DISCUSSION

Common challenges in diverse contexts

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Introduction

In their introduction to this volume, Enever and Driscoll describe this collection as the latest product of the Research Network in Early Language Learning. Established in 2015, the international professional network aims to deepen our mutual understanding of early language learning and stimulate collaboration on young learners' (3–12 years) second language (L2), foreign language (FL), and minority language (ML) learning across disciplines and regions.

Reflecting the breadth of the field of early language learning, the present collection is composed of seven studies that are broad in terms of scope, region, and methodology. Despite such diversity, the papers in this volume are united in their effort to contextualize the policy and practice of early language learning. Policy is not merely a system but rather reflects dynamic interaction, or synergy, between agents and environments, which are themselves multi-layered and complex entities. This dynamic synergy, both in space and time, is the "context." Policy discussions without contextualization are essentially meaningless. Although conducting a policy analysis with sufficient contextualization is always challenging, such analyses – including the seven presented in this volume – can help us identify common underlying mechanisms of how policy works, despite their seeming differences. Similarly, as exemplified in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system model, human development and learning are also embedded in multi-layered and interconnected environments, or what Bronfenbrenner called *ecological systems* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). We cannot understand children's language learning without contextualizing it in dynamic, whole ecological systems. Sufficiently contextualized studies on early language learning can help us find common mechanisms and issues associated with children's language learning and teaching, even when those studies take place in substantially varied environments.

Collectively, the papers in this volume address important contextual changes that we have to keep in mind when considering the policy and practice of early language learning; these include changes in (1) learner characteristics, (2) technology, and (3) pedagogical approaches in language education. These changes

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yield a few common challenges and complex issues – driven largely by globalization – when implementing policies and exercising practices, including (1) multiple expectations for early language learning, (2) accessibility and power structure, and (3) the role of out-of-school resources, including those of parents and communities. In my commentary on this volume, I first address the three major changes and then discuss the three challenges that have emerged as a result of the changes.

Major contextual changes addressed in this volume

Changes in learners' characteristics

The first and perhaps the most significant contextual change involves FL and L2 learners themselves. Not only are more children learning one or more additional languages than ever before, but those children come from increasingly diverse backgrounds. FL education for children is no longer only for privileged groups and is increasingly mandated by the formal curriculum in many parts of the world. This is particularly the case with English, a language that is often believed to empower students, as exemplified in three case studies in Enever (this volume). Likely because of widespread belief in the notion of "the earlier the better" for language learning, a growing number of very young children also start learning English, even though an earlier start does not necessarily lead to better learning in the long run (Wilden & Porsch, this volume).

Increased mobility of people also plays a role in the rise in the number of children who receive formal schooling in a language other than their home language(s); as with FL education, children learning a second language are also highly diversified with respect to their backgrounds. Various types of programs where the target language is used as the medium of instruction have been developed, ranging from bilingual immersion programs to Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (e.g., Anderson, Mcdougald, & Cuesta, 2015). Young learners' attitudes about their heritage languages are changing, as are the attitudes of their parents and communities (Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg, this volume); heritage languages are being revitalized worldwide. Multilingualism is becoming the norm rather than an exception and is increasingly influencing the linguistic repertoires of many communities. These changes are not universally embraced, however, and in communities that are traditionally perceived to be monolingual and monocultural, growing multilingualism is a potential threat (Driscoll and Holliday, this volume).

Changes in technology

The second change that is addressed in this volume concerns technology (e.g., Enever; Sayer; Driscoll & Holliday; Roos & Nicholas, all in this volume). Recent advances in various types of technology, especially digital technology, have greatly changed the way we use language. Accordingly, we should consider whether we need to reconceptualize the language abilities that we want our children to develop. For example, one can argue that spelling, which used to be a popular learning target and activity in young learners' classroom (and is still in some places), may no longer be important given the widespread availability of spell-check features. Moreover, technology is changing the way people learn and teach language. Using technology as a learning and teaching tool is indispensable.

Many young learners grow up with digital technology such as tablets and smartphones from a very young age. In the United States, for example, a report released in 2015 showed that by the time children are 1 year old, 35% use touchscreens, 15% use some apps, and 12% play video games (Sifferlin, 2015). Not too surprisingly, these percentages increase as children grow. The same report indicated that the percentage of children who use digital devices for more than an hour per day is 26% at the age of 2 and goes up to 38% by the age of 4. Compared with earlier generations, children who grow up with digital technology may have different cognitive processing, preferred learning strategies, and attitudes toward learning (e.g., Prensky, 2001). Although we still don't have sufficient empirical information on how technology use in early childhood influences children's cognitive and language development, if children get used to technology-mediated learning, then pedagogical approaches should be altered to support their learning needs. Roos and Nicholas' (this volume) use of photos or images in their linguistic landscape activity is a great example of incorporating technology into learning opportunities for this generation.

Critically, however, advances in technology do not penetrate children's lives equally. There are substantial gaps in access to digital technology by social class/socioeconomic status (SES) and gender depending on regions. Both Enever and Sayer (this volume) directly examine unequal access to technology and how it significantly influences the way that children receive FL instruction.

Changes in pedagogical approaches in language education

Over the years, a number of new pedagogical approaches have been promoted to teachers, often through policy. Such new approaches include child-centered learning, autonomous learning, project-based learning, critical pedagogy, communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, and so forth. Focusing on

learners, and respecting their agency and autonomy, these new approaches are motivated, at least in part, by the widespread rejection of the notion that children are blank slates for the controlled transmission of knowledge from teachers to children. In the field of language education, it is considered important for children to learn meaning-making and language use in context rather than simply acquire linguistic knowledge and skills. Roos and Nicholas' (this volume) linguistic landscape project shows children's sophistication in analyzing and interpreting data that they collected and in presenting their metalinguistic awareness and autonomy in accomplishing the project.

It is not always easy, however, for teachers to "get up to speed" on these new approaches and doing so largely depends on whether they have access to professional training. Moreover, as Sayer (this volume) vividly describes, there are serious gaps in access to these newer pedagogical approaches based on students' social class/SES; simply put, language pedagogy is stratified by social class. Driscoll and Holliday (this volume) report that, while preschool headmasters and teachers in U.K. preschools located in homogenous lower SES neighbourhoods were fully committed to widening their children's cultural awareness through FL learning, they were still largely constrained by traditional and essentialist "us-and-them" dichotomous views (e.g., "their culture" vs. "our culture"). Critically, for teachers, knowing these newer pedagogical approaches is different from effectively implementing them in context; appropriate contextualization is critical. As both Sayer's and Driscoll and Holliday's case studies suggest, offering sufficient professional training to teachers is indispensable for helping them be sensitive to their students' social class and surrounding environments, or ecological systems.

Common challenges and future directions

These changes in the ecological systems of young FL and L2 learners appear to yield some common challenges in implementing policy and pedagogy across contexts. In this section, I discuss three major challenges that emerged from the papers in this volume, as well as topics for future inquiries in response to these challenges.

Challenge 1: Dealing with multiple goals and expectations for early language education

The first challenge concerns how to deal with multiple goals and expectations for early language education. This is closely related to rapidly changing learner characteristics and their diverse needs, mentioned above. There are often mul-

tiple and sometimes even conflicting goals and expectations for early language education. Language learning is only one of many aims in most early language programs. For example, parents and educators often expect that learning an additional language early will have positive effects on children's cognitive development (Driscoll & Holliday, this volume). Enhancing children's cultural awareness and understanding is also a key purpose of early language education (Driscoll & Holliday, this volume). Moreover, early language learning is often expected to serve as a way to revitalize community language and culture (Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg; and Ragnarsdottir; both in this volume). The target language is also increasingly used as a medium of instruction for other academic subjects (Enever, this volume); attaining academic content is important as well as language acquisition. Certainly, early language education wears multiple hats.

The multiple goals and expectations that are imposed on early language programs make policy decisions complicated, particularly in multilingual contexts. For example, in Germany, the decision to introduce English education (discussed in Wilden & Porsch, this volume; also Wilden & Porsch, 2019) at an older grade level did not simply involve changes to instructional hours in English but also entailed securing greater instructional time for German and mathematics, which in turn had significant consequence for the growing number of German-as-L2 students in German primary schools. A policy in a given program can have varied consequences depending on students' goals and needs. A real challenge is to develop policies that maximize gains among stakeholders with varying goals and needs.

Having multiple goals and expectations also makes it challenging to measure and evaluate program effectiveness. What counts as "successful" learning, and how is it evaluated? Despite multiple goals and expectations, we tend to focus on linguistic aspects, which are often believed to be relatively easy to capture, especially in a quantifiable fashion. This assumption itself is arguable, however. We are far from understanding the nature of children's L2/FL learning and how best to capture it (Butler, 2019). As for non-linguistic aspects of early language education, we have very little knowledge about how best to capture them. As with program evaluation, sufficient contextualization is necessary while taking the whole ecological systems into account. In-depth evaluation case studies, such as those by Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg (this volume) and Ragnarsdottir (this volume), that combine multiple stakeholders' viewpoints are welcome as a way to triangulate the data and to better capture the complexity of program effectiveness.

Challenge 2: Working on accessibility and power structure

The second challenge addressed repeatedly across papers in this volume concerns accessibility and power structures (Enever; Driscoll & Holliday; Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg; Ragnarsdottir; Sayer; all in this volume). Securing equal access for everyone is, of course, a fundamental premise of educational policy. However, as Enever (this volume) and Sayer (this volume) clearly show, access alone does not guarantee equity. The distinction between *affordance* (i.e., opportunities) and *utilization* (i.e., making use of opportunities), originally proposed by Helmke (2015; cited in Wilden & Porsch, this volume), nicely conceptualizes the difference between access and equity. To make the matter more complicated, because equity presumes differences among individuals, groups, and objects (Gosepath, 2011), what counts as "equal" may likely be perceived differently by different stakeholders within a given context. Moreover, one has to define which aspects of the target individuals, groups, and/or objects are equal; equality applies when targets supposedly share a certain compatible attribute (Gosepath, 2011). However, reality is far too complicated and multifaceted for us to easily identify or define a compatible attribute across targets. It is beyond the scope of this short commentary to have an extended discussion of equity but, indeed, equity has never been a single principle, and philosophers have discussed multiple concepts of equity.

Because English is increasingly considered a powerful global lingua franca, children with access to resources have started learning it at an earlier age. One of the motivations for policy makers to introduce English in earlier grade levels in their formal education systems is to ensure that everybody, regardless of the availability of family/regional resources, has an opportunity to access to English early. In reality, however, as illustrated in Sayer's study (this volume), early English education often results in widening gaps by children's social class. Sayer argues that English proficiency or language skills that are emphasized in English classes for middle-class students helps them "build symbolic capital" (p. 57), while acquiring such skills would not bring the same benefits to students in lower social classes. But how does policy tackle this difficult issue? Having sustainable learning and practice supported by policy are critical for those who are in need (Driscoll & Holliday, this volume), but we are far from even understanding the complex relationship between access and power let alone developing effective policy interventions (refer, however, to Enever's case study in Uruguay, this volume, for an example of a policy intervention using technology to close a regional gap). Detailed case studies as well large-scale policy analyses focusing on this topic are urgently needed.

Challenge 3: Considering the role of out-of-school resources

The third challenge, closely related to issues of access and power that I discuss above, concerns the role of out-of-school resources, including family and community resources. Parents and communities often have tremendous influence on decisions about young learners' language learning, such as when to start, which language to learn, how to learn, and how much to learn. Shadow education – any educational activities or opportunities that take place outside of formal education systems, such as private tutoring and learning at private after-school programs – has expanded rapidly in recent years. In South Korea, for example, household expenditure on shadow education among primary and secondary school children reaches approximately 80% of government expenditure on primary and secondary school education (Bray & Lykins, 2012), and spending for early language education is expected to grow particularly rapidly. While South Korea may be an exceptional case, the role of shadow education, especially in relation to the children's social class/SES, cannot be understated when discussing the impact of early language education, English as FL in particular. A comprehensive inquiry of any policy impact will not be complete unless it accounts for the role of shadow education. It must be noted, however, that accurately capturing its impact is difficult.

For learning and maintaining heritage language, families and communities play a tremendous role in the effectiveness of the programs. Revitalizing a community/home language, as Ó Duibhir and Ní Thuairisg (this volume) indicate, cannot be achieved through formal schooling alone; students need opportunities to use the language in the community while being supported by positive community attitudes toward the language. Ragnarsdottir (this volume) also stresses the importance of bringing *inclusion* and *social justice* into the classroom with support from parents; partnering with parents has been key for the success of multilingual policy in Iceland.

While it is clear that, to make heritage/home language education successful, community and parent involvement is indispensable, getting their support is not always easy. It may require substantial tactical planning. The role of teachers in the process appears be critical as well (Ragnarsdottir, this volume). More intervention studies would be very informative.

Conclusion

Because empirical studies on early language education are scattered across different academic disciplines and regions, establishing an international network of

researchers to foster the exchange of information is an exciting move. As a signature product of this effort, this collection of empirical studies covers a wide range of issues related to early language education. Despite the diversity of scope, region, and methodology, all of the studies address the importance of "contextualization" when discussing policy and practice for early language education. When policy and practice are sufficiently contextualized, one can start seeing common mechanisms and challenges regardless of the differences in environments.

In this commentary, I identified three major changes that this collection addresses: changes in learner characteristics, changes in technology, and changes in pedagogical approaches. I then discussed a series of challenges that emerge from the diversity in language learning that is largely a result of the above changes, including dealing with multiple goals and expectations for early language education; improving accessibility and power structure; and considering the role of out-of-school resources. This new research network will surely facilitate our understanding of these complex and challenging issues and help us work on them collaboratively.

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