

Introduction to the Special Issue: Learners' outcomes and effective strategies in early second language learning

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Received 8 June 2019; received in revised form 28 September 2019; accepted 1 November 2019

ABSTRACT

EN As early second language learning is increasingly considered fundamental in children's development and as early language learning programmes are encouraged both at institutional and societal levels, research has expanded in scope from a narrow focus on age to examine the interplay between variables affecting language learning. In this introductory article to the special issue, we first provide an overview of the field of early second and foreign language learning and how it has changed over the last few years. Next, we report challenges and strategies that should be tackled both in research and in pedagogical practices. These include teacher education and use of teaching strategies, the use of multilingual practices, bilingual and CLIL programmes and teachers', students' and parents' beliefs about language learning at an early age. We conclude with an overview of the articles and book reviews included in this special issue.

Key words: EARLY L2 LEARNING, YOUNG LEARNERS, CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES, CLASSROOM PRACTICE

ES A medida que se ha ido reconociendo el lugar central que ocupa la adquisición temprana de segundas lenguas en el desarrollo de los niños y los programas de aprendizaje temprano de lenguas han adquirido relevancia institucional y social, la investigación en este campo ha empezado a prestar atención a otros factores más allá de la edad. En esta introducción, ofrecemos una visión panorámica del campo y de cómo ha cambiado en los últimos años, para luego pasar a describir una serie de retos y estrategias que la investigación y las prácticas pedagógicas deberían abordar. Éstas incluyen la formación de los profesores y el uso de estrategias docentes, el uso de prácticas multilingües en el aula, los programas bilingües y CLIL y las creencias de los profesores, los estudiantes y los padres acerca del aprendizaje de lenguas en una edad temprana. Este artículo se cierra con una panorámica de los artículos y reseñas incluidos en este número especial.

Palabras clave: ADQUISICIÓN TEMPRANA DE L2, APRENDICES JÓVENES, RETOS, ESTRATEGIAS, PRÁCTICAS DOCENTES

IT Dato che l'apprendimento precoce di una lingua seconda è considerato fondamentale nello sviluppo dei bambini e i programmi di insegnamento precoce sono incoraggiati sia a livello istituzionale sia a livello sociale, la ricerca in questo senso si è spostata dall'età come unico fattore di analisi per andare verso la varietà di fattori che entrano in gioco e influenzano il processo di apprendimento delle lingue in questo contesto. In questo articolo introduttivo del volume offriamo una panoramica di studi sull'apprendimento precoce delle lingue per poi descrivere una serie di sfide e strategie che la ricerca e la pratica pedagogica dovrebbero dipanare. Tra queste vi sono: la formazione dei docenti e il loro uso di strategie didattiche, l'uso di pratiche multilingui in classe, i programmi bilingui e il CLIL e le opinioni dei professori, degli studenti e dei genitori in merito all'apprendimento delle lingue in età precoce. Questo articolo chiude con una panoramica degli articoli e recensioni inclusi in questo numero speciale.

Parole chiave: ACQUISIZIONE PRECOCE DI L2, GIOVANI APPRENDENTI, SFIDE, STRATEGIE, PRATICHE DIDATTICHE

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1. Early second and foreign language learning

The introduction of second or foreign language learning programmes in early education has become common practice worldwide despite children's little progress and modest quantifiable achievements, particularly in low exposure contexts (Bland, 2015; García Mayo, 2017; Garton & Copland, 2019; Nikolov & Djigunovic, 2011; Rokita-Jaśkow & Ellis, 2019). The introduction of additional or foreign languages (FL/L2), notably English, for young learners (YLS) in primary schools and very young learners (VYLs) in pre-schools is claimed to have entered "a global phase, thereby astronomically increasing the number of children involved" (Johnstone, 2019, p. 16). In the European context, most countries have established the mandatory starting age of FL learning at 7 years or less (Enever, 2011; Eurydice, 2017). This widespread implementation of early language teaching is encouraged in several policy documents, including the Conclusions of the Barcelona Presidency (2002), the reports from the Commission of the European Communities (2003) and the consecutive Eurydice reports (Eurydice, 2006, 2012, 2017). These documents are informed by a socioeconomic rationale, namely the necessity for the school curriculum to keep pace with the requirements of a globalised world, where knowing different languages, in particular English, offers a competitive advantage (Enever & Moon, 2009). Language acquisition studies in immersion or second language contexts provide a psycholinguistic justification, according to which an early start results in potentially better language learning outcomes. Yet age is just one of the factors at play and an early start alone does not guarantee any advantages if the learning context and the learning conditions are not favourable (Enever, 2015; Johnstone, 2009). Research should therefore focus on exploring those contexts that are indeed successful to determine which factors contribute to improving early language learning experiences among teachers and learners (Garton & Copland, 2019).

A number of advantages for early second language learning have been identified, namely the development of positive attitudes towards foreign languages (Johnstone, 2009), the development of language awareness strategies, children's natural tendency to communicate and play (Halliwell, 1992), more time to learn, the development of multicultural identities, and reduced anxiety (Johnstone, 2002; 2009). According to Pinter (2006), children in their first years of schooling understand meaningful messages but do not display analytic skills. They also have low awareness of themselves as language learners and of the language learning process, and their literacy skills are only emerging. With limited knowledge of the world, they enjoy fantasy, imagination and movement. Older children in the upper stages of primary school are more analytic, have well-developed literacy skills, are aware of others' viewpoints, and have knowledge of the world and an interest in real-life issues. Two of the earliest research reports on early second language learning outlined a number of conditions for success (Blondin et al. 1998; Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006), and subsequent research reviews contributed to an understanding of factors fostering early language learning (Enever, 2011; Enever & Lindgren, 2016; Garcia Mayo, 2017; Nikolov & Djigunovic, 2011). As these researchers noted, the amount of exposure inside and outside school should be increased, parental involvement should be guaranteed, class size should ideally be reduced, teachers should possess an advanced linguistic proficiency level, methodologically appropriate training should be provided, and continuity should be ensured from one educational level to the next. Additionally, YLS need to be provided with meaningful and enjoyable tasks, as well as opportunities to communicate through purposeful, real, here-and-now experiences (Cameron, 2001; Muñoz, 2007; Nunan, 2011; Pinter, 2011, 2014), all of which encourage motivation in language learning. Most importantly, the development of realistic objectives and the use of age-appropriate methodological tools are key to enhancing the potential benefits of an early start (Bland, 2015; García Mayo, 2017).

The growing number of early second and foreign language teaching programmes has been paralleled by an increase in research contributions, particularly over the past ten years. Edited volumes on research-informed practice (Bland, 2015; García Mayo, 2017; Moon & Nikolov, 2000; Mourão & Lourenço, 2015; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Nikolov, 2009; Philp, Oliver, & Mackey, 2008; Rokita-Jaśkow & Ellis, 2019; among others), research methods (Enever & Lindgren, 2017; Pinter & Zandian, 2014), assessment (Nikolov, 2017; Prosic-Santovac & Rixon, 2019), teacher education (Zein & Garton, 2017) and global policies (Enever & Moon, 2009), special issues on young learners (Enever & Lindgren, 2016; Copland & Garton, 2014), monographs (Murphy, 2014; Pinter, 2011) and handbooks (Garton & Copland, 2019) all contribute to expanding research on instructed early language learning. However, the teaching and learning strategies and the outcomes of early language teaching policies in pre-primary and primary school settings remain under-researched in comparison to other age groups (i.e., university learners or adolescent learners) and same age groups in

second language or immersion settings (Collins & Muñoz, 2016) and their findings from studies on the latter groups cannot be extended to YLs on account of age and/or context-related differences.

2. Challenges and strategies in early second and foreign language learning

There is a need for more research on the challenges and teaching and learning strategies in early second language learning contexts and further studies can contribute to bridging the gap between research, classroom pedagogy, and expected outcomes. One of the great challenges that research on YLs still faces is teacher education and the use of pedagogical strategies employed by instructors in their classroom discourse and practice. As Zein and Garton (2017) emphasize, research on teacher education is still limited and unfocused (Grenfell, 2014) and mostly generates small-scale descriptive studies. Language-related, methodological teacher training is crucial to the development of effective pedagogical strategies and L2 literacy skills. At the primary school level, teachers may justify their self-perceived inadequate proficiency in English by the fact that they are expected to equip young learners with basic vocabulary and grammatical structures as opposed to content. However, the communicative approach, which must certainly be used with young learners, requires high competence on the part of the teacher, who often represents the single source of input (Bondi, 2001; Jiménez Raya & Hewitt, 2001). Pronunciation should be given careful attention (Edelenbos et al., 2006) due to its importance in enhancing phonetic awareness in learners. Precisely because of doubts about their language competence, teachers at the early learning stage may rely on grammar as a dependable source of L2 knowledge: “[T]eachers who are less confident in their English proficiency, or who feel pressure to teach towards an examination, will tend to opt for more traditional instruction, even if this is not mandated by the syllabus itself” (Parker & Valente, 2019). However,

young learners need to be surrounded by and participate in meaningful discourse in the foreign language, and it would not be conceptually appropriate for grammar to be explicitly taught as formal, explicit rules in young learner classrooms to children under the age of 8 or 9 years. (Cameron, 2001, p. 110)

Nevertheless, as Cameron also acknowledges, it is desirable for teachers to be aware of grammar-based as well as of form-focused teaching tools so that they can make the most of the learners’ readiness to more formal language learning or to call young learners’ attention to grammatical features present in the different sources of input they are exposed to, such as songs or stories. An additional strategy to be reinforced with young learners is the development of L2 literacy skills. As Cameron notes (2001), “[F]rom their early infancy, children are involved in using writing and reading: for example, when they are helped to write their name on a birthday card to a friend or when they look at story books with adults” (p. 124). It is therefore natural and possible to focus on early literacy in a second language when the teacher is adequately trained and the children are ready to carry out this kind of activity.

The use of multilingual practices and instructional strategies in class is another crucial and challenging area of research to be explored. This includes the use of the L1 by children and teachers in second/foreign language learning and translanguaging strategies in early education. Multilingual practices seem to contribute to a positive and motivating learning environment while still developing the children’s L1 (Garrity, Aquino-Sterling & Day, 2015; Gort & Sembante, 2015; Schwartz & Gorbatt, 2018). A belief persists that multilingual pedagogies should be avoided in order to expose learners as much as possible to the target language. This vision, however, is linked to traditional monolingual ideologies (Cook, 2001; Lin, 2015; Prada & Nikula, 2018) that can make teachers sometimes feel uneasy when they use other languages for pedagogical purposes.

Bilingual education and CLIL programmes are also a source of concern in early language learning, since it is thought that young learners might not be prepared to learn and consolidate content through an L2 or a FL if their level of the target language is limited. However, linguistic development should proceed parallel to that of content and therefore, if content and language are properly integrated and one assists the other, the above-mentioned concern should not arise. More than anything else, the real problem concerns CLIL teacher training, especially in early learning contexts (Mair, forthcoming). At this stage, training can be advantageous (Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2011) provided that certain success factors are considered (i.e., not neglecting pupils’ L1, preparing competent teachers with adequate training, having permanent teaching staff, involving parents, and developing suitable materials for this kind of methodological approach [Navés, 2009]). However, these considerations are often overlooked, which brings fewer advantages and limits tangible outcomes.

A further challenge to include in the research agenda is parents' and teachers' beliefs and misbeliefs about language learning in general and their children's language learning process. As Ellis and Rokita-Jaśkow (2019) observe, teachers' and parents' beliefs "have tremendous influence on their expectations of the aims of language learning, how languages should be taught and assessed, how much progress children should make and what achievements can be expected" (p. 242). Beliefs should be further explored as a tool to delve into how the stakeholders' affective stance may influence the process of early second language learning. These beliefs and misbeliefs need to be made explicit so that they can be explored, drawing on theoretical underpinnings and experimental data, and can inform the examination of what young learners can do with language and how their linguistic development proceeds.

Only through sound research and a continuous link between research and classroom practice can the aforementioned research challenges regarding early language learning be overcome. This is in part the aim of this special issue, which explores learners' outcomes and effective teaching strategies from a variety of perspectives and research methods, involving a range of L1s and target languages.

3. This special issue

Given the gaps in the literature and the unanswered questions concerning several of the challenges and teaching and learning strategies outlined above, this issue focuses mainly on two closely-related areas: the strategies to adopt in early second and foreign language learning and the extent to which those strategies lead to observable or verifiable outcomes. In this sense, we have aimed at investigating the efficiency and appropriateness of early second language teaching and the most effective teaching-learning strategies (as suggested by Enever & Lindgren, 2017; Murphy, 2014). We have simultaneously endeavoured to gain insights into approaches to and experiences of early language teaching and learning across contexts. We also aim to bridge the gap between research and school practice (as suggested by Zein, 2019) and to inform the development of effective educational practices and policies.

This special issue, which includes seven articles, therefore contributes to the growing body of research on early second language learning and teaching at pre-primary and primary school levels. In so doing, it seeks to shed light on teaching/learning strategies and related outcomes that remain under-researched. To this end, the contributions consider a variety of school contexts across the world, the range of approaches used within them, different onset ages, and different programme lengths and intensities. The issue also covers a range of target languages, L1s, and topics related to the various strategies and related outcomes: the importance of longitudinal or pseudolongitudinal studies in early language learning and assessment; effective strategies for the transition from pre-primary to primary language teaching and learning in bilingual schools in Spain; intercultural interactions and multilingual practices among preschool Arabic-Hebrew bilinguals in Israel; the use of the L1 in task-based interactions by Spanish/Basque bilingual elementary students studying English as a foreign language; the sound/spelling connection, pronunciation and literacy skills in L2 French in the UK; Maltese teachers' views on multilingual primary classrooms; and language learning motivation and literacy in primary school storytelling projects in Spain.

The articles are organized as follows (see the summary in Table 1): the issue begins with two conceptually-oriented articles (Lopriore; Fleta), one in Italian and one in Spanish, which reflect on how research and practice in early language learning are linked and provide an overview of assessment and teaching strategies. The next article (Krivosh & Schwartz) is written in English and examines pre-primary language education. The four articles that follow, also written in English, explore primary school contexts. Two of these articles (Martínez-Adrián; Porter) report quantitative research, whereas the last two (Panzavecchia & Little; Waddington) report on qualitative research. In what follows, each article is introduced in more detail.

The first article, "Valutare l'apprendimento precoce di una seconda lingua: rilevanza degli studi longitudinali," by Lucila Lopriore, examines the complexity of assessment and evaluation strategies in early language learning and discusses how these two aspects have been investigated in previous research studies. The author strongly stresses the significance of longitudinal research studies and their potential impact on teaching and learning practices and outcomes.

The second conceptually-oriented article, "Construyendo puentes entre Infantil y el aula de Primaria para la alfabetización temprana en inglés," by Teresa Fleta is a reflection on the *Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid* bilingual programmes and CLIL contexts. In particular, the article describes how both teachers and students can be better equipped in language learning. The author suggests practical communicative strategies that can be developed, particularly during the transition from preschool to primary school. These include the

development of phonological skills through storytelling, the exposure to input and interaction through the use of prefabricated language, and the development of early literacy skills.

The first empirical article, by Ludmila Krivosh and Mila Schwartz, “‘To be able to understand each other’: Intercultural interactions in the Arabic–Hebrew-speaking preschool in Israel,” explores the intercultural strategies used by L1 Arabic- and L1 Hebrew-speaking children during their first year of Arabic-Hebrew dual language education at pre-school in Israel. The authors also investigate how preschool teachers foster these intercultural strategies in the classroom environment and suggest how early bilingual education might contribute to outcomes in the acculturation process in the classroom. Observational and interview data with teachers (N = 2) and children (N = 29) were collected over one academic year and revealed several crucial teacher strategies to encourage intercultural interactions and a number of acculturation strategies of both L2 experts and novice L2 learners.

The contributions that follow are quantitative in nature. María Martínez Adrián’s article, “The use of previously known languages and target language English during task-based interaction: A pseudolongitudinal study of primary-school CLIL learners,” examines a very relevant strategy in early language learning: the use of Basque/Spanish (previously known languages) and English (target language) in primary school CLIL learners (N = 90) in year 5 and 6. The outcomes of the pseudolongitudinal study reveal that the use of previously known languages is greater in older students, but that both groups display similar use of the target language except for metalanguage. Martínez-Adrián’s article confirms how children make natural use of all their multilingual linguistic repertoires, but at the same time suggests a greater use of target language-based strategies.

“Learning French sound/spelling links in English primary school classrooms,” by Alison Porter, focuses on the combined use of systematic explicit phonics and communicative, meaning-based strategies in a 23-week French as a foreign language programme. The sample comprises 45 students (with a sub-sample of 23) who completed pre-, post- and delayed post-tests requiring them to read aloud in sentences. The multiple-source statistical analysis revealed that, in general, when reading a card with a familiar word aloud, the children made slow but statistically significant progress both during and immediately after the FL phonics teaching programme. They were unsurprisingly more successful reading familiar words than unfamiliar words. Porter highlights another very important observation, namely the fact that L1 literacy tends to correlate with FL literacy.

Teachers’ perspectives are addressed by Michelle Panzavecchia and Sabine Little in their article, “The Language of Learning – Maltese teachers’ views on bilingual and multilingual primary classrooms,” in which they focus on teachers’ multilingual perceptions and strategies at the primary level in Malta. Data were collected by means of in-depth interviews with 8 teachers who expressed interest in multilingual practices but at the same time felt the need for more training on how to use translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy. The pedagogical outcomes of this study shed light on the need to provide guidelines for the growing global multilingual society.

The final article, by Julie Waddington, “Motivating self and others through a whole-school storytelling project: authentic language & literacy development,” aims to explore the motivational effect and literacy development of storytelling teaching strategies on 27 learners in the upper cycle of primary school. This exploratory qualitative study was carried out over a period of three years and analysed data from field notes of classroom observations and video recorded sessions, questionnaires and interviews with students and teachers. The storytelling project included the use of authentic picture books and peer modelling. Outcomes suggest that the reading project promoted group collaboration, a positive attitude towards reading, and a growing awareness of how successful communication can be achieved. The author also highlights a discrepancy between students’ and teachers’ views on their performance and the students’ self-reported difficulties in using the foreign language.

In addition to the aforementioned research articles, this special issue also includes reviews of two recent publications in the field of early language learning. First, Andrea Huerta Bon provides a critical *reseña* in Spanish of Janet Enever and Eva Lindgren’s *Early Language Learning in School Contexts: Complexity and Mixed Methods* (2017). Then Alberta Novello offers a *recensione* in Italian of Subhan Zein and Sue Garton’s *Early Language Learning and Teacher Education* (2019).

Table 1

Summary of full-length articles in this special issue of E-JournALL

Author/s	Title	Context	Type of article	Language	Country
Lucilla Lopriore	Valutare l'apprendimento precoce di una seconda lingua: rilevanza degli studi longitudinali	Pre-primary and primary	Overview	Italian	International
Teresa Fleta	Construyendo puentes entre Educación Infantil y Primaria para la enseñanza bilingüe en inglés	Pre-primary and primary	Overview	Spanish	Spain
Ludmila Krivosh and Mila Schwartz	"To be able to understand each other": Intercultural interactions in the Arabic–Hebrew-speaking preschool in Israel	Pre-primary	Empirical/Qualitative	English	Israel
María Martínez-Adrián	The use of previously known languages and target language English during task-based interaction: A pseudolongitudinal study of primary-school CLIL learners	Primary	Empirical/Quantitative	English	Spain
Alison Porter	Learning French sound/spelling links in English primary school classrooms	Primary	Empirical/Quantitative	English	United Kingdom
Michelle Panzavecchia, Sabine Little	The Language of Learning: Maltese teachers' views on bilingual and multilingual primary classrooms.	Primary	Empirical/Qualitative	English	Malta
Julie Waddington	Motivating self and others through a whole-school storytelling project: authentic language & literacy development	Primary	Empirical/Qualitative	English	Spain

4. Concluding comments and future research

This issue addresses several of the most debated teaching/learning strategies in early language learning and their outcomes. Together, the articles in this volume clearly suggest that two of these strategies should be considered essential in early language learning contexts: the use of multilingual practices (in all their forms, from translanguaging at the micro level to bilingual education at the macro level) and the development of children's L2 literacy skills in reading (with particular attention to pronunciation) and writing.

The special issue sought to encompass both quantitative and qualitative research with a longitudinal or pseudolongitudinal design and including whenever possible all actors and educational levels (pre-primary and primary) in early second language learning. This objective was widely achieved since the papers focus on parents, students, teachers and institutions, often triangulating data to gain a more complete perspective. At the same time, the special issue intended to provide an overview of studies on different contexts, which was partly achieved, even though the studies mainly focused on the diverse European context (Spain, Italy, Malta, UK), with only one study examining on a non-European context (Israel).

All of the topics and strategies initially proposed in the call for papers—teacher discourse and its effects on language learning outcomes, effective teaching strategies with a focus on reading aloud and theater-based activities, systematic synthetic phonics outcomes, textbooks and materials analysis, diversity in teaching pedagogies according to different cultural contexts, strategies for special needs students, assessment (with a particular focus on assessment for learning and error correction), content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in early learning contexts, and bilingual education in early learning—have been addressed in some way by the articles in the issue, with two exceptions. None of the articles explore the use of drama as an effective teaching strategy and none explores strategies for special needs children, despite the fact that these represent important topics that remain underexplored. We hope that these and other topics in early language learning will be the subject of future research.

Acknowledgements

This article was written by both authors. Specifically, Pladevall-Ballester is responsible for sections 1 and 2; Costa for sections 3 and 4.

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