Global language policies

Moving English up the educational escalator

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This paper reviews patterns of primary foreign language policy across the world, analysing the development of policy and subsequent implementation processes with reference to the particular local histories and current politics at regional, national and supranational levels of governance. In providing an overview of current provision and recent research the paper draws on the theoretical frame of historical materialism to consider the impact of global forces in three economic regions of the world today in contexts where substantial growth in the provision of primary foreign languages is now evident – described by Graddol, with reference to English specifically, as a process of "moving up the educational escalator". Themes threaded throughout the paper include power and resistance to soft policy, perspectives of social justice and an emerging global expectation for accountability and transparency with regard to primary foreign languages policy. In reviewing recent developments in the field of educational policy research the final section raises questions around the extent to which teachers may shape language policy in education, acting as critical interpreters of policy in an agentive role, adapting and refining national and local curriculum policy to meet the needs of their learners.

Keywords: language policy, primary, global forces, accountability, social justice

1. Introduction

In a journal focusing on the field of young language learners it seems superfluous to begin this paper by commenting on the widespread provision of language education in schools today. Indeed, such provision has been the norm in secondary schools throughout the world for at least the past 70 years. However, the more recent phenomenon, with national policies requiring the provision of foreign languages in the first few years of compulsory schooling, has a history of

less than 30 years in many jurisdictions worldwide today. Perhaps more significantly, children as young as three or four years are now also being introduced to foreign languages in some kindergarten and preschool contexts. The following extract reporting from Japan succinctly describes these developments: "English is being taught at increasingly younger ages in an expanding number of countries. So today, teenagers are no longer young learners of English. The new YL is a first grader, a pre-schooler or even a babe in arms." (McCurry, 2006). It is this growth in areas of both policy and implementation that are the focus of this paper, reviewing evidence from a range of contexts to provide an overview of research findings and some discussion of the role of teachers in that process.

The paper is divided into four sections: the first provides some background on research in language policy, the second includes a summary of the growth in policy research on young language learners, citing key texts in the field. This is followed by selected examples from the author's research on language policy over a period of 20 years. A final section reviews the evidence presented, in the light of Graddol's claim that English is "moving up the education ladder" (Graddol, 2006, p.97). This section considers the agentive role of teachers shaping policy in classrooms, re-writing and re-defining policy, mediated by their belief sets and the perceived needs of their learners. Throughout this review I will use the terms "primary" and "kindergarten" to indicate the school sectors in focus, following the UNESCO (2011) International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), referring to ISCED 02 (ages 3 to start of compulsory schooling) as "kindergarten" and ISCED 1 (approximately 6–12 years) as "primary".

2.   Language policy

A number of researchers in the field of language policy provide accounts of how the focus of research has evolved over time from the emergence of language policy and planning (LPP) as a significant field of study in the 1960s (Hornberger & Ricento, 1996; García & Menken, 2010; Tollefson & Tsui, 2014; Hult, 2018a). These early developments can be attributed to patterns of increased interest in language policy and planning at government level as a part of nation building in the post-World War II period when new national boundaries were being drawn and former colonies gained independence. García and Menken (2010) note the different terms associated with the field, some of which overlap considerably. These have included: language planning, language policy, language policy and planning, language policy and language planning, language acquisition planning, language education planning, language education policy and language in education policy. Authors such as Fishman (1971) and Haugen (1972) were early

researchers in the field adopting a top-down approach to policy analysis at the level of national planning. Subsequent developments increasingly adopted a critical approach to the investigation of the ways in which policies may contribute to the maintenance of social inequities (Corson, 1999; Phillipson, 1992; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996; Tollefson, 1991; Tollefson & Tsui, 2014). Other recent debates have raised awareness of complexity, arguing that the process of shaping and forming a policy cannot be separated from the process of implementation and as such needs to be investigated from a range of perspectives which acknowledge the multi-layered complexity of the process ((Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). This ecological and holistic perspective considers the changing relationship between different elements within the system, seeking evidence of "what is happening in the temporal and spatial environment" in which they are situated (Larsen-Freeman, 2018, p. 59). A further emerging strand of research development in the LPP field has explored socio-political aspects of policy, with particular reference to the increasingly global nature of such developments. Arguing that policy is, by its very nature, intensely political and social, authors such as Tollefson and Tsui (2014) and Ricento (2015) explore the ways in which global forces are increasingly impacting on both national and local LPP, a development which Larsen-Freeman (2018, p. 65) also speculates on from the perspective of language learning in an increasingly multimodal environment, "characterised by *glocal* connectedness and heterogeneity" (suggesting that connectivity may operate at both local and global levels). A final strand of research to mention in this overview of the field relates to the role of teacher agency in the processes of policy implementation, interpretation and re-interpretation. With a strong focus on how teachers make sense of national policies, the extent to which they are able and willing to adjust and adapt them to the needs of their learners, this approach moves the locus of power away from policy makers acknowledging the agency of individual teachers operating within their situated contexts (Hélot & Ó Laoire, 2011; Hult, 2018b).

2.1 Overview of kindergarten and primary language policy publications

Relating the broad field of LPP summarised above to the age group in focus, it is immediately apparent that language policy studies at kindergarten and primary levels are likely to be more limited, given their relatively recent widespread provision. In this section I include a review of key publications in the language policy field which specifically relate to the 3–12 years age group in school contexts. Throughout this paper I follow Liddicoat (2013) in using the term language-in-education policy (LiEP) to refer to the sub-group of education policies which may determine both the medium of instruction and/or additional / second / foreign

languages requirements and implementation processes in educational contexts. The review is limited to publications available in English. Noting the relatively recent growth of policy documentation in this field I have focused only on publications since the start of the twenty-first century.

To gain an overview of publications on policy and implementation processes at primary / kindergarten level a search of titles and abstracts using the keywords "primary" and "elementary", together with "additional / second / foreign languages" was conducted in three leading international journals in the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition which focus on language policy and planning. Table 1 summarises the findings.

Table 1. Total published articles in field of kindergarten / primary school language policy in journals focusing on language policy and planning, 2000–2019

Journals	Primary (6/7–12 years)	Kindergarten (3–6 years)	Percentage coverage
Language Problems and Language Planning (2000–2019)	2	0	Minimal journal focus
Language Policy (2002–2019)	15	1	5.1%
Current Issues in Language Planning (2000–2019)	11	0	2.8%

A brief further investigation of the papers identified in Table 1 reveals that ten of the eleven published in the journal Current Issues in Language Planning relate specifically to foreign languages while the eleventh reports on multilingual practices in Ghana. Of those papers published in the journal Language Policy ten relate to foreign languages while a further six focus on primary language policy in complex bilingual / multilingual contexts. The two papers relating to primary languages policy published in the journal of Language Problems and Language Planning both report on studies in foreign language contexts at primary level.

A number of explanations might be attributed to this limited evidence of focus on such a radical policy reform of school curricula for this age group (Johnstone, 2009). Possibly, few primary specialists regard these journals as the "go-to" journals for such papers, preferring any number of alternative journals for submissions. It may well be that these three journals do not solicit such papers or find them unacceptable for reasons of limited theoretical perspectives. A third possibility is that there are simply very few primary specialists researching in the policy field. A final possibility is that few language policy specialists regard the kindergarten / primary years as a significant time period to be singled out for intensive research. Relating this limited data search to a broader study conducted by Hult (2018a, p.37) it is clear that there is much scope for "[a] comprehensive meta-analysis of work about

foreign language education policy (…) in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the ways in which principles of language policy have been applied to foreign language education". This paper, and indeed this whole journal issue sets out to demonstrate that a specific focus on the 3–12 years age group offers much scope for valuable further insights to be gained.

Turning to edited volumes and monographs in the field, publication evidence is hardly more extensive. I will briefly outline here four recent volumes whose titles include the terms policy and primary/elementary/young learners, accepting of course that many others may contain chapters or short sections which discuss aspects of policy. One early collection of papers from a primary policy conference held in Bangalore, India in 2008 focused on English language policy and practice around the world (Enever, Moon & Raman, 2009). This publication included contributions from policy makers, academics and senior educationalists from the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and Asia with sections including policy overviews, short country case studies and accounts of smaller-scale projects. While detailed engagement with policy theory was absent from most papers, many provided valuable insights on the ramifications of poorly-crafted policy decisions.

Two significant edited volumes focusing on primary LiEP in Asia were published in 2012, (Baldauf, Kaplan, Kamwangamalu, & Bryant, 2012; Spolsky & Moon, 2012). In their introductory chapter Baldauf et al., (2012) set out twelve reasons why the introduction of foreign languages (FLs) in schools might not be successful in Asian contexts. This introductory chapter is followed by a collection of nine papers from across Asia, including: Japan, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Nepal and Timor Leste, all of which offer valuable insights to the socio-political and cultural contexts for learning English at primary school level. A number of weaknesses in individual systems are identified, reporting on the often unrealistically short-termist expectations of both governments and wider society that fail to recognise the complexities of effective implementation. Nonetheless, Baldauf et al. (2012) conclude by proposing that English is on its way to taking its place as an Asian language, sitting alongside the myriad of other Asian languages spoken across the region. The Spolsky and Moon (2012) publication drew on conference presentations for Asia TEFL, presenting seven studies of policy implementation in the Asia region including: China, Singapore, Korea, India, Vietnam, Taiwan and Japan. Despite its considerable regional overlap with the Baldauf et al. (2012) publication this collection offers detailed insights regarding such issues as the social divide in provision, substantial concerns on teacher provision and expertise, together with rich observational accounts and reports of surveys conducted. As editors, Spolsky and Moon do not attempt to draw conclusions on the complex debate of the contested benefits which might or might not accrue as a result of early access to English provision, choosing to leave individual authors

to speak as authorities on their country contexts. The final publication to briefly mention is this section is a monograph presenting a strongly socio-political analysis of the global spread of English in primary and kindergarten contexts around the world (Enever, 2018). Through accounts of how supranational organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), United Nations (UN) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have contributed to influencing the broader social themes of regional soft policy, assessment, accountability, transparency and standardization in education, the volume reviews policy developments for primary English in diverse contexts in Europe, Latin America and Asia. The book concludes with a plea for greater attention to be paid to issues of social justice, equity and quality in meeting the promises of primary English policy provision in national contexts.

In addition to the above book publications, three other recent publications presenting something of a global overview of policy development and implementation practices should be mentioned here. Firstly, a survey conducted by Rixon (2013) with the assistance of British Council officers and local experts around the world provides summative accounts of current provision. Secondly, an edited collection by Murphy and Evangelou (2016) offers valuable insights on provision at kindergarten level in many contexts worldwide. Thirdly, I include here reference to a book chapter authored by an experienced global consultant on primary foreign languages policy development (Johnstone, 2018). Johnstone offers a number of fascinating insights on who formulates policy documentation and the processes in which they engage.

Without doubt, there will be some significant publications which have been inadvertently omitted from this review of recent relevant publications on primary and kindergarten policy. However, those included here give a sense of the still quite limited research in this field and may act as a prompt for others to take up the call to interrogate policy initiatives for this age group with renewed enthusiasm. The following section draws on selected examples of policy development for primary contexts to discuss the realities of negotiation and the role of power in the process of defining policy in diverse contexts.

3.   Primary foreign language policy development

This section presents three examples from the author's own experience of policy development during periods as an adviser and/or researcher in different global contexts. Through a discussion of the complex processes involved, often including instances where overt, covert or latent power in action could be observed (Lukes, 2005), the examples offer an illustration of how both an ecological and an agentive

perspective may extend our understandings of the realities of policy construction and implementation. The three examples discussed here focus on aspects of policy construction from Hungary, Vietnam and Uruguay – all countries which have introduced policies for the teaching of English as a foreign language at primary level since the mid-1990s.

3.1   Hungary. Policy for a new Europe

Following the political changes across Central Europe in the late 1980s/early 1990s Hungary began to expand the teaching of FLs at primary school level. In 1990 the Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture established a bi-lateral project with the British Council, with the aim of including English in the existing courses for initial teacher education in Hungarian Lower Primary Teacher Training Colleges. As such, Hungary was the first country in Central Europe to include a specialism for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in their courses for generalist kindergarten / primary teachers. Additionally, in-service courses were offered to teachers and primary schools rapidly began to increase the teaching of English for the age group 6–10 years. These initiatives suggested a firm commitment at national level to the establishment of early start programmes as a strand of public education. Thus, it came as something of a surprise when the Ministry published a new National Core Curriculum (NCC) including a recommendation that compulsory foreign language teaching should commence *no later than 11 years* (Ministry of Culture and Education, 1996). This loosely worded statement reflected a new approach to national policy formation in Hungary, representing a move away from a wholly centralised system towards a more localised one, establishing what is best described as a National Framework Curriculum (Báthory, 1993), whereby schools themselves were expected to develop their own local curriculum programmes. Offe (1996, p.75) identifies such moves away from centralised patterns of state regulation as the result of "a decisive change in life situations and market opportunities", suggesting that such "shaping" is brought about by "omission" rather than, as previously, by "commission", where policy is used as a regulator.

For many schools the decision was viewed as an opportunity to no longer provide English lessons in the first four years of primary school – a decision often leaving teachers without employment and parents dismayed at this withdrawal of provision. Viewed from a policy perspective, it could also be described as "a policy to have no policy", a decision which contrasted with many of the neighbouring countries which were, at that time, planning to lower the age for introducing a first FL to the first few years of compulsory schooling, with the growing soft policy influences of the European Union.

As a British Council adviser, working closely with the colleges and local teachers during the 1990s, my insider/outsider positioning facilitated access to a number of senior academics and ministry officials who were either directly engaged in the process or closely connected with it. In this section I explore themes which emerged from a series of interviews conducted with twelve experts, critically examining the role of power and agenda-setting during the development of the NCC.

3.1.1   *The process of policy formation*

The following quote captures the sense of excitement and anticipation felt by educationalists and many others, at this moment of a new beginning: "I wish the children of Hungary could sing and dance at school", announced the new Minister of Education at the first public meeting of professionals called to discuss plans for a new National Curriculum (Kovac, 2000, p. 80). Within two years he had lost his post. "…nobody else wanted children to have a good time in school – this is not the country where you aim at giving people a good time [in school]." This view, expressed by one of my interviewees, indicates the serious nature of schooling in Hungary at that time. Nevertheless, professionals were very enthusiastic about the opportunity to discuss and contribute to proposals for educational change. Kovacs (2000, p. 78) reports that "the newly appointed government were determined to carry through a radical political and economic transformation."

During the early 1990s planning for the NCC emerged as a politically driven vehicle for introducing new principles in education, connected with democracy and consultation, rather than a directive from a centralised authority. In aiming to provide guidance for teachers in moving *away* from a centralised policy, a key element of early planning was the identification of what would *not* be regulated centrally (Nagy & Szebenyi, 1990). According to Bathory (1993) the early drafting stages of the NCC were led by educationalists, whereas subsequent stages became a series of political manoeuvrings. Following much debate about the form the NCC would take, the model selected incorporated elements of both prescription and examination in determining content. This model was much in line with others in Western Europe at the time, reflecting a desire for Hungary to look westwards, with a view to gaining membership of the European Union in the near future – a political rather than an educational perspective, since limited evidence for the effectiveness of the chosen model existed then or now.

According to a number of interviewees, decisions for setting the initial policy framework, including an early decision on the recommended start age for FLs, were taken by a team of four academics. None were specialised in the field of early FL teaching. Even at this stage, it was evident that the NCC would be an essentially political initiative designed to establish new ways of working. Policy makers were concerned with the broad picture of curriculum change and, within that,

of FL teaching *in general* rather than details such as an early start programme. Thus, from the start, a covert process of agenda-setting was established, whereby some debates could not subsequently be brought to the table for further discussion, since they had been omitted from the initial policy framework (Lukes, 2005).

From this beginning, sub-committees for each subject area were appointed. Selection of FL sub-committee members appears to have centred on selecting professionals from the existing body of academics already known to Ministry staff – essentially 'an inner circle' selected from the higher echelons of academia. Membership of the FL sub-committee was determined by a ministry representative making selections on the basis of 'word of mouth' or 'friends of friends'. The following extracts from interview transcriptions give an indication of the procedures adopted. One new committee member from a school reported an invitation to join made through a personal telephone conversation with an existing committee member, "There is one million forints for a National Curriculum to be developed. They're setting up teams (…) a condition is that there should be one representative from a school in each team". Another reported being invited to join following an occasion when they happened to sit next to an existing member whilst attending an education conference. Such reports serve to emphasise the somewhat chance nature of committee formation, later confirmed from evidence that, amongst the membership of the FLs sub-committee, there was no representative with experience of the primary FL sector of education.

The task of the FL committee was to prepare proposals then submit them to the main committee for consideration and decisions on each section of the document. Views on an optimal start age were quite fluid at this stage, generally fluctuating from 9–11 years. According to one ministry official, much was based on subjective opinions. Little pedagogical evidence was presented because "it's impossible to speak about pedagogy in a very objective way". This comment reflected the low status of pedagogy at this period in Hungarian academia, where anything which could not be measured could not be regarded as "scientific" and thus carried more limited face validity.

One further illustration of the difficulty in establishing a democratic approach to consultation was the procedure adopted for consultation with schools. At an early stage the proposed text was distributed to all schools, inviting approval / disapproval of each passage. On the basis of returns, each passage was graded as 40 per cent approval / 60 per cent approval / 90 per cent approval, etc. If the percentage approval of individual passages was low, then the sub-committee were required to re-phrase or change completely despite the fact that some comments received indicated that the writer had no professional expertise in the field. One example given related to the number of words which should be prescribed in the FL curriculum. For those teachers familiar only with an intensive model of language curriculum (where every vocabulary item in the book should be taught

and learnt), the concept of productive and receptive vocabulary was less familiar, while understandings related to the impact of English as a lingua franca across Europe resulted in limited awareness of just how much language may be acquired outside school. According to this interviewee, further discussion was halted by the following decision: "Let's not state anything about the number of words. Let's just leave that free".

A second phase in the development of the NCC was delayed by a change of government and thus, substantial changes in the appointment of civil servants. These new ministry officials were generally less familiar with the daily practice of schools and were not so well equipped to provide guidance from personal knowledge. The new minister of education conducted a process of total re-drafting of much of the original document, with the specific aim of *neutralising* the guidance for schools (a term used in the new document to suggest a lack of moral prescriptiveness). The aim was to focus on modernisation, leaving behind ideas of returning to the former values and traditions of the Communist and pre-Communist eras.

In this second phase the minister was directly involved, working with a small group of advisers to re-draft much of the NCC. None of these advisers had expertise in the primary FLs field. All interviewees reported on how many of the original descriptors and clauses were withdrawn. The purported aim of establishing a democratic process failed to emerge in any tangible form, with final policy decisions influenced by the very personal views of a few key politicians and academics who took leadership roles at crucial points, acting in covert ways to critically influence the final document.

The central brief of the final NCC drafting for each of the sub-committees was to work on final wording, with attention to brevity throughout. One interviewee engaged in this process reported that, "the most important thing about the national core curriculum was that it should be no more than ten pages", no doubt referring to the cost of production and distribution to all schools and to the limited time which teachers might have available to read, digest and fully respond to these new requirements.

3.1.2   *Unintended outcomes*

Throughout this account we can observe the emergence of a technical managerial class, a newly powerful elite group (Eyal, Szelyeni, & Townsley, 1998) seeking to retain opportunities for participation in globalisation without *being seen to have introduced an elitist policy*. Hence, *a policy to have no policy* emerged as a vehicle for limiting the availability of FL provision at lower primary level schooling, particularly in the more rural, poorer regions of the country. An unanticipated outcome of this decision rapidly emerged in some of the more urban regions of the country where parents were willing to pay for the provision of an early start to English. Acting in a context where factors of historical materialism were overtaken

by global forces and a parental desire to ensure their own children should have a secure economic future (Cox, 1981), events overtook ministry attempts to establish equality in the provision of FLs for everyone. From this point on, there have been a number of further revisions to the policy, with current policy requiring the provision of a FL from nine years (Year 4) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017).

3.2   Vietnam. planning for 2020

The presence of English in Vietnam has become increasingly apparent since 1986 when the country decided on a policy of attracting foreign investment to Vietnam. English was viewed as a necessary tool for international communication with factors such as Vietnam's membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia-Pacific Cooperation (APEC) and World Trade Organisation (WTO) further contributing to an increase in the perceived importance of English.

In 2008 the government launched a radical new initiative, the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (NFL 2020), aiming to equip the next generation of school, college and university graduates "to use a foreign language in their daily communication" (Hung, 2015, p.62). During the first decade of the new century the popularity of English in primary schools had increased, with many introducing it for grades 3–5 (8–10 years) and some schools even from Grade 1. Following a pilot study period, a decision was made to introduce compulsory provision of English nationally for grades 3–5, comprising 4 x 40 minutes lesson per week from August 2010 (Dung, 2015).

Alongside these developments, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) began the process of formulating a National Curriculum, establishing pre-service primary English teacher education courses and Guidelines for evaluating primary English teacher's expertise (initially described as a Competency Framework). It is the process during this phase of policy development that is central to my discussion of LiEP at primary level in Vietnam in this section of the paper.

3.2.1   *Developing guidance for evaluating foreign language teachers*

As an external consultant my task was to advise on the development of a so-called *Competency Framework* to be used as a guide for the pre-service teacher education curriculum at both primary and secondary levels and to serve as a tool for continuous professional development for in-service programmes nationally. This document was to form part of the NFL 2020 initiative. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) consultancy meetings were held with representatives of the Vietnamese National Institute of Educational Sciences (VNIES) during a two-week period in autumn 2011.

Initial meeting discussions centred on the purposes of the proposed Competency Framework and the possible limitations offered by the construct of *competency* with its implications of *measurement* and a *precisely defined level to be achieved.* Research in other contexts has indicated that a simple list of Competencies may result in a tick list of skills that are measurable, with little attention paid to the deep learning processes that are not so measurable, but nonetheless of prime importance (Murray, 2009). Here, Murray argues that: "There seems to be a critical point on the generality – specificity continuum beyond which teacher professional standards cannot be described if they are to remain meaningful to the profession" (Murray, 2009, p. 21).

This issue continued to be a debate throughout discussions regarding the possible shift of emphasis that might be achieved by the use of the term *Guidelines* rather than *Competency Framework.* Initial discussions were held with representatives from VNIES and teacher educators from a range of institutions including both Universities and teacher education colleges where primary initial teacher education courses had recently been introduced. During the first day or two of meetings it became apparent. that some members of the planning team had little or no experience of current primary classroom practices in Vietnam. This was unsurprising given the history of a top-down approach to policy formation in Vietnam which had established a clear divide between national curricula specialists and teachers in schools. In an effort to create a pool of shared expertise and a more democratic approach for this new venture, a small group of experienced primary teachers were invited to join the team for the following week. It was hoped that this approach might be a starting point for ensuring that teachers themselves could feel empowered by a sense of agency and that those with limited experience of contemporary classroom realities would value the expertise contributed.

This approach initially met with some resistance from some members of the group, no doubt partly as a result of their lack of prior experience of open consultation along democratic lines and possibly also with a concern for time pressures. Shohamy (2003, p. 281–3) has commented on this type of resistance to including the voices of teachers in the process of language education policy (LEP) development, noting that, "LEPs are introduced by those in authority, usually government administrators and, at times, also academic experts." She identified three common problems of centralised LiEPs as, "the lack of knowledge and involvement of citizens, the lack of representation of constituencies and the lack of input from language teachers". The latter two are particularly in evidence in this account.

With the support of those close to the daily experience of primary FL provision a workshop style of brainstorming, planning and gathering of potential areas of professional knowledge for primary English teachers emerged. Alongside this, the team were also tasked with developing a parallel framework of guidance for

teachers at secondary school level although details of this are not included here, given the focus of this paper. The proposal that teacherly expertise for the primary school classroom might differ from that of the secondary school teacher was a topic for further debate, particularly for those with little or no experience themselves of teaching young children in public school contexts. These difficulties were similarly reported by Moon (2009, p. 312) who suggested that "the notion of English for young learners as a distinct type of teaching is still emerging in Vietnam and will take some time to become established". While the existence of this age-appropriate approach to primary languages teaching was amply confirmed by the contributions of practising teachers, it continued to be under-valued by representatives of the central government agencies and was, at a later date, removed from subsequent documents.

Moving forward from the brainstorming stage to early drafting of Guidelines proved to be a challenging task – particularly given the inexperience of some group members of working in this way. At one point in this process a group member suggested that, in the interests of expediency, a Competency Framework developed in Germany might instead be translated and submitted for approval. This proposal reflected a lack of awareness of the difficulties encountered in policy borrowing, whereby the simple transference of a policy developed with reference to one cultural context might have little or no relevance in a quite different cultural context (Enever, 2018). It should be noted here also that there had been recent past experience of policy borrowing in Vietnam in 2010 with the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a scale of reference for assessment of language proficiency and national accountability. According to Van (2018) no adjustment to the original scales of the CEFR was made, despite various critiques of their inappropriacy for children (e.g. see Little, 2007). At European level, this issue was finally acknowledged by the Council of Europe with the publication of a set of descriptors more in keeping with FL development for the age groups 7–10 years; 11–15 years (Council of Europe, 2018). However, in Vietnam no modifications have been made since the CEFR descriptors were first introduced in 2010, nor has any attention been paid to the broader issue of cultural relevance (Kirkpatrick, 2019).

Following six days of intensive consultation a draft document was presented to a consultative group of representatives from VNIES and MOET. Many areas of the Guidelines were discussed and elaborated. The emphasis placed on adopting a holistic approach in the formation of the Guidelines was discussed in relation to contemporary perceptions for the emergence of post-methods contexts in FL learning (Kumaravadivela, 2001) and the need for the development of *a professional consciousness* with the ability to respond to the ever-changing priorities of a

globalised world – a theme emphasised by MOET in prioritising the development of a foreign languages policy fit for the 21st century.

Other discussions with the consultative group centred around the use of digital technologies in the primary English classroom. It was acknowledged that this focus was likely to be aspirational rather than a realistic possibility in many school contexts, given the low level of resources often available in Vietnamese primary schools at that time. Nonetheless, it was felt that some mention of these possibilities should be included. A brief extract from the draft Resources text is included here as an illustration (unpublished internal document, 2011):

> Uses information and communication technologies, including presentation tools, educational websites, blogs, social networks to assist learning (where applicable).

At this stage in the development of the NFL 2020 project it was fully acknowledged that in resource-poor contexts, such as the more rural regions of Vietnam, the use of this type of classroom resource would not be possible. It was considered however that the Guidelines should convey a certain sense of aspiration, with the clear proviso for teachers that the document in its entirety should not be regarded as compulsory.

Following this review the document was substantially re-worked, drawing on section headings included in the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Foreign Languages (EPOSTL) (Newby et al., 2007), with adaptations to more appropriately fit the current Vietnamese context and the needs of teacher education. The European document, prepared through a consultation process with 33 national education advisors in Europe and drawing on empirical research evidence, was felt likely to offer the necessary structural validity required for this task. A piloting phase of the Guidelines was subsequently undertaken with teachers attending in-service courses and focus group interviews conducted with teachers and teacher educators in urban and rural regions of the country. These groups were invited to test out the Guidelines by using them as a self-assessment tool to evaluate the extent to which descriptors provided a sufficiently relevant and appropriate framework of guidance. Overall, the guidelines were favourably received, with 77 percent of teachers participating in the pilot study ($n = 23$) reporting that they found the guidelines helpful for self-assessment and relevant to their learning context (unpublished Pilot Study, MOET 2012).

From these early developments both the primary and secondary Guidelines went through many subsequent iterations, some of which contributed valuable additions while others have diluted the early efforts to address the specific contexts of primary classrooms discussed in this paper.

3.2.2   *An ongoing process of modification and refinement*

Developing effective FL policies is inevitably a complex and messy process, likely to suffer from many compromises and political interventions during development and implementation. From the outset of this initiative the Vietnamese government set themselves an unrealistic goal for completing the process by 2020. Reports of approaches to teaching and learning in primary English classrooms prior to the start of the Project and during the Project are indicative of the difficulties experienced in meeting this goal (e.g. see Moon, 2005).

Nguyen (2011, p. 230) notes that prior to 2010 "[t]here was no legislative policy governing credentialing for primary English foreign language teachers until the [recent] requirements set out in the Directive on Primary English Education, issued in August 2010". Soon after this Canh and Chi (2012, p. 117) conducted a study of language use in primary classrooms. Analysis of lesson observation notes ($n = 17$) identified similar lesson features to those outlined by Moon (2005) including:

– Overemphasis on linguistic forms (accuracy)
– Overuse of chorus repetition drills for vocabulary teaching
– Use of complicated English to give instructions
– Absence of the techniques that enhance multi-sensory and experiential learning

According to a more recent report by Canh (2019, p. 15), in 2016 "MOET reported that the project failed to meet its goals within the planned 2008–2020 period" and has now been extended until 2025.

In summary, it is evident that the politics of decision-making have proved challenging in a country currently undergoing a shift in perspectives, towards a market-oriented economy. A centralised system for the management of the public education system faces the challenge of how to maintain control yet introduce radical reform within a very short timeframe. In a paper reflecting on the process of introducing the CEFR in Japan, Nagai and O'Dwyer (2012, p. 146) comment that, "[w]hile top-down implementation brings the benefits of integrated, effective decision-making and curriculum control, there is the risk of the loss of teacher autonomy and their resulting indifference to the reform." Further research will reveal the extent to which these risks may have been overcome within the context of reform in Vietnam.

3.3   Uruguay. A policy for democratisation

The small Latin American country of Uruguay (population 3.5 million) has undergone a series of education policy reforms during the first decades of the

21st century. With a largely stable economy, in a region with a history of much instability, a new government began a major process of educational reform in 2006 with the twin aims of achieving "social inclusion" and "narrowing the digital gap" (Fullan, Watson & Anderson, 2013, p.1). This has included a radical process for the reform of national languages policy since the publication of the General Education Law. No. 18,437 (MEC, 2008). An early step in this process was the issue of a low-cost laptop to all 395,000 primary school children and to their teachers, across the country's 2332 public schools, together with the installation of high-speed internet connections for schools. A platform of digital resources has been developed, together with training for teachers to make daily use of the materials. Following this first phase of the reform, in 2012 a second phase introduced a programme to provide primary English classes via a remotely-based video-conferencing system with teachers based in the capital (Montevideo), Argentina, the UK and the Philippines. This procedure was designed to overcome the extreme shortage of teachers' existent in Uruguay, especially in the more remote areas of the country (Stanley, 2017).

In parallel with these reforms a series of regulations and laws have begun to reshape investment in the education system, supported by international loans and frequent reviews by international organisations such as the OECD (Santiago, Ávalos, Burns, Morduchowicz, & Radinger, 2016). With reference to primary FLs in particular, a decision was made to develop a framework for progression in FLs (including a focus on English at primary level), building on the groundwork laid by the publication of a new National Curriculum Framework (MCRN, 2017). In this paper I focus on one phase in the development of a national curriculum framework for FLs, comprising a set of outcomes to be achieved at each stage of compulsory schooling (Year 6, Year 9, Year 12) – subsequently referred to as the *FL Progressions Framework.*

3.3.1   *Group planning as a democratic principle*

Significantly, a collaborative process of development was established from the start of planning for the FL progressions framework. As such, this procedure was much in the spirit of the recent political history of the country, whereby democratic ideals are publicly prioritised and transparency perceived as a necessary objective. *Democracy* here seemed to imply a consultative approach, although the centralised nature of this early phase of planning and decision-making rather overlooked this – one indication of how institutional power may operate in time-bound situations.

Under the auspices of the Policy Unit of the National Public Education Administration (ANEP) a planning group comprising national representatives from all education sectors in which FLs are taught, came together for a series of meetings

held at the language policy unit offices. As an external consultant I contributed in these meetings over a two-year period, 2017–19.

The stages of development, commencing with the new education law, are illustrated in Figure 1. As indicated, this was followed by the publication of the national curriculum reference framework (MCRN), the profile of compulsory education, the sector profiles, and finally the curriculum organization. The task of building on the outline provided by the new MCRN was a challenging one, given its highly philosophical and visionary style and given the need for clarity in any subsequent documentation.
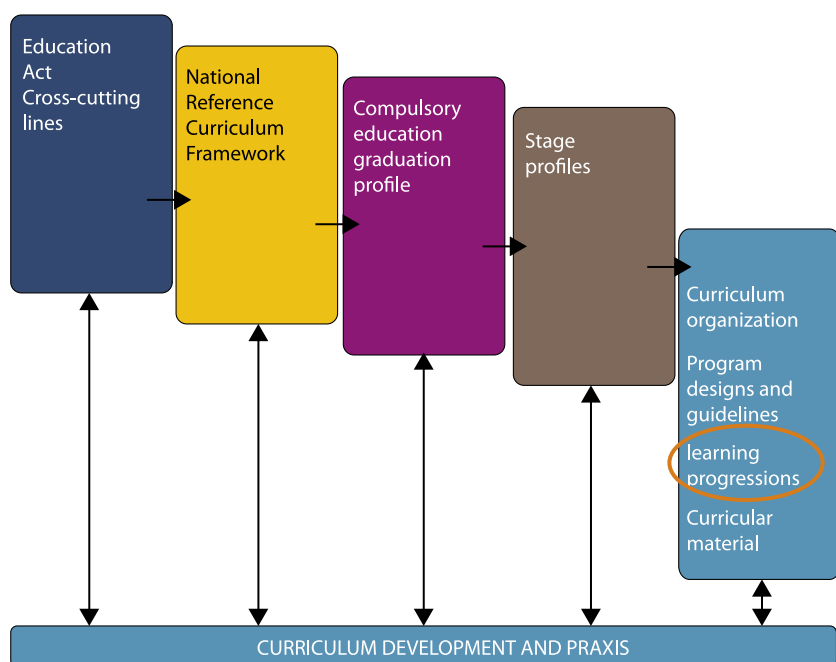

Figure 1. Curricular processes involved in the definition of profiles (MCRN, 2017, p. 47) (official translation, Federico Brum)

The Languages policy group's task was to establish the design and orientation of learning outcomes and set a framework for how to work on the FL learning progressions (see circled text in Figure 1). This would later be completed by teams planning the detailed curriculum materials.

It was evident from Day 1 that this was unfamiliar territory for the group. With the benefit of hindsight, the following quote acknowledges just how difficult it may be to come to a shared understanding of the nature of 'curriculum'. Edlund, (2011) proposed that the linguistic turn in curriculum theory has taught us that, "[T]here is no representational knowledge, but more agreements and/or struggles

over how to talk and learn about what we call reality, we need to address and analyse the consequences of different vocabularies of educational phenomena and schooling" Edlund (2011, p. 194).

Throughout the process of developing the FL progression outcomes the struggle for vocabulary choices continued. For example, the concept of an outcomes-based curriculum document can now be identified as having a particular pre-history. Tracing back to a period in European language planning which attempted to establish principles of *plurilingualism*, it is evident that the notion of an outcomes-based curriculum was much influenced by the Council of Europe's promotion of the concept of *standards* or *outcomes* as a means of comparing achievements across a range of languages in Europe. To some extent this can also be seen as a reaction to the problems of an overloaded content-based curriculum model in schools, where each subject specialism competed for the limited time available within the school calendar (Cedefop, 2012). Notwithstanding such debates, with the publication of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), the trend towards an outcomes-based framework (sometimes described as *competencies*) has become increasingly widespread in education documents worldwide – its appeal resting on its apparent ability to provide both transparency and accountability.

With no prior experience of policy drafting on this scale and no pre-existing national documents for guidance, as a starting point, the group found it important to undertake a thorough review of examples from other national contexts to help clarify the purposes of the FL learning progressions. Following two days of intensive debate, with contributions from a range of specialists including the authors of the MCRN, a draft rationale was prepared and the way forward in defining the concept of FL learning progressions for the Uruguayan context was agreed.

It should be noted here that the MCRN references only the "mother tongue" (often described as first language or L1), and foreign languages. After some debate it was agreed that the design of the progressions would focus on English, since this was the only FL compulsory throughout the school system. Thus, the progressions could not be considered as equally applicable for Uruguayan Spanish, Uruguayan Portuguese or Uruguayan Sign Language since these languages are not compulsory throughout the school system. Similarly, other non-compulsory languages introduced in the education cycle might not follow an identical pathway, although the FL progressions could provide a basis for the design of progressions relevant to languages such as French, German, Italian and Chinese introduced in some sectors of the Uruguayan education system. Progressions related to Uruguayan Spanish, Uruguayan Portuguese and Uruguayan Sign Language might require a different treatment, possibly more closely related to progressions for L1 (mother tongue).

During this first week of intensive planning two main objectives were established. Firstly, to reach agreement on what a sense of progression across the three phases of compulsory schooling might look like and, secondly, to map out a con-

sultation procedure which would invite teachers from around the country to contribute to the development of descriptors for FL learner achievement at each stage. An early illustration of progression served as a useful guide for how to develop language-focussed progressions (Figure 2).
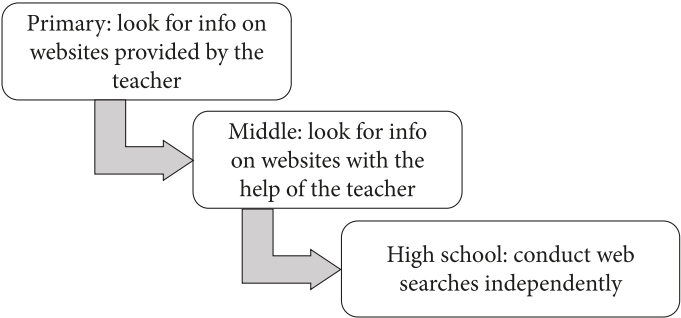
Figure 2. Sample illustration of progressions in Internet searches (Extract from internal consultancy report, Enever, 2018, p. 4)

The initial themes proposed for the consultation process were substantially based on the MCRN document. These somewhat wide-ranging themes included the following, together with a first attempt at articulating how these might be understood in relation to languages learning (both first and additional languages) at the end of primary school (Year 6) (Table 2):

Table 2. Uruguay – preliminary framework for foreign language progressions (adapted from internal consultancy report, Enever, 2018, p. 5)

MCRN themes	Year 6 (age 12)
Communicates and communication	Understands texts with teacher mediation (visual and paralinguistic information is provided by teacher)
Lives and participates in the complexity of the world	Identifies foreign language as different from first language. Finds differences between his own cultural universe and other contexts
Participates socially in a relevant way using first language and other languages	Communicates simple ideas and thoughts about his context. Writes simple sentences
Uses technology in an informed and responsible manner	Searches for information on web pages provided by the teacher and carries out internet searches with support.

3.3.2   *National consultation process*

Given the priority for democratic procedures, an extensive national consultation process was conducted in all 19 regions (departments) of the country, involving over 2,500 teachers, teacher educators and education management representatives. Teachers provided evidence of the many achievements of learners at the various progression points, together with accounts of the challenging contexts in which learning took place. These included limited opportunities for professional development, with some teachers working in isolated rural communities, often themselves with quite low-level proficiency in English. Significantly, in some regions with low socio-economic status (SES), children often arrived at school on Monday morning, having had no meals over the weekend. Faced with such circumstances, teachers struggled to justify teaching a FL when issues of equity in terms of re-distribution of basic material resources were clearly a more immediate priority (Enever, 2019).

Many teachers were unfamiliar with the concept of establishing *outcomes* for each phase of schooling. Similarly, some lacked familiarity with the technical terminology commonly employed in the professional literature related to FL learning, making it difficult to establish an informative account of what students were able to do. Despite these limitations, it was evident that the consultation process proved valuable in ensuring that teachers participated in the policy-making process, while also alerting the policy team to the realities of diverse learning contexts and the importance of establishing realistically achievable outcomes for all schools rather than an *aspirational* one which might prove to be unrealistic.

3.3.3   *Drafting a language progressions framework*

Following the collection and initial analysis of data the policy team met again in autumn 2018 to review the analysis and prepare an initial language progressions framework. As an external consultant I contributed to these meetings. It was immediately evident from the analysis that coverage for some aspects of language learning was quite limited while other areas were fully articulated. Various international guides were consulted to ensure the major FL curriculum areas relevant to the Uruguayan context were fully taken into consideration. Here, the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) was a major source of ideas for possible themes to include. This was considered appropriate given the frequent citing of CEFR levels in many Uruguayan education documents including the MCRN. A further source of guidance was provided by recent additions to the CEFR available in the Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018).

In the event, it proved particularly difficult to decide on the exact number and detail of descriptors to be included in each section of the final draft document. Paying due regard to the central aim of providing descriptors which could offer guidance for teachers in the design of curricula, teaching materials and assessment tools, it was agreed that descriptors should serve to provide a framework, rather than a detailed set of all outcomes that might be achieved (intensive model). Acknowledging that the progressions should be designed to meet the *current* needs of FL teachers, the agreed descriptors aimed to offer guidance on an expected *minimum* level of achievement for all students at each school phase, rather than an *aspirational* level. Although it was recognised that some students would achieve well above the minimum requirement it was agreed that a cautious approach at this initial stage would be appropriate.

As yet, it is too early to make any judgement on the appropriacy of the FL progressions, given their very recent implementation. However, in line with the principles of the MCRN, it is acknowledged that the FL learning progressions should be regarded as open and thus likely to be subjected to a process of continuous revision as priorities change in current and future socio-political environments (Enever, 2018).

4.   Reviewing language-in-education policy and teacher agency

The final section of this paper reviews the ways in which teachers, parents and students may play a part in the process of policy making and implementation (García & Menken, 2010), with particular reference to the three examples discussed in this paper and to commentaries provided by researchers in the field of early language learning.

Returning to the claim made by Graddol (2006, p. 97) that English is "moving up the educational escalator", embodied in the title of this paper, the three examples of policy development outlined here reflect the perceived importance of English at national policy levels in many, if not most jurisdictions worldwide today. With a focus on global forces and patterns of convergence in higher education, Graddol argues that trends towards ever earlier start ages are strongly related to expectations that secondary school outcomes should equip students with the ability to study in English, at least for part of their university education. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate how the shift towards an earlier start might result in these outcomes.

Writing some 14 years ago, Graddol proposed that this substantial upward shift in outcomes was likely to be attributable partly to increased early provision in schools, together with increased exposure to English out of school in contexts where parents access private tuition for their children. Today, research also suggests
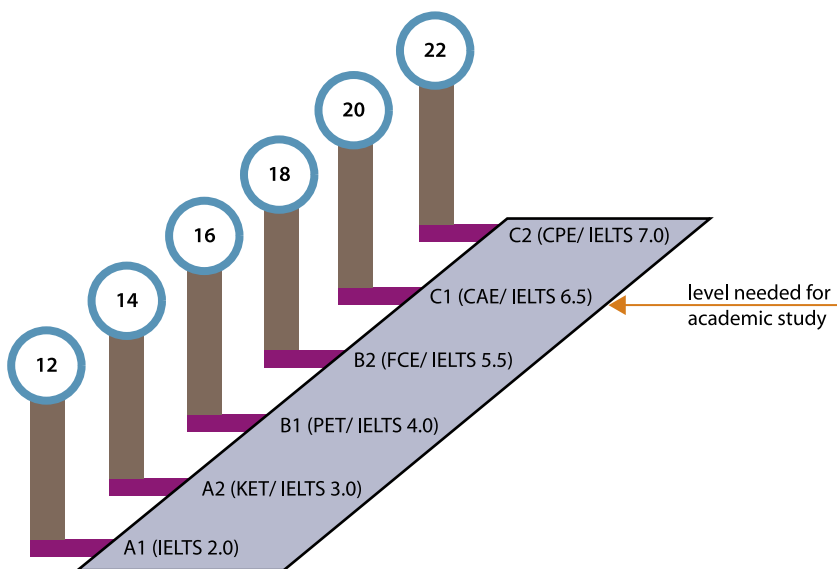
Figure 3. Desirable age-proficiency levels in traditional EFL model, indicating academic study proficiency level may be reached by age 20 (Graddol, 2006, p. 97)
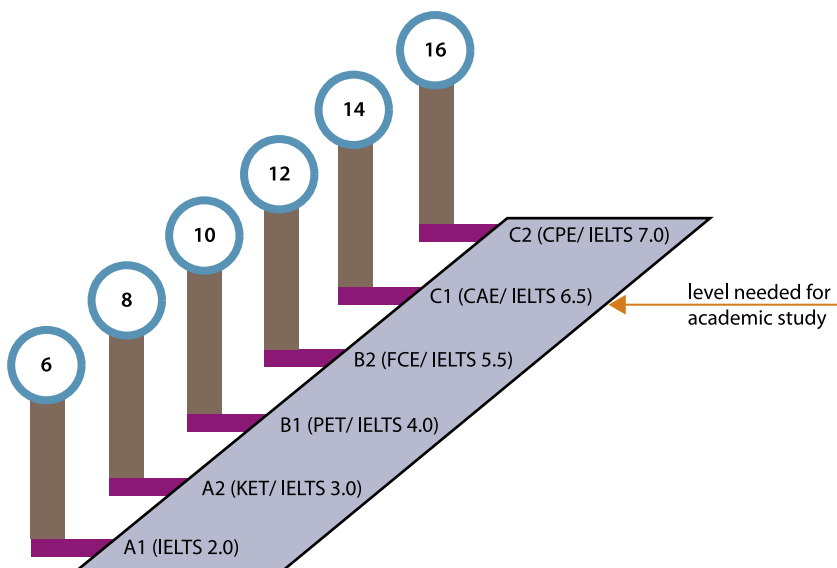

Figure 4. Idealised age-proficiency levels available with an earlier start (Graddol, 2006, p. 97)

a trend towards increasingly younger children engaging in online gaming activities in English may be an additional factor in earlier proficiency (Butler 2017). The high

achievement levels forecast by Graddol (2006) look somewhat less likely today, given the evidence from research which now suggests that young children tend to make slower progress in FL learning than adolescents (however, see Wilden and Porsch, this volume, for controversies around these findings).

The outlines of LiEP development included in this paper have indicated the complex nature of policy formation. In similar vein, the processes of implementation are both complex and multifaceted. This division between policy development and policy implementation, described by Baldauf (2006) as macro and micro language planning, may now be seen as insufficient given the multi-layered, dynamic and non-linear processes reflected in accounts of the *ecology of language policy* explored in Menken and García (2010). This more recent wave of language policy research seeks to take account of the role of individual agents *as part of the process* of LiEP development. Thus, at both kindergarten and primary levels, teachers, children and their parents are positioned at the centre, in an agentive role of negotiating space for policy development both in and out of school.

The role of agency is particularly evident in the study of Hungarian policy development, with the benefit of the historical perspective possible as a result of the passing of time. With a policy requiring schools to introduce the first FL by the age of eleven, at the latest, it was anticipated that *some* parents in the wealthier urban regions of Hungary might demand that schools should provide an earlier start. However, the scale of demand was far higher than any of the FL sub-committee had anticipated. Schools and local authorities found it impossible to resist the power of parentocracy (Brown, 1990) and were forced to allocate the limited budget, set aside for local needs, to the provision of early start subsidised by a top-up contribution from parents. Equally, English teachers were happy to take on these additional classes offering the benefit of extra income. By 1997 ministry statistics were confirming that 15 per cent of Year 1 pupils were learning a FL, while in Year 3 over 40 per cent had such provision – despite the fact that this earlier start was some two years below the NCC requirements. The role of teacher agency in the Hungarian context was succinctly articulated by the response of a senior teacher (with a teaching career spanning some 40 years). When asked what accounted for teachers' apparent lack of surprise for the introduction of a policy to have no policy he replied: "It's my experience, after quite a long teacher's career, that documents don't change the whole situation, only partly. The result doesn't depend only on documents". In this comment we can observe the dynamic agentive role of the teacher contributing to the critical interpretation of policy as a vehicle for meeting the needs of his students.

Turning to the study of LiEP in Vietnam, the strongly centralised tradition of LiEP was much in evidence during the process of formulating FL guidelines for use in teacher education. No prior consideration had been given to the pos-

sible inclusion of practising teachers in the planning process, a proposal which met with initial resistance and subsequent reluctance to fully acknowledge the distinctive roles of primary and secondary school teacherly profiles. While it was not possible to collect data evidence from teachers during consultancy visits, a recently published paper offers some insightful perspectives on teacher agency (Nguyen & Bui, 2016). In their study of a multi-ethnic and multilingual region of northwest Vietnam the researchers provide illuminating accounts of teachers' agentive roles as final arbiters of the NFL 2020 policy implementation (García & Menken, 2010). They report that students did not see English as contributing to their future "educational, economic and social advancement" (Nguyen & Bui 2016, p. 93). Instead, students mainly used English only for social purposes. In many cases teachers were concerned that their students from minority language backgrounds needed to improve their proficiency in Vietnamese to provide access to future employment. This was viewed as a higher priority than English proficiency with some teachers reporting the difficulties of teaching English to minority language speakers when the teachers themselves only spoke standard Vietnamese. The lack of high-level proficiency in a shared language made teaching doubly difficult in the absence of any well-focused professional development. Teachers strongly critiqued compulsory professional development workshops which promoted a model of communicative language teaching with no attempt to address the specific needs of minority language students. The evidence of teachers professional agency provided by this study reveals "resistance to state-mandated policies" which is identified as "rooted in professional commitment and social justice principles" (p. 101). As such, this study reflects the critical importance of the agentive roles of teachers in transforming policy into "performative action" (Lo Bianco, 2010, p. 162). Given the huge financial commitment of the NFL 2020 project this transformative role may be crucial to the enactment of the project and should be capitalised on rather than ignored.

The final example of primary foreign language policy development discussed here is the recently introduced FL progressions framework for Uruguay. As described above, this policy development formed part of a strongly motivated socio-political initiative, explicitly planned as a democratic process, including the engagement of teachers, teacher educators and policy makers throughout all phases of development. Given the very recent development of the progressions framework it is too early to fully evaluate its appropriacy for the context. However, a few initial comments are included here as a reflection on the process.

One concern which may arise in the near future relates to the status of non-compulsory languages referred to in the MCRN. These included: Uruguayan Spanish (a school subject in Portuguese-speaking regions of Uruguay close to the border with Brazil); Uruguayan Portuguese (a medium of instruction in

Portuguese-speaking regions close to the border with Brazil); and Uruguayan Sign Language (limited provision in some parts of the country). Defining expected outcomes on a national scale for these languages is likely to prove problematic, given the uneven nature of provision in all three areas. Procedures for establishing a democratic process for development may also prove complex. Challenges related to status and political will may also emerge over time, as language communities become aware that their languages have not received the level of attention given to the subject areas of English and Spanish (the first language areas chosen for the development of progression frameworks). Questions of status and social justice may then be raised.

More broadly speaking, it is highly likely that teachers and teacher educators will express concerns related to some progression descriptors at the end of each educational phase. In some cases objections may relate to questions of wording, whilst others may more fundamentally challenge the rationale even for the inclusion of particular descriptors. Given the open and democratic style of this policy development, it may prove difficult to respond to such challenges and decision-making for subsequent revisions will need to be seen as open and democratic. However, with the appointment of a new President in November 2019 it is also possible that political will may be focused elsewhere in the future and opportunities to further refine the FL progressions may no longer be a priority.

5.   Conclusions

This policy review has highlighted the limited attention paid to the phenomenon of early foreign language learning policy development in international journals focusing on language policy. Given the exponential growth of this education sector over the past 30 years, this omission is surprising. All too often, policy researchers have perceived policy development at kindergarten and primary levels as just another strand of broader policy development. However, bearing in mind Johnstone's claim that the growth in the provision of early FL learning can now be identified "as possibly the world's biggest policy development in education" (Johnstone, 2009, p. 33), it is surely high time that greater attention is paid to this major development.

Gaining access to national LiEP formation is a sensitive business given the contested nature of much political manoeuvring. Nonetheless, accounts which link the political processes with the agency of teachers, parents and children would be invaluable in clarifying the procedures necessary for the formulation of sustainable policies which pay due regard to the priorities of social justice in their inclusivity. Based on my personal experience as a researcher in the field for

over 30 years, my recommendation is that such investigations are best carried out by researchers who have themselves taught in kindergarten or primary FL classrooms at some period of their professional lives. I urge others to take up this call for research which can both inform and enrich the quality of policy for these crucial early years of learning languages.

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