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Early Foreign Language Learning in Europe – Challenges of Data Collection in a Multinational Study

ELLiE Research team

Abstract

Today there is a heavy focus on Early foreign language learning (ELL) in Europe. In 2004 the European Commission stated that “member states should move towards ensuring that foreign language learning at primary school and kindergarten is effective”. At present twelve of the current 27 EU members advanced their compulsory start to the age of 7 or earlier (Lopriore 2008). An early start needs to be accompanied by good teaching, a supportive environment and by continuity (Edelenbos, Johnstone & Kubanek 2006).

This symposium focuses a longitudinal multinational project with the aim of investigating what can realistically be achieved in terms of language learning in state schools where relatively limited amounts of class time are available for foreign languages. The project Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) includes England, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and Croatia. ELLiE addresses three central issues: the processes of policy implementation, the factors contributing most effectively to the success of early language learning and the linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes.

The project uses a multimethod approach, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data. ELLiE collects data on whole classes, around 180 children per country, and on a selected group of focal learners, approximately 40 children per country. Thus, a large number of case studies is built up, using the same research approach and instruments across the seven countries. From this we draw out strands for comparative analyses, involving triangulation of data through different sources and participants.

In this symposium instruments and analyses will be presented and discussed around four topics: 1) motivation, 2) comprehension, 3) vocabulary and oral production, and 4) the teacher and classroom environment. Each presentation will focus on the challenges of multinational research with respect to the combination of quantitative and qualitative data and to the use of different sources.

Papers

1. Challenges in researching young foreign language learners' attitudes and motivation

Jelena Mihaljevic-Djigunovic and Janet Enever

2. Challenges of data collection in multi-national studies: insights into young learners' aural comprehension processes

Lucilla Lopriore, Resi Damhuis and Carmen Munoz

3. Effects of foreign language exposure on young learners oral production

Magdalena Szpotowicz and Eva Lindgren

4. The teacher and the classroom learning environment in early foreign language learning: a multimethod and multinational approach

Resi Damhuis, Lucilla Lopriore and Elsa Tragant

Discussant

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Paper 1: Challenges in researching young foreign language learners' attitudes and motivation

Jelena Mihaljevic-Djigunovic and Janet Enever

Extended summary

Early foreign language (FL) learning is considered to have a highly beneficial effect on young learners' (YLS) attitudes to and motivation for future FL learning, as well as on some other aspects of their development such as cultural outlook, self-esteem and confidence (Kennedy et al. 2000). Research on language attitudes and language learning motivation, however, is highly complex in the case of learners of a young age because YLS may lack the ability to articulate their perceptions. Many earlier studies relied on concepts and instrument designs developed for adult FL learners. Thus, for example, questionnaires were used to elicit the strength of YLS' integrative or instrumental orientation (e.g., Limić 1983; Olshtain et al. 1990). These studies could not explain YLS' motivation because they tapped into such generalised motivational dimensions that were not relevant for YLS. Therefore special efforts are needed to alleviate the demanding task of accommodating YLS' insights and perspectives. This is usually attempted by using a range of methods to assess YLS' motivational characteristics. Recently, such attempts have been based on the understanding that both learner attitudes and motivation change over time, and that it is looking into their development that might bring us closer to understanding their role in the process of early FL learning. It is often stressed that YLS' attitudes are shaped by the classroom (Nikolov, 1999) and the key factor in their attitude formation is the teacher (Vilke 1993). Thus, studies that focus on the immediate language learning environment have been perceived as more revealing of YLS' attitudes to and motivation for FL learning than those that define attitudes and motivation as more general and stable variables. Research that looks into the immediate learning environment is process-oriented and is most informative if carried out longitudinally.

In the *Early Language Learning in Europe* (ELLiE) project, attitudes and motivation are one of the foci in the investigations carried out within a longitudinal format. In reporting from this study we will focus on two aspects of researching young FL learners' attitudes and motivation: designing appropriate measuring instruments and interpreting obtained results. The process of construction of questionnaires and interviews used in the project will be presented in detail to highlight the first aspect. Analyses of the findings and their interpretative potential will be used to illustrate the second aspect.

Investigations of attitudes and motivation within this project are being carried out on a sample of close to 1,200 young FL learners (age 6/7 years) from seven country contexts: Croatia, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden. They are drawn from between six to eight primary schools per country. For all participants the FL (English, French or Spanish) is part of their primary curriculum. One aim of the longitudinal study is to look into the role of affective learner factors on early FL learning in the formal school context. During the period of a one year scoping study phase and a three year longitudinal study data on YLS' attitudes and motivation are being gathered by means of smiley questionnaires, oral

interviews and classroom observation. While the questionnaires are administered to the whole sample, interviews and classroom observation are being used with a subsample of 'focal learners' – six learners selected randomly from each of the classes. Data so far collected relate to three school years in the case of Croatia, England, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden, with two school years only in the case of the Netherlands, as they were not part of the initial scoping study.

The first part of the presentation will offer a detailed description of instruments construction. Challenges in designing a smiley questionnaire that could tap into YLs' attitudes and motivation concerning a range of classroom activities common to seven country contexts will be focused on. The same type of challenges will be considered with respect to constructing oral interviews that are carried out with the participants on an individual basis. Attention will also be devoted to collecting information on attitudinal and motivational aspects of YLs' learning behaviour through classroom observation, which is being undertaken in order to triangulate data.

In the second part of the presentation the authors will focus on the challenges met during data analyses and interpretation of findings. The issues to be described relate to the validity and reliability of the gathered data, as well as to the interpretation potential of the findings. YLs' attitudes and motivation results will be considered against the relationship with the participants' language achievement, as well as their variability with regard to gender, linguistic self-confidence and the characteristics of the instruction that the YLs are exposed to.

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2. Challenges of data collection in multinational studies: insights into young learners' aural comprehension processes. Lucilla Lopriore and Evelien Krikhaar

Extended abstract

In a young learner programme, oral language – speaking and listening - provides the basic input for literacy development, and it is through oral language that the foundation for learning a new language is established (McKay, 2006). In primary classes learners are immersed in an environment where most of the activities are based on exposure to the foreign language through activities such as songs, games or stories and teachers' input. Aural comprehension is therefore one of the most relevant skills that enables learners to learn.

Listening is a complex, active process of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know, but listening is also a reciprocal skill, as it is almost always part of an interactive process. Research on aural comprehension processes in FL learning (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Rost, 2002; Vandergrift 2002, 2007) suggests that listening, more than any other skill, has often been a neglected skill, in the mother tongue as well as in the process of learning a foreign language. This is mainly attributed to the fact that listening appears to grow on its own, even if aural comprehension plays a key role in learning itself. It is even more so with younger learners whose learning is closely linked to experiences based on a combination of oral interaction and visual input. There is still insufficient research into young learners' FL aural comprehension processes. With respect to comprehension in the mother tongue some studies show that many aspects of listening in the first language are mastered at a very early age, particularly in conversational contexts, but when the listening tasks involve complex cognitive information processing, children might encounter some problems because aural comprehension involves a multiplicity of skills that are the result of both social, cognitive and linguistic dimensions.

In FL aural comprehension listeners seem to rely upon their experience in the mother tongue as well as upon the knowledge of the content and of the language used in the spoken message (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Brewster, 1991; Grabiélatos, 1998; Rixon, 2003; Vandergrift 2002).

This contribution is aimed at presenting some of the emerging results of the first two years of a longitudinal study on the development of young learners' aural comprehension skills and of their learning achievement in FL classroom contexts. The study is part of a large-scale European project investigating Early Language Learning in Europe and it has been carried out on young learners from six primary classes in each of the seven European countries participating in the project and on a specific sample of 6 focal learners drawn for each class. The present study has specifically identified in each classroom context areas and events where young learners are specifically engaged in listening comprehension tasks during the FL lesson. In order to investigate young learners' development of their listening skills, different quantitative as well as qualitative instruments have been used (Dörnyei, 2007): classroom observations, teachers' interviews and questionnaires, learners' self-assessment, analysis of country specific documents and materials, and specific listening tasks.

Classrooms activities have been observed at regular intervals during the last two years through specific observation grids (COLT, MOLT) where factors such as the use of mother tongue vs the use of the FL, activity types, types of teacher-learner interactions, type of

language used, learners' groupings, lesson management, use of materials and teacher's support of learners' understanding of the FL have been recorded and coded.

Specific listening tasks based upon multiple choice items, 19 in the first year and 18 in the second year, were developed and administered at the end of each school year in order to measure learners' listening comprehension. The items were developed pooling the results of the analysis of syllabi, activities and materials used in each country.

The data emerging from quantitative instruments was triangulated with evidence from observation of the FL classrooms, teachers' and learners' interviews thus providing information about the impact of specific activities and events on learners' aural comprehension development.

First results on learners' listening development and achievement across the seven countries will be presented. Challenges of such triangulation of data will be discussed.

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Paper 3. Effects of foreign language exposure on young learners' vocabulary production

Magdalena Szpotowicz and Eva Lindgren

Extended summary

In the early stages of foreign language learning learners' comprehension of the foreign language is much higher than their production. The same is true for adult foreign language learners and first language abilities. Comprehension and production are never symmetrical (Clark, 1993, Schmitt 2000, Read, 2000). At the early stages of foreign language instruction learners are typically able to produce short utterances, a number of individual words, or longer chunks of fixed phrases. One aspect that is important for successful language learning is learners' exposure to the target language. Frequency of input has been pointed out as important for noticing of language aspects (Ellis, 2002) and the level of input as important for successful acquisition (Pienemann, 1998). Moreover, the quality of input is recognised to be important for correctness (Swain, 1998). Thus, both the amount and type of exposure to the target language affect learners' vocabulary retrieval and their oral production. Learning of novel words is also affected by their phonological similarity to the target language and the length of the items (Service and Craik, 1993). The fact whether the word is easy or difficult to pronounce is an important factor influencing word learning difficulty. Ellis and Beaton (1993: 561) predict that 'the less the overlap between the feature set of the native and the foreign word, the harder it will be for the FL learner to learn that word'.

Testing the results of vocabulary acquisition is challenging both in young and in adult learners. Vocabulary retrieval in test conditions is subject to various factors. Although it is best tested in a spontaneous production test, where the items the subject produces are computed, the computation depends on a number of non-linguistic factors, such as the person's verbosity, fluency, motivation to the topic or the ease in front of an audience (Melka, 1997).

In this paper we present a study in which young learners' vocabulary production is related to their school and their out-of-school exposure to the foreign language. Young foreign language learners, eight to nine years old, from the seven ELLiE countries were included in the study. Information about learners' vocabulary production was collected using a similar method to that of Johnstone's (2000). The learners were asked, one at a time, to produce any words they knew in the foreign language. At the same time the researcher wrote the words on a laptop. When necessary the learners were prompted semantically with fields they were familiar with from their classroom, such as clothes, body parts and colours. Information about learners' exposure to the foreign language was collected through

classroom observations, interviews with their FL teacher, from questionnaires to the parents and from general observations of FL exposure in the seven countries.

In the analysis we have divided the learners' production into categories, depending on the length and type of utterance. Thus, we distinguish between one-word utterances and longer utterances and between utterances in different word-classes. Also, a semantic analysis of word categories has been conducted. Preliminary results indicate that learners predominantly produce single nouns. Longer utterances are mostly represented by fixed phrases, such as 'Sit down, please' and 'My name is NN'. Learners with more out-of-school exposure to FL tend to produce more words and words in other semantic categories than learners with less out-of-school exposure.

The results will be discussed in relation to the varied FL contexts in the different countries and to other variables that may be important for vocabulary retrieval, such as motivation and the role of the teacher. Finally, we will discuss the complexity of language learning in general and oral production in particular indicates and the need for research methods to be improved to better account for various aspects that may influence successful development of vocabulary and oral production.

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Paper 4. The teacher and the classroom learning environment in early foreign language learning: a multimethod and multinational approach

Resi Damhuis, Lucilla Lopriore and Elsa Tragant

Extended summary

Besides individual differences in motivation and out-of-school environment, the learning environment is assumed to be an important factor in the results of early language learning (ELL) (Cummins & Davison 2006, Dörnyei 2006). A wide concept of learning environment is used here, including the teacher and the role of the teacher: learning environment is used to cover all of the learning experiences of the children in the classrooms. Foreign language learning at an early age requires a different didactic approach (e.g. Blondin et al. 1998; Coyle et al. 2002; Edelenbos & Johnstone 1996; Nikolov & Curtain 2000): a limitation in the use of written materials due to the still low literacy skills, more emphasis on communication and no grammar focussed activities. The main research question discussed in this symposium paper is: To what extent does a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal insight into the classroom learning environment of young foreign language learners in the classroom? The project aims at combining qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and data analyses (Dörnyei 2007), in order to reach in-depth insights in relevant factors for ELL.

Several kinds of instruments are used for various sources of information. A first set of issues is directly related to the teacher. Is the teacher a native speaker or not? And what are her qualifications? An argument in favour of native speakers is that they bring into school the language in optimal form as well as the culture. Counterarguments are that cultural differences may hinder optimal functioning and the supposed advantage that non-native teachers went through the learning process themselves (Herder & De Bot, 2005). The participating countries differ in their policy on these issues and teachers in the project schools vary in these respects. Therefore data is collected from policy documents for each country, and with questionnaires for and interviews with the teachers in the project schools. In the interview teachers are for instance asked to reflect on their own proficiency.

The teachers' educational concepts and their perspective on ELL constitute part of the learning environment. These have an impact on the classroom practice of the teachers and may also serve as background for the interpretation of several features of their practice. The teacher interview provides information on this aspect.

A second set of issues concerns the actual classroom practice. What kind of activities are performed, how do children participate, what are the aims of the activities? Here classroom observations are used in combination with teacher interviews and analyses of teaching materials. Both sources provide indications of the communicative character of the teaching and the type of activities that the children participate in. The dilemma here is that objective information needs observation but is very time consuming and costly (e.g. Good & Brophy 2003). The project chose a combination of methods here. Classroom observations are performed at three points during each academic year. Real time coding is used in these observations, following approaches like COLT (*Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching Observation Scheme*, Spada & Frölich 1995) and MOLT (*Motivational Orientation of*

Language Teaching Observation Scheme, Guilloteaux & Dörnyei 2008). Real time coding avoids tedious analyses afterwards of video-recordings. Nevertheless the activities are audio taped as well. This allows for a qualitative description of actual classroom language use by teachers and children as an in depth addition to the real time coding. To compensate for the limited number of observations per class, interviews with the teacher shed light on the intentions and experiences during the rest of the school year. Thus a balance is created between pragmatic time limitations of actual classroom observations and possible unreliability interview reports on classroom practice that are easier to conduct on a larger scale. By using both observations and interviews the project aims to build up a more reliable as well as more in depth picture of the learning environment than by restricting the data collection to only one method or one source.

Once every school year the classroom observation is specifically dedicated to the focal learners in each class. This provides information on the way in which individual children participate in various activities. Moreover, this allows the project to relate these data with data on achievement, motivation and home environment.

From these different sources we build up teacher profiles, profiles of classroom learning environments and profiles of individual children's participation in the classroom learning environment. These profiles consist partly of narratives, partly of quantifiable information.

Instruments and data collection are set up in this way to meet the needs of more in depth insight in the actual learning environment. On the one hand this characterises the project as a multiple case study. On the other hand, by conducting the case studies similarly in several countries, we accumulate information, rising above the level of case studies. The challenge that will be discussed in the presentation is how to construct an overview of these case study profiles of the classroom learning environment that eventually can be related to linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. Examples of the profiles are presented and proposals for linking them with outcomes are put up for discussion.

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