

Early Learning of Modern Foreign Languages

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Early Learning of Modern Foreign Languages

Processes and Outcomes

Edited by

Marianne Nikolov

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Márta Fábián is an English teacher and teacher trainer. She teaches practical grammar classes to English major students. She has conducted research into the teaching of EFL in Transcarpathian Hungarian schools. She is the co-author of a textbook for young learners *English with You and Me*. Her research interest is TEYL. She is currently a doctoral student at the University of Pannonia, Hungary.

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Krisztina Nagy was trained as a primary school teacher in her native Hungary and taught there for five years. Then, she trained in London to use the Montessori Method and taught for three years in a Montessori school. Subsequently she did a course in Scotland on teaching children with learning difficulties, and worked as a learning support teacher. She has completed an MA course at Stirling University on Teaching English as a Foreign Language and is following this up with her doctoral research. She has presented papers at various conferences on language learning in primary schools. Her creative spirit is expressed in her use of new, interesting materials for carrying out research.

Introduction

I vividly remember my very first conference presentation almost three decades ago. After it, a senior member of the audience, an established figure in applied linguistics, congratulated me and asked, 'Why do you research young learners?' He suggested finding a more appropriate area. Since then, the world has definitely changed, as chapters in this edited volume illustrate.

These days, foreign language programmes tend to start at an increasingly early stage not only in Europe (Eurydice, 2005: 28), but the same trend is observable on other continents as well. This worldwide increase in early language learning (ELL) in public education has resulted in a growing number of empirical studies. These developments are well documented in publications of small-scale research projects usually focusing on a particular aspect of ELL (e.g. studies in Moon & Nikolov, 2000; Nikolov, 2002; Nikolov & Curtain, 2000; Nikolov *et al.*, 2007), large-scale longitudinal national projects (e.g. in Spain by García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003; Muñoz, 2006; in Ireland by Harris & Conway, 2002; Harris *et al.*, 2006) and recent state-of-the-art reviews (e.g. Edelenbos *et al.*, 2007; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006).

Despite the widely spread practice of offering modern languages to young learners at an increasingly early age, few publications focus on what is available to children in different contexts and classrooms, on processes and outcomes, and emerging issues. This edited volume aims to fill this gap by showing how in a number of contexts early access to modern languages varies, how young children progress and benefit from an early exposure to modern languages in different educational contexts, and how affective, cognitive, social, linguistic and classroom-related factors interact in the processes. The book documents the state of the art in researching young language learners by exploring different approaches to early modern language learning and offering both large-scale and narrowly-focused empirical studies.

The world wide spread of ELL is often seen as the outcome of English becoming the lingua franca (e.g. Graddoll, 2006). A special strength of the volume is the range of languages: although English is the most widely learnt foreign language, chapters in the book focus on a variety of target languages: Croatian, French, English, German, Italian, Spanish and Ukrainian. As for the contexts where the empirical studies were conducted,

they range from China, to Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, Poland, the Ukraine and the UK. In these countries the status of the target language is a foreign, second or third language on a continuum where divisions are hard to identify. As readers will see, an additional strength of the book is that the studies represent a variety of research methods: enquiries apply qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. Also, some of the chapters give an account of research applying triangulation.

The Structure of the Book

The 16 chapters in the book are arranged into five sections. The first three chapters outline the larger picture. In the first chapter John Harris and Denise O'Leary discuss a large-scale long-term project, the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative, in the bilingual context of Ireland, where the aim is to achieve language diversity by making four European languages available to children. The second chapter, authored by Janet Enever, explores resistance to implementation of early modern language programmes in the UK by analysing empirical data collected in one city in two phases. In a very different context, Zrinka Jelaska and Lidija Cvikić discuss young learners' competences in Croatian, a second language for minority children living inside and outside Croatia.

The four chapters in the second section focus on narrower areas as they examine how cognitive, affective, socio-economic and classroom-related factors interact with one another. Participants in the first study were Greek pupils learning English. Thomaï Alexiou administered an aptitude test to them and examined how different components of the aptitude measure contributed to young learners' development over time. Results of a nationwide survey are reported in the next chapter on Hungarian learners studying English and German. Kata Csizér and Judit Kormos examine the relationship between language learning motivation and cross-cultural contact. A different method is applied to explore young learners' motivation in a study conducted by Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović: she provides insights into a comparative study of children's motivation under two sets of conditions. In the last chapter in this section Marianne Nikolov examines how different variables including learners' aptitude, language learning goals, motivation and classroom processes contribute to outcomes in large-scale studies on Hungarian learners of English and German.

The third section includes four chapters on literacy and skills development. In the first one Ion Drew investigates the challenges, advantages and effectiveness of adapting a special Australian literacy programme emphasising regular reading in Norwegian schools. The next two chapters used innovative research techniques to explore young learners' strategic thinking on reading and writing in the target language. Renata Šamo gives an account of a special study using think aloud protocols to investigate young

Croatian learners' reading strategies, whereas Eleni Griva, Helen Tsakiridou and Ioanna Nihoritou collected data on young Greek learners' strategies while writing in English to gain insights into their composing processes. A subskill, reading aloud, is examined in a laboratory study conducted by Vanda Marijanović, Nathalie Panissal and Michel Billières as they analyse young Croatian learners' pronunciation in French.

In the fourth section three chapters give an account of assessing young language learners. Ilona Huszti, Márta Fábián and Erzsébet Bárányiné Komári tested young ethnic minority Hungarian learners in two languages they study: Ukrainian (the official language) and English (a foreign language). After analysing the first phase of their longitudinal study, they discuss how learners' performances on tests relate to what and how they are taught. Two chapters assess young learners' vocabulary. Andrea Orosz applied a validated test to examine Hungarian learners' vocabulary size and to compare results to achievement targets in the curriculum and in other studies. Magdalena Szpotowicz, on the other hand, gives an account of an experiment scrutinising the amount of words very young Polish learners remembered after one session.

The last part of the book includes two classroom studies: one focuses on classroom language in Chinese learners' English classes, the other one explores what children think about learning English. Jing Peng and Lily Zhang observed and tape-recorded classroom discourse in a large Chinese city and analyse the amount and quality of English language children are exposed to and use. Finally, young Hungarian learners' voices are heard in Krisztina Nagy's study. She asked children to do innovative tasks in pairs in order to explore why they think they learn English, and what they think helps and hinders their development in their new language.

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