction, and the shift in teaching methods across all phases of the transition. However, at the same time, the majority of primary learners (*n* = 10) ranked themselves "good" in English. Additionally, even when they had already been in the secondary school for several months, pupils (*n* = 10) still referred to their primary English lessons in comparison to secondary English lessons which was expressed as being different and "more intense" (phase2_step1_FGI2_P3_line264–267). Particularly, as they (*n* = 9) further articulated that at primary level they never had to work in a book, do a listening comprehension, nor read or write in English , whereas in secondary school this is what they do on a daily basis. Furthermore,

they more basically expressed that they did not have "real English" in primary school (phase2_step3_FGI1_line233–234) and that they got so much better in secondary having it every day. Generally, their English perceptions, throughout phase 2, differed depending on the English teacher they had: Whereas half of the children (*n* = 4) mentioned that they liked English, the other half (*n* = 5) mentioned to find it "stupid" (phase2_step3_FGI2_P1_line329) even though at the same time they (*n* = 7) declared that they have "learned a lot already" (phase2_step3_FGI2_P1_line267). The same appeared for the notion of "in English only" . Whereas four liked it, the other five did not, exaggeratedly expressing it by overstating the sentence.

In terms of the more negative experiences, pupils (*n* = 5) centred on the academic experiences in the secondary school. The method and pace in secondary English lessons were expressed as "zack zack" (phase2_step1_FGI2_P3_line344–346) causing "pressure when looking at others, who are three worksheets ahead" (phase2_step1_FG3_P2_line348–350) (*n* = 5). Additionally, P2 pictured that many main subjects on one day as well as many tests in one week as challenging.

In this phase, however, another "stressor" (*n* = 3) appeared. During this step, their very first English test just recently had taken place. Due to their first contact with English tests, individuals (*n* = 3) expressed that it is challenging "as there is much to study for" (phase2_step3_FGI2_P5_line286). All learners (*n* = 9) agreed that even though content-wise the test "was not difficult" (phase2_step3_FGI2_P3_line304), however, in its quantity, much.

Overall, in phase 2, step 3, they all (*n* = 9) referred to having adapted and adopted to the secondary ELT not being able to express a strategy they used but "just being able to do" it (phase2_step3_FGI2_P2_line578). Moreover, as meeting the learners over a period of 11 months, it was obvious that a couple of weeks made a huge difference in learners' maturity, habitus and perceptions: how confident they were, how assured, how informed, how they acted, but also how they perceived certain aspects (e.g., pace, pressure, teachers). For example, whereas learners when in year 4 barely spoke to secondary pupils during phase 1, step 2, they became very chatty and expertise when in phase 2, step 2, even repeatedly wishing for meeting primary year 4 pupils to guide them along and act as the "old" ones. This exchange was also mentioned various times as the most obvious and helpful to the learners, talking peer to peer, asking questions, being showed around, and satisfy their curiosity towards the new school. It was notable that their L2 self and visions changed over the period of transition – before after and during – and their concerns faded. Additionally, the continuity of meetings from year 4 (primary level) to year 1 (secondary level) in an iterative cycle helped to validate and check on prior meanings in this major phase of change but also served as "vignettes" to get pupils to talk on concrete examples.

Discussion

The transition from primary to secondary education represents a critical phase in pupils' academic journey, particularly in the context of ELT (Bellenberg & in Brahm, 2010). This period is marked by significant changes in instructional approaches, curriculum demands, and student expectations. Exploring learners' experiences and perceptions has revealed several insights. In their transition from primary to secondary school, pupils exhibited mixed expectations and adjustments, with a predominant positivity towards non-academic aspects such as extra-curricular activities and the newfound significance of being secondary students. Despite initial uncertainties about increased academic demands and social integration, they anticipated and eventually embraced necessary adjustments with optimism. In terms of ELT, students initially felt unprepared due to limited primary school exposure, yet they expressed eagerness to improve their skills. Upon entering secondary school, they encountered more intensive English instruction, which was both challenging and rewarding, fostering significant improvement in their language capabilities. The transition was characterized by increased autonomy and responsibility, alongside the support of peers and former classmates, which facilitated their adaptation. Over time, students' perceptions evolved, indicating improved self-efficacy and comfort with the new school environment, despite initial anxieties about academic pressures and social norms. The iterative nature of the study illuminated the transformative impact of this major educational transition on their maturity, confidence, and academic perspectives.

A key outcome regarding continuity in English education is the difference in lesson frequency between primary and secondary schools. In secondary schools, students encounter English almost daily, whereas in primary schools, it may be taught only once a week, if at all. This increased exposure in secondary education reinforces English as a consistent part of students' learning experience, potentially strengthening their language development through continuity. Eventually, this regularity may contribute to learners perceiving English as a "normal subject" more quickly. Moreover, English lessons in primary schools are more frequently cancelled or shortened (Buchholz, 2007). This may largely happen due to the fact that primary school teachers are generalists, responsible for teaching multiple subjects rather than being specialized in English. As a result, English may not receive the same level of priority as in secondary schools, where it is taught by a language specialist. This lack of consistency in primary education further highlights the contrast in how English is integrated into students' academic routines at different educational stages. As Summer and Böttger (2022) highlight, continuity is essential for effective FL development. This underscores the need for primary school teachers, who spend most of the day with their students and teach multiple subjects, to integrate EFL across subjects more often. This approach could elevate English to a "core subject," encouraging students to value it more from an early age. This could be achieved through regular interaction and consistent use of the FL in the primary classroom. Additionally, primary teachers play a crucial role in fostering a positive attitude toward the FL. Providing regular feedback on learners' progress and achievements can further enhance students' awareness of their own English skills, boosting their confidence and motivation.

At the same time, primary school pupils in this study emphasised the anticipation that English would become more intense, potentially one reason why they could also relatively smoothly adapt to the method shift. Whereas pupils experienced an implicit approach at primary level, learners in secondary noted a more explicit approach with a different pace and more pressure due to tests and grades (in line with Jeakel et al., 2017; Schmidt, 2001; Tellier & Roehr-Brackin, 2017). With the implicit approach, learners mentioned that at primary level no course book, nor reading, writing or tests were used; whereas, at secondary level, this was state of the art. Not only did the learners (have to) adapt quickly to the shift of methods (e.g., Jaekel et al., 2017; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019), but this might also be one reason why learners believed that they did not learn much in primary ELT. Implicit and integrated approaches might not be as visible to learners – as unconscious processes (Dörnyei, 2009; Ellis, 1994) – potentially, another reason why several pupils illustrated their high level of secondary English enjoyment although the given shift of methods, teaching pace and perceived pressure (Krammer et al., 2000). In contrast, the increased visibility of ELT in secondary school — through regular tests, homework, and the ability to track their own progress (in line with Chambers, 2016; Pfenninger & Lendl, 2017) — may have further enhanced students' enjoyment of the subject. This stands in sharp contrast to the more sporadic and inconsistent approach to English in primary school, where it often functions as a gap-filler rather than a structured subject (see for example Buchholz, 2007; Stanzel-Tischler & Grogger, 2001, 2002). This, additionally, might give insights of learners' routines and preferences in ways of learning a FL at this age mobilizing practitioners and their practical and pedagogic-didactical knowledge catalysing and concentrating on conversations about transition, which brings stakeholders together and adapt their methods to the learners' actual needs. As a result, whereas secondary ELT teachers could pick up on the ludic approach more often, primary teachers could prepare learners for the more explicit approach in secondary in order to balance out the methodological shift across levels. That not only could lead learners (teachers, and families) into valuing primary ELT more but also smoothen and simplifying secondary ELT. Furthermore, existing practices that support transition such as AERO (2022) can offer quick guidance by building on successful approaches that can foster a child's sense of belonging to the new environment. The transition from primary to secondary school is a multifaceted process that extends beyond academic progression. It encompasses cognitive, emotional, and social adaptations that can shape learners' long-term engagement with education. By implementing well-structured support mechanisms — ranging from curricular alignment to emotional guidance — schools can help students navigate this critical phase with greater ease, ensuring they embark on their secondary education journey with confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging.

Accordingly, focusing on the exploration of the profound impact of contextual and interactional changes on individuals, these changes encompass a variety of elements such as peers, societal norms, values and self-concept (Berger et al., 2025; Däschler-Seiler, 2014; Mays, 2014). Such transformations are crucial as they shape and redefine an individual's identity and their interaction with the world around them. When individuals possess a strong sense of agency, they are better equipped to navigate through stressors, adapt to changes within their field, and manage mismatched expectations more effectively (Sime et al., 2021). This sense of agency might foster resilience, enabling individuals to face challenges with confidence and

adaptability as well as well-being across domains (e.g., physical, academic, social, and emotional) (Mays, 2014). Understanding the dynamic of these changes and their impact on an individual's life journey offers valuable insights into the processes of personal growth and development. Recognizing the interplay between agency and transition can empower individuals to harness these experiences for their personal and professional advancement. Thus, this study's methodological outline forefronted learner's agency by making their voices heard and seen determining the research focus (Kumpulainen & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2019) in order to ensure a positive transition for the learners, in the now and the future.

Limitations

While these components were helpful and gave nuanced insights into learners' transition perceptions, future studies could extend the instruments, which were limited to focus group interviews. However, the interviews initiated to reflect on and connect about the transition to a new school, simultaneously served the data collection activities as didactic-pedagogical actions initiating collaboration, continuity and a sense of belonging. In future, by using more creative, explorative methods a fuller picture of the environment could be gained not only initiating change but mobilizing practitioners and their practical, pedagogical and didactical knowledge correspondingly.

Conclusion

This study, considering the national context, provided insights into learners' experiences with and perceptions of the transition from primary to secondary level in respect to ELT. Insights from the focus group interviews suggest that transition programmes should focus not only on academic preparedness but also on social and emotional support for young learners during this critical phase. In particular, by introducing learners early before the actual transition to the new school familiarizing with the new frame of references and socialization codes in school, as well as starting initiations, collaboration and communication between schools in order to align with learners' present circumstances and experiences responding to the unique needs and context each learner brings to the educational environment.

By identifying the experiences and perceptions of the learners within this period of change regarding ELT, this study aimed at making learners' voices heard and seen. The insights these experts provided based on their own lived experiences provided rich insights in the form of concrete suggestions for improvement of practices, interventions and communication across levels for a positive transition to the secondary school in general, but also particularly regarding ELT. Listening to learners in these processes is one crucial piece of the puzzle when aiming to improve this transformative process that in first instance affects learners actively (but also families), fostering growth and adaption in response to the evolving environment, in the hope of mitigating stressful moments in a phase of change. By foregrounding learners' voices, this research emphasizes their role as key informants in shaping effective educational transitions and may offer suggestions for improving cross-level coordination, teacher practices, and support mechanisms in ELT settings.

For educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers, these findings underscore the need for holistic, learner-centered transition strategies that go beyond academic alignment. Future research could build on this work by investigating how such practices are implemented in diverse school contexts and how they impact long-term language learning motivation.

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