

## EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING IN EUROPE

### 1. The situation regarding Early Language Learning (ELL) in Europe today

Responding to growing needs for language learning in Europe, the EU member states have introduced foreign language programmes in primary education, where language instruction begins between the ages of six and nine. In many instances, the first foreign language – which is usually English – is compulsory, and the second is optional. Approximately 30 percent of the EU countries have also introduced foreign language teaching for pre-schoolers, even though this is usually a community or school based choice.

Member states with more than one official language offer language instruction in two languages in elementary school and/or in kindergarten (e.g. Ireland, Scotland and Finland). There are also countries that offer children the opportunity to start school in a language other than the official one(s). Believing in the basic principles of enhanced bilingualism, the countries that offer such opportunities are aiming at supporting children in their mother tongue and thus making the transition between the L1 and the L2 less demanding (e.g. Sweden and Finland).

Successful language learning in general and early language learning (ELL) in particular seems to occur commonly in countries whose official languages are lesser used and taught outside their own context. ELL and foreign language learning as a whole is practiced less frequently and is less successful in countries whose official languages are widely spoken and taught, with England being the number one country in Europe where interest in foreign language learning is persistently declining.

The EU's interest in ELL is obviously linked to the promotion of Multilingualism by the European Commission. Since 2002, several programmes have contributed to awareness-raising regarding the benefits of an early start in language learning,<sup>2</sup> and useful recommendations have been put forth, motivating member states to start foreign language teaching under the age of 12.<sup>3</sup> European policy statements and the 2002 resolution by EU heads of government to recommend "at least two foreign languages to be taught from a very early age" have been vital decisive for an early start in foreign language instruction. The rationale behind the pro-ELL choice rests on the assumption that language learning affects positively children's scholastic achievement, their personal and social development. Moreover, as pointed out by the Commission on their language education webpage, the reasoning behind ELL in Europe and to ensure that language learning in primary school and kindergarten is not simply offered but that it is taught effectively. Successful ELL is important because "it is here that key attitudes towards other languages and cultures are formed, and the foundations for later language learning are laid [...]. Early learners become aware of their own cultural values and influences, and appreciate other cultures, becoming more open towards and interested in others [...]". Ultimately, of course, language learning,

---

<sup>1</sup> This Report was completed in June 2010 by B. Dendrinou, as a member of the Work Group of experts, working for the European Commission Recommendations on Language Education 2013-2020.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the 2002 Resolution to promote linguistic diversity, the 2005 Language Action Plan, and the 2005 Strategy for Multilingualism.

<sup>3</sup> The Action plan for Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity states "It is a priority for Member States to ensure that language learning in kindergarten and primary school is effective, for it is here that key attitudes towards other languages and cultures are formed, and the foundations for later language learning are laid. [...] Early learners become aware of their own cultural values and influences and appreciate other cultures, becoming more open towards and interested in others [...] Parents and teaching staff need better information about the benefits of this early start."

ELL in particular, is also thought to have affirmative long term advantages for the labour market.

ELL practices are also linked to research outcomes. Actually, there is a mounting body of research indicating that an early start in foreign or additional language learning has desirable results. A case in point is the evidence and documentation regarding young children learning one or more additional languages, which have become available thanks to a Commission supported study completed in 2006 (see also Nikolov, M. & H. Curtain, 2000).<sup>4</sup> The study provides an overview of recently published research on provision, process, individual and group factors, and their outcomes. Furthermore, it provides accounts of what is considered to constitute 'good practice' in early languages learning.

Research findings carried out inside and outside Europe provide strong evidence suggesting that early language learners are more likely to become multilingual, that children who use more than one language have several advantages over monolingual children, in terms of their cognitive and social development. In fact, according to studies at the Cornell Language Acquisition Lab (CLAL), children who learn another language can maintain attention, despite outside stimuli, better than children who know only one language. And this is important because that ability is "responsible for selective and conscious cognitive processes to achieve goals in the face of distraction and plays a key role in academic readiness and success in school settings." In other words, "cognitive advantages follow from becoming bilingual [...] and these cognitive advantages can contribute to a child's future academic success."<sup>5</sup> Other studies argue that children speaking more than one language seem to have greater self-respect, respect for culturally diverse groups and individuals, and they are also more likely to develop high degrees of intercultural competence.

The vigour of the foreign language teaching market, which stands to profit from language education materials and specialist courses for the Teaching of Languages to Young Learners, is also an important force for the rising attention to ELL. The young language learner's market is especially strong in the UK, where one finds hundreds of postgraduate and diploma courses for the teaching English to young learners, and a publishing business thriving on instructional materials that make English fun for children and even toddlers. Other languages and especially the "smaller" ones cannot possibly compete with English in the international market. However, there are admirable local initiatives, for which information is rarely disseminated.

The EC has recognized that language teaching for the young does not itself ensure good learning outcomes. Suitably trained teachers and specially designed programmes are required because, as the Commission has made clear, "the advantages of the early learning of languages only accrue where teachers are trained specifically to teach languages to very young children, where class sizes are small enough, where appropriate training materials are available, and where enough curriculum time is devoted to languages." Moreover, there is need of adequate resources, especially so as to teach languages other than English to young children.

## **2. Challenges and recommendations**

There is strong evidence showing that there are many creative initiatives and valuable examples of good practice in ELL across Europe. Therefore, it looks as though the first round of the debate between those in favour of an early start and the sceptics who assume that mother tongue literacy will suffer as a result of ELL has ended in favour of the former. However, there is still intensive need to raise awareness regarding the benefits and advantages of ELL. The main stakeholders are parents, teachers and pupils themselves. As they are very

---

<sup>4</sup> As reported by R. Johnstone "Early language learning: where are we now and where might we go?" Keynote lecture presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, Pécs, Hungary, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> "Learning a second language is good childhood mind medicine, studies find" Physorg.com, May 13, 2009, by Susan Lang.

different audiences that require totally different awareness-raising techniques, the challenge ahead is significant. The need for a special programme promoting the value of ELL for different groups of stakeholders is therefore very real.

Language teachers, in particular, need to be persuaded not only that ELL is to the benefit of pupils and the development of their (multi)literacies, but also that teaching foreign languages to young kids *can* work, providing that the programme is designed in a way which is meaningful for children of different ages,<sup>6</sup> and that the teacher has the qualifications to teach youngsters.<sup>7</sup> However, there is relative shortage of foreign language teachers adequately prepared to teach young learners, and training them is a second but equally important challenge. A web based ELL site for pre-service and in-service teachers of young children could be supported by the Commission and designed to disseminate information about interesting local initiatives, and to provide an array of theoretical and practical information, ideas for methods, practices and teaching techniques, language learning activities and resources for learners of different languages. The latter could be particularly useful since there also seems to be a lack of proper resources, especially so as to teach languages other than English to young children.

One of the greatest challenges perhaps is to raise awareness with regard to the usefulness of learning languages other than English at an early age. The stakeholders here are mainly parents who want their children to be native-like in English, thinking that this will secure them academically and professionally. Also pupils themselves are essential stakeholders who could be extrinsically and intrinsically motivated to develop at least partial literacy in languages which are less widely spoken.

As regards ELL methodology, most experts seem to agree on the importance of focusing on meaning rather than form, language use which is familiar and relevant to kids through a task based approach to learning. Also, there seems to be an agreement about including foreign language instruction in the mainstream curriculum and using fun and creativity in the classroom. However, the best way to deal with very young language learners, i.e. ages 3-7, when literacy in the mother tongue has not yet been developed, is still a challenge. Therefore, there is need for relevant research, which is discussed in the section that follows, but also pilot and experimental teaching experiences shared across Europe.

Other challenges related to the teaching of foreign languages to youngsters have to do with the educational approaches most conducive to the development of a multilingual ethos of communication and to the meaningful use of the foreign language in parallel fashion with the mother tongue. An equally important challenge is to specify techniques for the development of children's mediation skills and their intercultural awareness from a very early age. Once these are recognized as important goals for the enhancement of multilingualism, the design of hands-on projects which might provide suggestions for teaching techniques, learning strategies and examples of good practice should be supported.

One more challenge facing those who are concerned with ELL is to think more rigorously about introducing opportunities for ELL with the use of ICT and web based technologies, particularly in languages other than English.

---

<sup>6</sup> Suitable programmes for 3-5 year olds will look different from programmes for children of 6-8 or 9-11 year old.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that there is another ongoing debate as to whether the classroom teacher should integrate the foreign language period into his/her timetable, or whether a trained foreign language teacher should come in and teach the kids. Arguments evolve around the claims, on the one hand, that the classroom teacher has neither the language proficiency nor the training to teach a *foreign* language (which requires special methods and techniques) and, on the other, that the specialist teacher has no sound knowledge of child psychology and no training to employ the proper pedagogy. Some maintain that this question is an invalid one, and argue that it should not be an "either-or" issue. Both are important. The challenging question is how do you get them to collaborate?

It is also a challenge to consider ways of traditional assessment techniques for young children, with the use of quizzes and fun testing (in an effort to create positive attitudes to testing and assessment), but also of alternative assessment, for example by using the European Language Portfolio, in an adapted form for children, so as to provide primary school pupils with a means of documenting what they can do in what language. Likewise, if these are recognized as important goals for the enhancement of multilingualism, the design of hands-on projects which might provide suggestions, relevant ideas and examples of good practice should be supported.

Finally, one of the greatest challenges lying ahead has to do with bilingual education programmes, aiming at social inclusion. Whereas it has been well documented that bilingual education can have desirable results on many accounts, nationalist ideologies and language nationalism in many European countries has not allowed bilingual education to develop to the degree that this might be desirable. Of course, even outside Europe, in conservative states of the US bilingual education is stigmatized and bilingual children are thought to suffer from language confusion and to have a cognitive deficit. The challenge here again is awareness raising and supporting opportunities for well structured bilingual or even trilingual programmes, and not just for the socially deprived pupils.

### **3. Further research**

Research into ELL is still in its infancy worldwide, when compared with other issues in foreign language learning, teaching and in second language acquisition. On a more general scale, there is a significant need for action research into young learners' programmes, by investigating expectations and assessing outcomes in both countries supporting top-down research (e.g. Belgium, Germany and Switzerland in Europe, Australia and Canada beyond) or in countries where early foreign language teaching is a result of bottom-up pressure as, for example, the community obliges schools to launch courses with little control from educational authorities and no conditions for assessment and research. Such action research can provide grounded suggestions regarding the design of primary curricula (and their link with the Common European Framework of Reference), the number of contact hours, the educational and linguistic background of pupils and teachers, materials and resources, as well as attitudes to languages.

Also, there is a definite need for the compilation of learner corpora, close analysis of children's oral and written performance, new models of early language learning and studies of children's literacy.

Other issues that need further research include the following:

- 1) The starting age of foreign language learning. Actually, there are still two camps: 'the earlier the better' and the 'postponing ELL' until children are more cognitively mature camps.
- 2) ELL teacher education and identity; their language related attitudes and beliefs
- 3) Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation factors, including virtual and live intercultural communication
- 4) Types of activities, materials and resources aiming to develop literacy in and through the additional language(s), as well as to foster positive attitudes to language and multilingualism
- 5) Young learners' capacity to develop learner autonomy particularly with the use of ICT and to cultivate cognitive skills, such as analytic and synthetic skills, visual perception and inductive learning skills

Collaboration within and across national boundaries is crucial so as to gain insight into what is still *terra incognita*. In fact, in an effort to share expertise and ideas in this gradually emerging field of research, it is suggested that a European network of ELL researchers is included in the aforementioned web based ELL site, aiming at:

- Sharing information on relevant research carried out inside and outside the EU
- Identifying problematic or neglected areas of research
- Sharing resources, data and tools

- Planning common events
- Virtually discussing issues

Finally, socially-sensitive bilingual education needs to be investigated and more research carried out with children who are bilingual. It is of particular interest to investigate learning techniques of bilingual children learning one or more foreign languages, as the research in this area is still fairly limited.

### **Selected bibliography for ELL**

- Blondin, C., Candelier, M., Edelenbos, P., Johnstone, R., Kubanek-German, A., Taeschner, T. 1998. *Les langues étrangères dès l'école primaire ou maternelle : quels résultats, à quelles conditions?* Bruxelles: De Boeck.
- Cameron, L. 2001. *Teaching English to Young Learners*. Cambridge University Press.
- Del Pilar Garcia Mayo, M. & M. L.G. Lecumberri (Eds.), *Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Hanušová, S., Najvar, P. (2005). Do the Early Birds Really Catch the Worm? Demystifying the Factor of Early Age in Language Learning. In *Theory and Practice in English Studies 3. Proceedings from the Eighth Conference of British, American and Canadian Studies*. 1. vyd. Brno : Masarykova univerzita. ISBN 80-210-3930-2.
- Hasselgreen, A. 2000. The assessment of the English ability of young learners in Norwegian schools: an innovative approach. *Language testing*, 17/2: 261-277.
- Hasselgreen, A. 2008. Assessing the literacy of children: A CEFR-linked longitudinal study. Paper, 5th EALTA Conference, Athens, [http://ealta2008.hau.gr/conf\\_program.htm](http://ealta2008.hau.gr/conf_program.htm).
- Johnson, J., & Newport, E. 1989. Critical period effects in second language learning: the influence of the maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language. *Cognitive Psychology*, 21, 60-99.
- Marinova-Todd, S.H., Marshall, D.B., & Snow C.E. 2000. Three misconceptions about age and L2 learning, *TESOL Quarterly*, 34, 9-34.
- Moon, J., & Nikolov, M. (Eds.). 2000. *Research into teaching English to young learners*. Pécs: University Press Pécs.
- Nikolov, M. et al. (Eds.). 2007. *The TeMoLaYoLe book: teaching modern languages to young learners: teachers, curricula and materials*, Strasbourg/Graz: Council of Europe/ European Centre for Modern Languages.
- Nikolov, M. & H. Curtain (Eds), 2000. *An Early Start: Young Learners and Modern Languages in Europe and Beyond*. Council of Europe: European Centre for Modern Languages.
- Papp, S., & Jones, N. 2008. Use of young learner can-dos as part of formative assessment. Paper, 5th EALTA Conference, Athens, [http://ealta2008.hau.gr/conf\\_program.htm](http://ealta2008.hau.gr/conf_program.htm).
- Pinter, A. 2010. *Teaching Young Language Learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rixon, S. 2000. Young learners of English: background and issues. *Modern English Teacher*, 9(4), 5-10.