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What can realistically be achieved in state schools where relatively limited amounts of class time are available for foreign language learning?

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This paper considers the position of early language learning in European schools today, operating within a global context of unprecedented interconnectedness, where increasingly nation states have taken a policy decision to introduce a second/foreign language from the very earliest phases of compulsory education.

Historically, such radical policy decisions can now be linked to the political and economic changes which occurred across Europe and south-east Asia, particularly in the late 1980s/early 1990s. With the escalation of a neo-liberal agenda for lowered economic barriers in these regions, paralleled by the phenomenal growth of digital technologies, trading globally became a realistic possibility for many businesses in many markets. Much business communication was conducted in English, often the result of either a legacy of colonial ties or the need to access the economic power base within the USA. The consequence for schools was a perception by both politicians and parents that early second/foreign language learning in schools would better equip the next generation with the cultural capital necessary to gain future economic advantage in the global market place. Overwhelmingly, but not always, English was the perceived ‘market leader’ in this.

Across Europe today policy initiatives replicate this pattern with comparative data from 1990/2008 clearly implying radical policy reform.

Table 1:

Europe: recent changes to national compulsory start age for foreign language learning (July 2008)

	compulsory start age (for the 27 current EU member countries)		
	7 yrs or below	8-9 years	10-11 years
1990	1	2	24
2008	12	11	4

Data source: personal communication from senior in-country specialists

Table 1 above reflects a shift in just 18 years from a position where almost all EU countries required schools to introduce a second/foreign language by the age of 10/11 years to a situation now whereby only four countries maintain this – now later – start. Increasingly, the trend is towards a start within the first three years of compulsory schooling (European Communities, 2007).

This paper reports on early findings from a transnational, longitudinal study established to investigate the realities of introducing early language learning in seven European countries (Early Language Learning in Europe: ELLiE). Acknowledging that most countries are in a fairly early stage of introducing a challenging educational reform, the study explores contexts for learning, the social milieu, the children’s, schools and parents’ responses to this new experience. In taking a longitudinal perspective, it is anticipated that the opportunity to observe development over time will enable the research team to report on what can (and cannot) be achieved in busy primary classrooms where between 30-90 minutes per week are available for language learning.

The transnational framework of the study includes the six EU member states of England, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden (funded by a grant from the EU Lifelong Learning Fund), together with Croatia - an EU applicant country (funded separately by the British Council). This transnational framework is designed to provide opportunities to draw out similarities and differences across the European educational space, which may offer the potential for the development of a more generalised approach to early language learning, establishing a set of key principles for future policy makers in Europe. Currently, no study of a similar scale exists, yet further guidance on what is achievable is much sought after.

The innovative nature of this study has required the research team to re-think many accepted principles for gathering data on language learners. As part of the on-going process of shaping and refining appropriate research instruments with which to gain insights into the process of language learning in primary schools, a mixed method approach is being developed, including questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation and analysis of published documentation. Data is collected from children, teachers, school principals and parents to construct a comprehensive picture of the children's continuous learning experience – both in and out of school.

This paper will discuss evidence of early attitudinal and motivational findings which suggest the following:
Children are highly motivated for learning a foreign language at this age;
Children are aware of their abilities and of their progress in the foreign language;
Children show clear preferences in terms of foreign language learning environment and classroom activities.

In reviewing the evidence of linguistic outcomes, findings from production tasks will be presented in the light of information from classroom observations and teachers' interviews. These findings suggest the following:
Initial evidence reflects a strong emphasis on oracy and its effect on children's production, particularly in terms of vocabulary production;
In terms of lexical knowledge, children at this stage produce more nouns than verbs and tend to produce routinised lexical chunks with only occasional application in new contexts.

Contextualising the above evidence, responses from principals, teachers and parents indicate positive support for early introduction of language learning and the perception that an early start is a relevant factor in children's learning outcomes. Variations in parental support across countries and emergent measures being taken to address them will be further discussed in the paper.

Initial findings from the ELLiE study indicate the importance of not being over-ambitious in expectations of linguistic progress for young language learners where there is a quite limited amount of curriculum time for languages. Longitudinal evidence will clarify the exact role that the establishment of early positive attitudes and motivation may play in developing learners with the desire and ability to maintain their learning over time and become increasingly independent as autonomous language learners.

References

European Communities (2007) *Final Report. High Level Group on Multilingualism*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2007.



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