

Introduction

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This issue of the AILA Review sets out to position early language learning as a distinctive field of enquiry within the discipline of applied linguistics and education. The provision of additional languages at primary and kindergarten school level is now the norm in most developed countries worldwide and it is increasingly reaching the policy agendas of low-economy countries (Enever & Lindgren, 2017). Described as the greatest educational policy change worldwide in the past 30 years (Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006), Graddol (2006) suggests that English has become a basic skill for some national curriculum policies, with multilingualism increasingly the norm even in societies traditionally associated with one national language (Mitchell, 2014). Language policies and approaches to teaching and learning vary across the world (Blondin et al., 1998; Wade & Marshall with O'Donnell (2009); Enever, 2018; Extra & Yagmur et al.; 2012; Rhodes & Pufhal, 2009), but challenges tend to be the same, in many if not most countries. There exists a limited supply of appropriately qualified teachers and inadequate provision for pre- or in-service development and continuing local support. With reference to the popularity of English in particular, Rixon (2016, p.19) argues that English for young learners (EYL) has 'come of age' as can be witnessed by the rise of commercial interest in devising resources, materials and formal testing procedures for this age group.

Despite the widespread introduction of additional languages at primary school level across many contexts globally, it is evident that only limited attention has been paid to the satisfactory preparation of schools, teachers, families and the wider community in accommodating this major reform to school curricula. Many complex issues are still to be addressed if effective implementation is to be achieved (Truscott de Mejía, 2016).

In this issue we include a range of papers reflecting a sample of the diverse contexts in which languages are now being introduced in the early stages of formal schooling worldwide. Papers included address three main themes in need of further research: classroom pedagogy, the learner and teacher development. The first paper in the collection offers an introductory discussion of policy issues

that have emerged as a result of political decisions to introduce early language learning (ELL). It provides a policy frame for the papers following. Subsequent papers address factors such as neoliberalism, intercultural competence, diversity, processes of marginalization and the linguistic landscape, reviewing their interaction with specific contextual features relevant to the early years of schooling.

The ELL-ReN Network

This publication has come about as a result of the establishment of a new AILA Research Network – the Early Language Learning Research Network <www.ell-ren.org>, established in 2015 as a much-needed vehicle for raising the profile of and disseminating research evidence in the broad field of early language learning (including foreign, second and minority languages) in instructed contexts for children in the 3–12 year age range. The Network has proved popular, attracting a global 100-strong membership. It provides a range of opportunities for members to meet, share their research and identify significant areas of future investigation. This publication arose from a series of stimulating conferences organised by the AILA ELL-REN Network, including presentations given at the AILA Congress 2017, a sample of which are included in this volume.

Classifying education systems

The question of terminology for the age group in focus is of particular significance and needs some clarification. Until approximately the late 1980s, the term *young learner* was used to refer to adolescents (aged 12–18 years), learning an additional language either in mainstream or private language schools. Since then, the age at which children begin to learn additional languages in school contexts has fallen rapidly, with national policy currently stabilising somewhere between the ages of 6–9 years in government-funded schools in many parts of the world. Additionally, in some regions, non-compulsory provision at kindergarten level (ages 3–6 years) is becoming increasingly common. Further confusion in terminology arises with reference to the organisation of schooling systems across countries and continents. Children in the age group 6–12 years may attend schools which are variously called: ‘junior’, ‘primary’, ‘elementary’ or ‘basic’, to name but a few. For the purposes of this publication we rely on the UNESCO (2011) categorisation of school systems, known as the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), referring to ISCED 02 (ages 3-start of compulsory schooling) and ISCED 1 (approximately 6–12 years).

We follow the ISCED classification in their choice of international terminology to describe these two sectors as *kindergarten* and *primary*.

Research in the field of early language learning

Given recent policy changes there is an urgent need for research that will clarify the distinctive features of young children learning a new language in the formal context of school classrooms. As already confirmed by a number of researchers in the field (Butler, 2015; Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014; Garcia Mayo, 2017; Hayes, 2017; Lopriore, 2014; Muñoz, 2006; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011; Spolsky, 2012; Toohey, 2000; and Wang, 2009), research related to this age group can be regarded as a relatively recent field of empirical enquiry, with many areas substantially under-researched. Concern particularly relates to understandings of how young children learn additional languages in formal contexts. For example, Cameron (2003, p.107) argues that as young children are active participants in social interaction before they gain fluency in their first language, so children are able to seek out meaningful interaction before they gain a level of proficiency in the process of learning a foreign, second or additional language. She describes this as seeing language ‘from the inside’ where language is used to communicate meaning, rather than ‘from the outside’ where the focus is on ‘system and form’. The challenge for teachers in facilitating opportunities for children to engage in meaningful interaction in classroom environments is substantial, particularly in contexts where teachers themselves are novice learners or where they have received little or no training in how this may be achieved. As Butler (2015, p.304) has argued, there is now an urgent need for ‘more contextualized research among diverse populations in the areas of second language acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics’.

Further concerns relate to the optimal age question, originating from debate surrounding evidence from Lenneberg (1967) who proposed the existence of a limited developmental period for L1 acquisition, known as the critical period hypothesis (CPH). Numerous studies of children deprived of this early exposure have contributed to an accepted view of puberty as the latest likely cut-off point for satisfactory L1 acquisition. Subsequent application of this theory to learning additional languages has been influential in the early introduction of FLs in school contexts. Evidence for the effectiveness of such policies, however, has so far been contradictory, emanating from both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies in local or regional contexts, including many different contextual variables. As an illustration of the conflicting evidence available we refer briefly to four relevant studies here. Firstly, we mention the Barcelona Age Project (BAF) a cross-

sectional and partly longitudinal study of the rate of foreign language learning (Muñoz, 2006). The project compared earlier and later beginners in various age groups learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Barcelona region, a bilingual community where English is generally the third language. The longitudinal study of the two central groups (aged eight years and eleven years; $n=570$) found that those learners who began their FL learning later progressed more rapidly in the first 200 hours of learning than those who began earlier, although it was clear that 'results were not uniform across measures of language abilities' (p.30). However, in contrast to this, a much larger cross-sectional study of 6500 learners in the North-Rhine-Westphalia region of Germany found that the group commencing their English studies at age six years achieved more highly in receptive skills than those starting at age eight years (Wilden & Porsch, 2016), evidenced by testing conducted at the beginning of secondary school (aged 10 years). Factors affecting these outcomes included gender, SES and the children's reading skills in German. Finally, in this section we mention two longitudinal studies which provide somewhat contradictory evidence. Firstly, the ELLiE study (Enever, 2011), a longitudinal three-year study (age 8–11 years) of 1,400 learners across seven European countries revealed the complexity of both measurable and unmeasurable factors contributing to progress in FL learning. Overall achievements varied substantially both within and across countries, with many factors contributing to the generally positive outcomes. A further study of 636 learners conducted by Pfenninger & Singleton (2017, 2019) in the multilingual context of Switzerland, compared early starters (aged 8) with later starters (aged 13) in EFL, measuring longitudinal outcomes at 13 years (measurement for later starters conducted after 6 months of study) and subsequently at 18–19 years. Four categories of learners were included in the study including categories of monolinguals, simultaneous bilinguals, simultaneous bilingual-biliterates and sequential bilinguals. Analysis found that while progress for early starters across a range of receptive and productive measures was greater at the start of secondary schooling, some five years later no main effect was evident for the earlier starters in this study, except in the case of the simultaneous bilingual-biliterates. What is evident from these and many other studies is that age alone cannot be viewed as an independent variable. The multi-layered complexity of the many factors affecting FL progress in the primary school years makes it difficult to draw any reliable comparison or conclusion across studies. However, despite this mixed evidence, policy trends since the late 1990s have indicated a continuing commitment to making an early start to language learning. Given this trend, there is a substantial need for further research to shed light on the many gaps in current knowledge, particularly the complexity of the classroom learning environment (Enever, 2011; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019).

Themes included in this volume

The Review includes empirical research drawn from three central themes of early language learning research: classroom pedagogy, the learner and teacher development. Papers include findings from Asia, Europe and the Americas, representing those regions of the world where national policy shifts towards ELL have been strongest in recent years. Studies focus on foreign and second languages, minority languages and multilingual contexts, reflecting both a global trend towards the increasing provision of English and an acknowledgement of the significance of other additional languages under heightened conditions of migration at a global level. This varied range of extended papers aims to valuably contribute to consolidating the research agenda in the field of early language learning, raising awareness of the complex nature of an interdisciplinary research agenda that spans the disciplines of applied linguistics, education, politics, sociology and psychology, at least.

Papers included in this collection

The seven empirical papers reflect learning environments across Asia, Europe and Latin America, signalling the extent of early language learning now present in primary and kindergarten contexts worldwide today. Papers are organised in three main themes, with the first three providing a focus on pedagogy; the second three focusing on the learner and the final paper on teaching quality. Inevitably, however, all three themes emerge and continuously re-emerge in discussions of each paper. An introductory summary of each paper is provided here.

Janet Enever in, “Looking beyond the local: Equity as a global concern in Early Language Learning” focuses on the challenges of achieving equity in early foreign language provision across three contrasting contexts – Uruguay, India and China. Classroom pedagogy is explored in relation to political factors which may determine the current effectiveness of provision in each jurisdiction. Factors included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG; 2015) such as universal access to primary schooling, gender equality and access to digital technologies are critically examined in the light of historical conditions which continue to limit the achievement of social justice with regard to early foreign language learning provision in each of these contexts.

Peter Sayer’s paper, “The hidden curriculum of work in English language education: Neoliberalism and early English programs in public schooling” explores a theme closely-related to Enever’s, revealing the extent to which the recently-introduced national programme for early English in Mexico may be regarded as

organized around neoliberal principles. The paper presents a comparative case study of three schools, representing different points on the socioeconomic spectrum. Classroom level findings indicate that the actual processes of teaching and learning are highly stratified across social class levels developing the skills and dispositions most closely associated with their social class position and thus limiting opportunities for tangible social change.

Patricia Driscoll and Adrian Holliday's paper, "Cultural threads in three primary schools: introducing a critical cosmopolitan frame" foregrounds the value of early language learning in enriching children's understanding of themselves, of others and of the world. Through evidence collected from three school studies the authors explore teachers' and headteachers' perceptions of foreign languages through the lens of critical cosmopolitanism. Drawing on the argument that a narrative of the *target language* and *target culture* is an outmoded approach to cultural learning in primary schools, their evidence reveals the need for professional development to support teachers. Through providing a broader range of topics to guide children's construction of culture through a discourse embedded in foreign languages, teacher agency may contribute meaning to children's lives and to the construction of their cultural identities.

Jana Roos and Howard Nicholas introduce a focus on the learner with their paper, "Using young learners' language environments for EFL learning – ways of working with linguistic landscapes". Drawing on data collected by children in local linguistic landscapes they explore German primary school learners' perceptions of English. The children's written reflections on their collected evidence demonstrate their sophisticated abilities in the interpretation of the linguistic, social and cultural aspects of the data and the potential opportunities for learning presented by involving children in activities which reflect on the world around them through the lens of the languages the children encounter there.

Pádraig Ó Duibhir and Laoise Ní Thuairisg's paper, "Young immersion learners' language use outside the classroom in a minority language context" considers the contemporary position of Irish, a minority language taught in all Irish primary schools today. The paper examines the impact of this government policy for language revival, charting its decline and efforts made for revitalisation through data collected in a series of three empirical studies. Findings indicate that while the 20-year strategy has proved successful in establishing Irish as a language that children use in class, there is limited evidence of its transfer to either the playground or the home context. The authors propose initiatives to promote the wider use of Irish in community contexts as a vehicle for its sustainability and revitalisation.

Hanna Ragnarsdottir in her paper, "Perspectives on bi- and multilingual children's participation in kindergartens in Iceland" explores the recent changes in cultural and linguistic diversity experienced in kindergartens as a result of recent

migration shifts experienced in Iceland. Through a discussion of interview data collected in three kindergartens the paper reveals the extent to which children are supported in communicating across and between languages, engaging in communication through play, educational and social activities where children and their families flourish and feel welcomed. Several challenges are also identified in the study, including the linguistic demands for teachers working in multilingual environments and the low retention of teachers in some kindergartens.

Eva Wilden and Raphaela Porsch's study, "The impact of teaching quality and learning time on primary EFL learners' receptive proficiency. Preliminary findings from the TEPS study" discusses the research design and initial findings of a study conducted in Germany comparing two cohorts of children who began learning English in years one and three ($n=269$). The study looked at children's receptive EFL proficiency, learner attitudes and teaching quality at the end of primary education (year four). Findings revealed an advantage for the earlier starters in both reading comprehension and listening. Significantly, teaching quality was found to have a moderating effect on positive attitudes towards learning, contributing to higher achievements in EFL reading abilities. These findings serve to emphasise the importance of high quality teaching in teaching EFL to young learners.

In a final discussion paper "Common challenges in diverse contexts" Yuko Goto Butler introduces a discussion of major contextual changes identified in the papers presented. These include: changes in learner characteristics; changes in technology and changes in pedagogical approaches in language education. The paper proposes that these changes in the ecological system of young FL and L2 learners present three new challenges articulated in many of the papers: challenges in dealing with multiple goals and expectations for early language learning; the challenge of working towards accessibility for all and of understanding ways in which out-of-school resources may be harnessed to enrich children's language learning experiences.

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