

# Early Language Learning in Europe: a multinational, longitudinal study

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## Introduction

This paper presents an outline of the research framework for a longitudinal, comparative study of early language learning (ELL) across seven European country contexts (Croatia, England, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden). In addition, two strands of evidence from the initial one-year scoping study are explored here, providing an early account of emerging findings and offering an indication of outcomes to be reported in the further three years of the research. Given the European priority for introducing early foreign languages in schools, there is now an urgent need for both qualitative and quantitative evidence on the precise nature and outcomes of ELL, as highlighted by the recent European Commission Report ‘Languages for the children of Europe’ (Edelenbos et al., 2006). This research aims to provide a much-needed body of data of sufficient scale to offer the kind of validity that previous studies have been unable to achieve, with the potential strategically to inform both future policy and practice.

## Research framework

During the period 2006–07 an exploratory scoping study across six European countries (Croatia, England, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden) was conducted with the aim of exploring the viability of a longer study and establishing a data baseline. The countries selected reflect a cross-section of European contexts, including northern and southern Europe; ‘older’ European Union (EU) members and recent (newer) EU members; larger and smaller countries; the diverse linguistic roots of Germanic, Romance and Slavonic languages; contexts where the languages learnt in schools range across a continuum from the status of second to foreign language. The further three-year European Commission-

funded study (European Commission, 2007) to be conducted from 2007–10 includes the addition of the Netherlands as a seventh country, while Croatia (as a European Union applicant country) is supported by an additional British Council research grant.

The central purpose of the study is to investigate what can be realistically achieved in second/foreign language learning in state schools where relatively limited amounts of curriculum time are allocated to such learning. In particular, the research explores the significance of the teacher's role in ELL and the impact of digital media on this process, both in and out of school. With the aim of developing a multi-faceted picture of how young children engage with foreign language (FL) learning the study design is essentially qualitative, while also incorporating quantitative dimensions. Data sources include the learners, their teachers, the school principals and the learners' parents. Data was collected from a convenience sample of approximately 150 children aged 6–8 years in each country, amounting to a total sample of some 900 children. With the addition of a further 150 children from the Netherlands, the sample will increase to a cohort of 1,050 children, whose progress will be tracked as they continue through Primary schooling. During this process, the research team will gather qualitative data to construct a total of 250 learner profiles, 45 teacher profiles, and 45 school profiles, with the addition of quantitative data from the sample of over 1,000 children. Research tools include individual interviews, classroom observation and questionnaires, further supported by analysis of published local and national documents.

The following two sections of this summary present analysis of collated data on the learning environments experienced by these young learners, together with a full discussion of their developing attitudes and motivation towards FL learning. Together, these dimensions offer an insight into those early classroom experiences likely to prove crucial to the establishment of a foundation on which these language learners will build their confidence and competence as they progress in their learning.

## Learning environment

The data on the learning environment was obtained from the interviews with foreign language teachers and from classroom observations. Information collected from each of these two sources was thought to complement the other and provided a summary of learning conditions in all the six countries (Croatia, England, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden) The sample comprised of 40 teachers (6-8 per country) who taught foreign languages to 6–8-year-old learners of the selected classes (approximately 150 per country).

The key areas of investigation included the classroom reality and the teacher's perspective on ELL. In scrutinizing classroom realities, we focused on how teaching was organized in different European contexts. The analysis of teachers' perceptions pinpointed their opinions on the role of language teachers of young learners, their views on the pupils' progress and their perceptions of how parents and other staff viewed ELL in their schools.

In this paper we have selected particular aspects of the classroom environment to focus on as most likely to be significant in their impact on learning. These include:

- the varying number of students per class;
- students' seating arrangements;
- teachers' talking time in the foreign language/mother tongue;
- teachers' reactions to learners' mistakes;
- teachers' opinions about their profession;
- teachers' perception of parents' and other staffs' attitudes to ELL.

Due to limited space we have concentrated here on those similarities and differences that we found significant or of interest for further investigation.

The classrooms observed in the sample differed across the countries with respect to the number of students per group. The largest groups were observed in England where the number of students ranged from 28–32, and where only one school divided the class into two smaller groups for FL lessons. England was followed by Croatia, with classes containing between 22–29 students. In Poland and Spain the classes were of similar size, ranging from 13–27. In Sweden and Italy, the classes under scrutiny did not exceed 24 children. The seating arrangement and the type of interaction in classrooms also differed. For example, in Poland and Italy, all the observed students were seated at desks, arranged in three rows, with one or two students per desk/table. In the remaining four countries, the seating was more flexible. The students were either seated in groups of 5/6 at tables, often changing their position to sit on a carpet around the teacher or board (an electronic whiteboard in England).

The amount of teacher talking time in the target language appeared to depend on individual teachers' preferred style, rather than anything pre-planned. However, it was noticed that the selected teachers in Spain used the target language to a greater extent (45–100 per cent of the time) than those of other countries. The lowest teacher talking time in the target language was found in Croatia (between 25 per cent and 60 per cent of the time). In England, Poland, Italy and Sweden the levels varied across schools but no country-specific differences were noted. These ranged from situations where almost no target language was spoken in class and most of the lesson was taught through the mother tongue, to classes in which the teacher exclusively used the foreign language.

Teachers' reactions to language mistakes made by the students while speaking in the foreign language during the lessons were also scrutinized. It appeared that in England, Croatia, Poland and Spain the teachers corrected, remodelled or prompted self- or peer-correction among their students almost immediately after the mistake appeared. The majority of teachers frequently used one of these techniques and only some teachers applied them rarely. It was interesting to note that the only teachers who were observed not to correct any language mistakes were the teachers from Swedish classes. The possible reasons for this

difference need to be further explored.

Semi-structured interviews with FL teachers revealed that their opinions about the task of teaching a foreign language to young learners were mainly positive. Responses can be grouped into three categories:

1. very positive or positive;
2. stressing both enjoyment and the challenges of the task;
3. stressing the negative aspects.

The first category was represented by responses from almost 47 per cent of the teachers. They referred to their jobs as exciting/rewarding/fun/motivating/enjoyable. Another group, approximately 37 per cent, stressed that it was rewarding and challenging/difficult/demanding. Only 16 per cent claimed this job was mainly tiring/demanding/exhausting.

When asked to describe the methods they use while teaching at this level, teachers responded in a variety of ways. Many stressed their priority in teaching MFL was for communication, others focused on play and games or on exposing children to the target language. More precise answers were obtained when the question referred to the activities used most frequently in class. Almost all of the teachers listed games and songs, and many mentioned total physical response activities and acting out stories. Some said they often used storytelling, drawing or colouring. Only a few teachers referred to reading, writing or dictation.

The interview revealed considerable similarities across all countries in their perceptions of the types of activities that their learners enjoyed. All students were said to like games and songs; many teachers added acting out and colouring. Some mentioned video films, stories and cutting-out activities.

As for the pupils' reactions to learning a foreign language, the teachers claimed that their students were either enthusiastic or moderately willing to learn and only a few teachers responded that the learners treated their FL classes indifferently. No negative responses were noticed by any of the teachers interviewed. Similarly, reactions of parents and other staff in school were perceived by the teachers as either positive or very positive. Only three teachers described some of the reactions as 'unsure'. No strongly negative responses were recorded by any of the teachers.

Our observations concerning the learning environments show that although the six European contexts differ in a number of aspects, the crucial elements of teaching foreign languages to children are very similar. Having analyzed the interviews with FL teachers and compared them with the data from classroom observations, we could draw the initial conclusions that teaching methods, the choice of activities and classroom management techniques do not vary significantly across all the researched contexts. The attitudes of all parties involved – those of the teachers, the students, the parents and other school staff – also seem to be positive across the sample.

## Attitudes and motivation

Attitudes and motivation are considered to be among the key factors in early FL learning. Although there are quite a number of studies in this area, their results do not as yet build a coherent picture. Some (e.g., Nikolov, 1999) suggest that initially positive attitudes wane with time; others (e.g., Cenoz, 2003) show that motivation can be maintained over extended periods of time; while still others (e.g., Julkunen and Borzova, 1996) came up with mixed results. Possible causes of such conflicting findings may be twofold: different research designs and different contexts in which the FL was being learnt. In this study we wanted to remedy this complex situation by using the same research design in six country contexts and by taking into account the relevant contextual differences potentially impacting on YLs' attitudes and motivation.

In order to investigate YLs' reactions to FL learning the ELLiE team designed two instruments. A smiley questionnaire (ESQ – ELLiE Smiley Questionnaire) containing five items was constructed to elicit YLs' attitudes to five activities that were observed to be most commonly used in FL classes. The activities included: speaking, singing songs, learning new words, listening and using the FL while playing games. The second instrument was an oral interview carried out with a sub-sample consisting of six randomly chosen learners from each class. The interview elicited data on YLs' attitudes to the FL, to its native speakers and to classroom activities, as well as on motivational orientations and YLs' perception of parental support. The collected data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Due to space limitation, we present here only the major findings.

The level of motivation (*M*) of the whole sample (a total of 845 learners filled in the ESQ) was found to be high:  $M = 2.56$  ( $\max = 3$ ),  $SD = .484$ . Girls were found to be significantly more motivated than boys ( $t = 5.447$ ;  $p < .000$ ). Significant differences in levels of motivation were also found among YLs in the different countries. YLs of French and Spanish in England were significantly less motivated than YLs in the other five countries. Croatian learners had a significantly higher motivation for learning EFL than the rest of the YLs. Spanish and Swedish young EFL learners showed significantly higher motivation than Polish learners, while Italian learners' motivation was of a similar level to that of the Polish, Spanish and Swedish cohorts.

Inspection of means for the individual five ESQ items resulted in very interesting insights. The highest mean ( $M = 2.72$ ;  $SD = .57$ ) was found for 'learning new words'. This suggests that already, at a very early school age, YLs associate FL learning with vocabulary building and perhaps prefer activities that can produce such concrete and measurable results. This may be considered as some sort of achievement motivation. Listening ( $M = 2.62$ ;  $SD = .62$ ) was the second most-liked activity, followed by speaking ( $M = 2.54$ ;  $SD = .64$ ) and singing ( $M = 2.54$ ;  $SD = .72$ ). Surprisingly, and in contrast to some other studies (Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 1993), playing ( $M = 2.42$ ;  $SD = .77$ ) turned out to be the least liked of the five included activities. This result is not easy to understand. Several possible interpretations come to mind. There are different conceptualizations of play that both YL teachers and

YLS themselves might entertain (Bruce, 2001). Also, designing and implementing a good play activity in an early FL class requires a very high level of competence in teaching young learners. Our future research efforts will include looking more closely into both teachers' and learners' conceptualizations of and attitudes to play as well as its implementation in the YL classroom.

Results of the oral interview were analyzed from a more qualitative perspective. For the purpose of this paper we will summarize and comment on findings obtained from two extreme sub-samples in terms of motivation: the cohorts from Croatia and England. It is interesting to note that, in contrast to Croatian EFL learners, the majority of whom chose English as their favourite school subject, only a minority of English YLS of French and Spanish selected their foreign language as a favourite subject. The two groups differed also in their motivational orientations. While YLS of French and Spanish in England thought it was good to learn French or Spanish in order to be able to use it when in the target language country and for communication with native speakers, Croatian YLS seemed to view their FL (English) as a global language and were more interested in using it for communicating with non-native speakers. Another interesting finding concerns the YLS' awareness and perception of native speakers. In England, a larger number of YLS had met native speakers of the FL they were learning, but they could not specifically comment on their perceptions of them. In Croatia, very few learners reported having met native speakers of English, but most of them expressed positive attitudes towards them. It is our assumption that this is the result of exposure to the FL through the media. Croatian YLS probably formed their attitudes on the basis of the numerous TV programmes they can watch on the national TV. These programmes are subtitled. In England there are few undubbed French or Spanish programmes on TV that would give YLS an opportunity to connect the language with characters as native speakers of French or Spanish. The different status of the FLs were also reflected in YLS' interest in learning other FLs: fewer Croatian YLS wished to learn other languages than YLS of French and Spanish in England. Apparently, Croatian YLS believed that English was the most useful foreign language. Parental support was perceived to be high in both cohorts, but more so in the Croatian sample. This may have been reflected in YLS' motivation too.

Our results suggest that young learners, generally speaking, react positively to FL learning. Their attitudes vary with the language studied, more specifically with its status and availability in YLS' lives. The impact of the contextual factors seems to be highly important too. We hypothesize that, among the numerous contextual variables, quality of teaching is of key importance. The follow-up to the study described in this paper will aim to test all these hypotheses.

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