

# UZRT 2024: Early language learning in formal contexts. Book of abstracts

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International conference

# UZRT 2024

Early language  
learning in  
formal contexts

February 16-17, 2024

**Jelena Mihaljević  
Djigunović**

University of Zagreb,  
Croatia

PLENARY  
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**BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
University of Zagreb, **ZAGREB, CROATIA**



University of Zagreb  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences



**Hrvatsko filološko društvo**

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# KEYNOTE LECTURES

# Croatian contributions to researching early learning and teaching of FLs

Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović, University of Zagreb ([jdjigunovic@gmail.com](mailto:jdjigunovic@gmail.com))

Compared to other European contexts Croatia has a rather long tradition of formal early FL learning. The FL has been part of the primary curriculum from grade 4 (or grade 5 depending on the availability of qualified FL teachers during the early days) for more than eight decades. Research of FL learning and teaching processes was initiated by Mirjana Vilke of Zagreb University, who motivated whole generations of future researchers to explore this increasingly popular area of applied linguistics.

In my talk I will analyze key developments in researching early FL learning in Croatia, which started during the 1970s (e.g., Vilke, 1976) and has continued to this day. My focus will be on research approaches in studying early FL teaching and learning processes, findings obtained, and impact they have had on national educational policies. Some attention will be devoted to research methodology aspects that have been recognized internationally as unique and innovative (e.g., Johnstone, 2009). At the end of the talk I will suggest possible future directions for researching early learning and teaching of FLs.

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- Johnstone, R. (2009). An early start: What are the key conditions for generalized success? In J. Enever, J. Moon and U. Raman (eds) *Young Learner English Language Policy and Implementation: International Perspectives* (pp. 31-41). Garnet Publishing Ltd.
- Vilke, M. (1976). The Age Factor in the Acquisition of Foreign Languages, *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata*, 2-3, 179-190.



# Slow as a snail: Findings on pre-primary learners of foreign languages, their teachers, and parents

Marianne Nikolov, University of Pécs ([nikolov.marianne@pte.hu](mailto:nikolov.marianne@pte.hu))

The talk offers a critical overview of research into teaching and learning a foreign language (FL; L2) in pre-primary schools by drawing on a recent publication by Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2023). We analyzed 74 empirical studies published over two decades to characterize the state of the art and to outline where more studies are needed. The main findings overlap with what used to be, and in some contexts still is, typical in early lower-primary FL programs: parents' enthusiasm underlies the growing popularity of pre-primary FL learning initiatives. However, not all teachers are motivated and well prepared for the challenging job, and expectations are sometimes not tuned to the children's and their teachers' abilities. Stakeholders' hope reflected in the proverb slow and steady wins the race is valid only if certain conditions are met: (1) Age-appropriate FL curricula and materials are aligned with all aims of pre-primary curricula; (2) Teachers are competent both in early childhood education and FL teaching methodology, and proficient in the children's first language(s) and the target language; (3) Classrooms are equipped with toys and picturebooks in rooms familiar to children allowing FL activities to be integrated into the timetable; (4) All stakeholders cooperate to support children's wellbeing and learning; and (5) Transfer and continuity are ensured in primary programs integrating what children already know and can do. Findings show that most research focused narrowly on children learning words, the target language is limited to English, the authors are positively biased enthusiasts, even longitudinal studies cover short periods, and children's and teachers' emic perspectives are rarely included. The aims of pre-primary programs tend to be vaguely defined, and studies tend to tap only into L2 outcomes. Truly longitudinal studies are necessary on children's overall development to explore benefits and conditions of pre-school programs.

## References:

Nikolov, M., & Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (2023). Studies on pre-primary learners of foreign languages, their teachers, and parents: A critical overview of publications between 2000 and 2022. *Language Teaching*, 56(4), 451-477. doi:10.1017/S0261444823000095

# Emergent bilingual children in early foreign language learning: Focus on variability and dynamicity in L2 development data

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Second Language Acquisition research has identified three recent trends that are particularly pervasive in language education of young learners. First, very young foreign language (FL) learners have become a new population of learners, which opens challenging questions regarding not just expectable outcomes but also the very nature and aims of FL learning at this age (Muñoz 2019). Second, as a “major educational initiative” (Heras & Lasagabaster 2015: 72) in Europe, content and language integrated learning (CLIL) has been taking root in recent decades, with the promise that early bilingual instruction will result in higher levels of FL proficiency, while simultaneously equipping students with other key skills such as intercultural awareness (e.g. Wode 2004). Third, today’s multilingual and technology-supported culture is redefining when, why, and how languages – in particular English as a foreign language (EFL) – are learned and used (Douglas Fir Group 2016; Larsen-Freeman 2017). Each of these three topics has received a lot of attention in its own right in SLA, albeit not in interaction with the others.

Drawing on my own research on the long-term EFL development of children attending bilingual and regular (pre)primary FL programs for up to 8 school years in Switzerland, I offer a critical review of empirical and theoretical results concerning understanding of CLIL, age and the extracurricular use of digital technologies in the context of European school education. My main goals are (1) to discuss ways to implement dynamically oriented methodology that can provide much needed insights into the inherent dynamic, emergent, and contextually and socially embedded nature of L2 learning in young children, and (2) to outline implications for multilingual education when decisions are made about early teaching of different languages and early instruction through different languages in the FL classroom.

## References:

- Douglas Fir Group. 2016. A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *Modern Language Journal* 100(s1). 19–47.
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- Muñoz, C. 2019. A new look at age: young and old L2 learners. In John W. Schwieter & Alessandro Benati (eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of language learning*, 430–450. Cambridge: CUP.
- Wode, Henning. 2004. *Frühes Fremdsprachenlernen. Englisch ab Kita und Grundschule: Warum? Wie? Was bringt es?* Kiel: Verein für frühe Mehrsprachigkeit an Kindertageseinrichtungen und Schulen FMKS e.V.

# SYMPOSIUM

# Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in the Croatian Pre-Primary Educational Landscape

Convenor: Ivana Cindrić

In the Republic of Croatia, foreign language learning (FLL) has been compulsory from the first grade of primary education since 2003. Concurrently, FLL has also permeated into the pre-primary educational setting. Various FLL programs are now offered in early childhood and preschool institutions (ECEC), however with no national regulation at this level. Nevertheless, according to data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, a substantial number of children participate in these programs (Mikulec & Rogulj, 2023), which raises questions about teacher competences, pedagogical approaches, and the effectiveness of early language acquisition.

The symposium addresses essential aspects of pre-primary FL learning and teaching. It begins with research exploring pre-service ECEC teachers' beliefs about early FLL and their perceptions of the competences required for teaching the English language. This is followed by a paper emphasizing the significance of phonological awareness in early literacy development which advocates the use of word games to foster this skill in an engaging language-learning environment. The paper gives an overview of empirical studies on game-based phonological tasks for preschool children learning a foreign language, with a focus on the research instruments and materials employed in these interventions and their relevance to the development of phonological awareness in children.

Furthermore, the symposium highlights the importance of incorporating movement into language instruction, an area which has been underexplored. The undertaken study investigated language teaching practices involving movement and the benefits of combining language instruction with rhythmic and dance education for pre-primary learners.

The role of authentic literature, particularly picturebooks in very early language learning has also been examined. The research investigated how pre-primary children in Croatia respond to authentic English language picturebooks, revealing their strong interest and capability in comprehending simple stories presented through text and images. This suggests the advantages of using picturebooks in pre-primary settings and provides a potential approach for incorporating authentic foreign language picturebooks in early FLL.

Additionally, a small-scale study conducted with children aged three to seven revealed the importance of focusing on foreign language acquisition by using age-appropriate activities, developing children's motivation and positive attitudes, as well as teacher competences to ensure successful foreign language teaching in pre-primary education.

Finally, the process of creating, adapting, and implementing "My First Language Portfolio" for evaluating and self-evaluating the language skills of children aged four to six/seven, as well as its role in assessing the benefits of early FLL, is presented. The insights emphasize the importance of implementing appropriate methods and age-appropriate content that enhance children's awareness of language and communication.

In summary, the symposium sheds light on the evolving and yet underresearched landscape of pre-primary FLL in Croatia. It offers insights into teaching practices, literacy development, movement-based learning, and the use of picturebooks in this context. It emphasizes the importance of effective pedagogical approaches, teacher competences, and the engagement of young learners in the process of early language acquisition.

## References:

Mikulec, A. & Rogulj, E. (2023). *Ovladavanje stranim jezikom u ranoj i predškolskoj dobi*. Sveučilište u Zagrebu: Učiteljski fakultet.

# EFL in Pre-primary Education: Pre-service ECEC Teachers' Perception

Alenka Mikulec ([alenka.mikulec@ufzg.hr](mailto:alenka.mikulec@ufzg.hr)) & Ivana Cindrić ([ivana.cindric@ufzg.hr](mailto:ivana.cindric@ufzg.hr))  
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Nowadays, the number of preschool institutions implementing foreign language learning from the earliest age is increasing across the globe. This practice is in accordance with the EU recommendations which propose developing the mother tongue and two additional languages (European Council, 2002). Despite the recognized key role of preschool teachers in delivering high-quality education (OECD, 2006), there appears to be a systemic gap in the formal training of early childhood education and care (ECEC) foreign language (FL) teachers, both at the national and international levels (Dagarin Fojkar & Skubic, 2017). FL teachers who possess teaching methodology and linguistic competences have been identified as the key factor in effective FL acquisition in very early years (European Commission, 2011).

Therefore, the paper aims to investigate future ECEC teachers' perceptions regarding English as a foreign language (EFL) in the context of pre-primary education. The research reveals the results of a survey conducted in 2023 among second and third year pre-service ECEC students. Specifically, it examines their awareness of existing FL programs in preschool institutions, their perceived need for further education, and their willingness to teach EFL at the pre-primary level. Furthermore, the study aims to establish pre-service teachers' perceptions about very early FL learning, their assessment of the proficiency levels required for ECEC teachers involved in FL instruction, and their estimate of the importance of FL teachers' generic and specific competences.

These results will be analyzed in light of the graduate study program in early childhood and preschool education: English language teaching offered by the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb. In addition to offering a new qualification, the program aims to meet the needs of preschool institutions for professionals in the area of EFL.

## References:

Dagarin Fojkar, M. & Skubic, D. (2017). Pre-service preschool teachers' beliefs about foreign language learning and early foreign language teaching in Slovenia. *CEPS Journal* 7 (4) (85-104). <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:15213>

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# Pre-Primary FL Learners: Phonological Games and Early Literacy

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Phonological awareness (PA) is a crucial foundational skill for reading in alphabetical languages as it involves the ability to recognize and manipulate segments of spoken language such as words, syllables, or sounds (e.g., Anthony & Francis, 2005). Supporting children's early literacy development can be effectively achieved by engaging them in word games designed to develop their PA in an implicit and unimposing manner. Connecting word segmentation with game-based activities facilitates creating a constructive and engaging language-learning environment, laying the groundwork for later language learning and proficiency (e.g., Wright et al., 2005). The selection of game-like teaching activities that promote early literacy depends on the specific learning goals, the age and proficiency level of the learners, and the teacher's creativity in adapting games to suit the classroom context. Research instruments and materials utilized to study young learners should be adjusted accordingly. In other words, when investigating foreign language acquisition in young children, researchers are advised to coordinate their procedures with those used by pre-primary practitioners (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023).

The primary objective of this paper is to provide an overview of empirical studies comprising game-based phonological tasks as interventions aimed at developing PA in preschool children who are learning a foreign language (e.g., English). For that purpose, several accessible web-based scholar databases will be examined: Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, ERIC, and CroRIS. All applicable studies will be analyzed, particularly their research instruments and materials, which serve as prospective representations of phonological games. The findings will be outlined according to their relevance to the developmental continuum of children's PA (Pufpaff, 2009), ranging from rhyming words to phonemic awareness tasks.

## References:

- Anthony, J. L., & Francis, D. J. (2005). Development of Phonological Awareness. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(5), 255–259. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00376.x>
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- Wright, A., Betteridge, D., & Buckby, M. (2005). *Games for language learning* (3rd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

# Movement in Language Acquisition at an Early Age

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Early childhood is characterized by movement and play as essential forms of children's activity, integral to their natural development. Neuroscientific research indicates the connection between movement, physical space and brain development, confirming the significance of early sensorimotor experiences for brain maturation, alongside developing motor skills and spatial awareness as the foundation of a child's overall growth (e.g., Rajović, 2017). Guberina (1967, 2010) emphasizes the importance of movement in speech and language development and discusses the interrelations between movement, language, speech and space, claiming that speech belongs to the sound and movement in physical space. Within the field of cognitive science, more specifically embodied learning and embodied cognition, the connection between cognition, motor development and language is recognized and investigated (e.g., Iverson, 2022).

The value of incorporating movement-based activities in early language learning programmes has been acknowledged (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023). However, research in this area is quite scarce, particularly studies focusing on exploring diverse approaches to integrating movement into language instruction.

The aim of this paper is to examine language teaching practices employing movement and give an overview of the publications in this field. The possibilities and benefits of employing movement in language teaching, indicated in the results of the author's own approach to teaching English to pre-primary learners, in which language teaching is combined with rhythmic and dance education, will be compared to the key conditions of efficient early primary programmes revealed in the publications on pre-primary teaching and learning (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023).

The results of the mentioned language and movement combined programme indicate that comprehending movement in the context of the theory of movement as an art form may enhance the beneficial impact of movement-based activities in teaching, which in turn can contribute to the assembling of the age-appropriate model of efficient practices in early language learning.

## References:

Guberina, P. (1967). *Zvuk i pokret u jeziku*. Zavod za fonetiku FFZG.

Guberina, P. (2010). *Govor i čovjek – verbotonalni sistem*. U V. Crnković i I. Jurjević-Grkinić (ur.). Zagreb: Artresor naklada.

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Nikolov, M., & Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (2023). Studies on pre-primary learners of foreign languages, their teachers, and parents: A critical overview of publications between 2000 and 2022. *Language Teaching*, 56(4), 451–477. doi:10.1017/S0261444823000095

Rajović, R. (2017). *Kako igrom uspješno razvijati djetetov IQ*. Split: Harfa.

# Reading Foreign Language Picturebooks with Pre-primary Children

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During the past two decades the number of pre-primary foreign language programs has been slowly increasing in Croatia. Although the available studies on teaching and learning a foreign language in the pre-primary setting include children's individual differences, language awareness, vocabulary development and using ICT (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023), not many are focused on using children's literature. Exceptions include two important studies on using picturebooks by Kearney and Barbour (2015) and Mourão (2015) which support the idea that foreign language picturebooks should be used in the pre-primary settings, even in the low exposure contexts.

The purpose of this study was to explore how pre-primary children respond to authentic picturebooks in English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Croatian context. The picturebook *Shark in the park* (2020) by Nick Sharatt is read aloud with a group of pre-primary children and accompanied by various appropriate pre-reading, while-reading and after-reading activities. The activities are formed with respect to the content and language integrated approach (CLIL) and situated learning theory, using total physical response (TPR) and game-like activities. Also, key developmental areas in children suggested by Mourão and Ellis (2020) will be taken into consideration. Preschool children involved in this study have been learning EFL in a pre-primary setting. This is their first encounter with the selected picturebook. Sessions with children are recorded and consequently transcribed. Their responses during the repeated read-alouds are analyzed using the methodology of children's response to picturebooks (Mourão, 2013; 2015).

The results of the study confirm that pre-primary children are very interested in foreign language picturebooks and are able to enjoy and follow simple stories in EFL conveyed through text and pictures. The range of their verbal and nonverbal responses prove benefits of using picturebooks in pre-primary settings on various levels. Following children's reactions and responses a possible approach to using authentic foreign language picturebooks is offered.

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# Pre-primary Children's Preferences for EFL Learning Activities

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In many countries around the world foreign languages (FLs) are introduced from a very early age. However, not many studies have been conducted focusing on this age group (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023). Therefore, many aspects of FL teaching in pre-primary age need to be investigated, and as Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2023) propose, these studies should be conducted by practicing teachers. Despite this gap in research, some general teaching guidelines have been recommended such as emphasis on acquisition rather than conscious learning (European Commission, 2011), i.e., teaching activities should be tailored to suit this age group (e.g., play, picturebooks, songs and rhymes). Next, the focus should be on developing children's motivation and positive attitudes towards the language (Johnstone, 2019). Finally, the teachers need to possess both language and teaching competences (European Commission, 2011) and they must ensure that learning is stimulating and motivating (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

The main part of this paper focuses on the results of a small-scale study conducted in two phases by a practicing preschool teacher of English as a foreign language. The aim was to gain insight into children's attitudes and preferences related to using English and different language activities. Research participants were 35 children aged three to seven and enrolled in the English language programme in a kindergarten in Zagreb. Data collection methods were observation and individual interviews with children, and the results were analysed qualitatively.

The results indicate that children generally have positive attitudes to using English and activities such as singing, playing games, and reading stories and picturebooks. It may therefore be proposed that a competent teacher and the selection of age-appropriate activities are of paramount importance for successful very early FL teaching.

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# First Language Portfolio and Early French Language Learning

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"My first language portfolio" resulted from research focusing on the process of evaluation and self-evaluation (assessment and self-assessment) of language skills among children aged four to six/seven, as well as the observed benefits of early foreign language learning (FLL). Research was carried out at the Professional Development Centre for early French language learning at the Kindergarten Travno in Zagreb.

Effective planning of activities for preschool children requires teachers to possess relevant knowledge about children's developmental abilities and learning styles, which will result in the implementation of best methods for developing communicative and intercultural language skills while also encouraging children's development of independent FL acquisition strategies. This paper will present the adaptation of the CEFR descriptors (Vijeće Europe, 2005), which was done to provide an assessment tool for preschool children's FL skills and abilities. Therefore, a new set of descriptors was developed by the research team (Vrhovac, Domladovac, Pečko & Kantarci) and implemented with children between the ages of 4 to 6/7 years focusing on their speaking, reading and writing skills at levels A1.1, A1.2, and A1.3 (Dječji vrtić Travno, 2011). These descriptors aimed to foster children's awareness of language and communication by incorporating age-appropriate content. Self-evaluation allows preschool children to reflect on their language acquisition, the use of FL vocabulary and basic communication phrases during play and other daily activities in kindergarten. With guidance from their FL teacher, children gradually become aware of their FL use during play and gain awareness of the presence of other languages.

"My first language portfolio" gives preschool teachers insight into language competences of very young learners and provides children with feedback on their progress in the FL. Additionally, it serves as a resource for parents and primary school teachers to plan continuing activities for FL instruction as children transition to primary school.

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# INDIVIDUAL PRESENTATIONS

# The connection between early foreign language learning and narrative abilities in the mother tongue (Croatian) of early and preschool children

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The acquisition of the mother tongue is a process that depends on many factors, primarily on the child's cognitive abilities, his individual characteristics, but also gender, the structure of family life, organic idiom, exposure to the media, involvement in institutional education and various communication incentives in the middle of growing up. Around the age of three, the foundations of the mother tongue are formed, but in that early period the child still generalizes or does not implement the adopted rules on the morphological level. On the phonological level he masters the sounds and sound sets in accordance with the developmental age, and on the syntactic level he expands his sentence with approximately one in other words annually. Grammatical development is accompanied by lexical development, which is the most dynamic in that period, so a child around the age of three has 1,000 words in his vocabulary, and around the age of four already has 4,000 words. In some preschool institutions, children from the age of three are involved in early learning of a foreign language, usually English, and therefore are exposed to the English language for about two hours every day. This is exactly why research was conducted in two kindergartens in Central Croatia, one in which an early English language learning program is implemented and one in which such a program is not implemented. The children of the two selected groups were examined with the MAIN test - a test of narrative abilities and a test of semantic fluency. The collected data were compared with regard to learning/non-learning of the English language and with regard to the gender of the children and their chronological age.

# The role of cognitive discourse functions in lower primary CLIL Science teaching materials

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Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has become part of mainstream education in many European countries, including Hungary. In Hungarian bilingual primary schools, selected subjects are taught through the CLIL-language starting at grade 1 of primary school, while Science is taught through the CLIL language starting in grade 3.

This poses several challenges; the CLIL-language level of pupils is at A1-A2, and there is a lack of good quality, age-appropriate teaching materials (Bakti & Szabó, 2016; Sherwin, 2022).

This presentation illustrates a possible way of facing these challenges: the process of compiling a resource material for lower primary (grades 3-4, ages 8-10) CLIL Science teachers will be introduced, where the aim was to create a material that is age-appropriate and is in line with the Hungarian curriculum.

First, an analysis of the Hungarian Framework Curriculum for Lower Primary Science is presented, which was carried out using the model of cognitive discourse functions of Dalton-Puffer (2013). As a result of this analysis, key CDFs that should be focused on and developed in the Hungarian-medium lower primary Science classes were identified (Bakti, 2023).

Second, a possible implementation of the results of the analysis is provided. The CDFs identified could be used as the starting point of teaching material development, as illustrated by a resource material designed for lower primary CLIL Science teachers (Bakti & Szarvas, 2023).

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# Repeated reading, the path to developing reading skills (a case study)

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In the first years of learning how to read, but in later stages as well, reading difficulties (e.g., insufficiently developed reading speed, incorrect decoding of words, lack of content comprehension, incorrect punctuation, sentence intonation, etc.) are common (see Visinko, 2014; Čudina Obradović, 2014). If automaticity has not been achieved, the reader cannot attain the level of fluency necessary to immerse oneself in the text and reach genuine reading comprehension (Peti-Stantić, 2022). With the aim of improving reading fluency, namely speed and accuracy, as well as reading comprehension, a repeated reading strategy has been devised (see; Samuels, 1979). It consists of repeated reading of a short, meaningful passage until a satisfactory level of fluency is reached. The efficacy of this strategy has been confirmed by numerous studies (see Therrien & Hughes, 2008). In his meta-analysis, Therrien (2004) stresses the following as key implications for teaching and future research: students need to read aloud to an adult, the student needs to receive feedback on misread words, reading needs to be repeated three to four times, that is, until a certain performance criterion has been satisfied.

The aim of this study is to show the application of the repeated reading strategy and its contribution to fast, automatic reading with the correct use of prosodic features, as well as sentence-level comprehension of meaning in Croatian as a mother tongue in the home environment. The participant is a 2nd-grade primary school student. The study was conducted across a two-week period in the home environment, using five shorter texts (selected from the SMIB magazine) as a template, and in the presence of an adult. Each text had 3-4 readings. Based on audio-recordings of all readings, a checklist was filled in, containing data on the desired goal (number of words per minute), the code of the chapter being read, the number order of readings, number of words read per minute, number of incorrectly/correctly read words, and whether the goal has been achieved. Data analysis provided information on reading speed and accuracy. Reading comprehension of each text was checked twice – using the same questions after the first and fourth reading, respectively (analytical questions and synthetic question). Selected sentences from each text have been compared in terms of placing stress on key words and marking the end of sentence through falling intonation, whereby data on improved prosodic correctness were obtained.

Apart from gaining deeper insights into reading difficulties in the mother tongue of early-school-age children, by comparing different readings of the same text, and by comparing reading of different texts over time, this study will contribute to the understanding of benefits of applying the repeated reading strategy in their elimination.

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# PALINGUI - Making young children's language learning pathways visible in the early years

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Societies, and with it our classrooms, are increasingly plurilingual, and this places new demands on teachers and educators with the diverse range of language learning pathways of the children being as individuals as the young learners themselves. This means that educators need to consider the language experiences that happen within and outside of the education system when designing pedagogical approaches to ensure that the children in their setting feel valued and supported in being active agents of their own language learning.

This paper will look at the outcomes of the European Centre for Modern Languages PALINGUI project which aims to support teachers and educators in making language learning visible for children aged 3 to 12 in the education system. Using observation, assessment, and documentation as guiding principles to identify, understand and support language learning, the project explored through practitioner enquiry and conversations, how learning opportunities can be created to allow children to progress on their language learning pathways, considering the various dimensions and uses of the languages that make up a child's linguistic repertoire. The outcomes from this project will be further exemplified through practical examples from a range of different educational contexts which show that the implementation of these approaches can be embedded as part of the daily classroom practices within any setting or educational system.



# Pragmatic awareness of prospective non-native EYL teachers

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Communicative competence in any language encompasses the speaker's ability to use the target language appropriately in various contexts, the degree of appropriateness of the speaker's linguistic choices differing between languages and cultures. The knowledge of contextually appropriate language use is referred to as 'pragmatic' competence. A number of studies have dealt with the relevance of pragmatic competence to second language teaching (e.g., Rose & Kasper, 2001; McLean, 2004; Sánchez-Hernández & Barón, 2022), but little has been said about the role of teachers' pragmatic awareness in English for Young Learners (EYL) classes (Glaser, 2018). The present paper reports on the initial step of a research project aimed at investigating the function of pragmatics in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in primary school. To this purpose, a first exploratory study was conducted in which Italian student teachers attending a Primary Education course were asked to do an anonymous quiz designed to assess their awareness of the naturalness/appropriateness of certain linguistic choices in EYL classroom language. An analysis of the students' answers has revealed disagreement on the linguistic options proposed in the quiz. This seems to suggest some degree of uncertainty as to what classroom language may (not) suit an EYL context, and raises questions about the respondents' awareness of the repercussions of classroom language on children's learning of English.

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# Lessons learned from observing YLs' EFL classes: "Sh... did you understand? I will explain".

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Over the last 2 decades English has enjoyed a special status in Israeli society, with growing enthusiasm about an early start in schools (Carmel, 2019) despite disappointing national test results and ambiguity regarding the benefits of early English (Carmel, 2019; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). This exploratory study aimed to use classroom observations to capture teaching practices in real time (Nikolov & Timpe-Laughlin, 2021) to offer insights into YLs' motivated behavior and engagement with tasks.

An observation schedule was used to collect data in eight teachers' grade 2 and 3 EFL classes with 238 YLs. Detailed notes were taken on what the teacher and the children were doing, what materials and tasks were used, if children were to listen, speak, read, write, or use total physical response. Estimated time for each task was documented along with impressions of how motivated and engaged the pupils were and what they learned.

We found that a lot was going on at the same time, resulting in unpredictable digressions, code switching, disciplining, and other spontaneous activities. Three main findings emerged: (1) teachers struggled with maintaining children's attention as it was challenging to keep them on tasks (2) few tasks seemed to be engaging and conducive to learning, as they failed to offer meaning-focused opportunities for using English. (3) Although some children were involved in doing the tasks at hand, most of them were not engaged in learning English.

What we identified as 'bad practice' is alarming, as over time, this may result in demotivation for YLs and their teachers (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019). Intricacies and complexities involved in teaching languages to children are discussed along with suggestions as to why EFL for YLs is often risky and disappointing.

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# Reading motivation in English as a FL at a primary level

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Reading motivation is a fundamental part of learning a FL as it impacts reading performance and FL learning motivation (Guthrie & Klauda, 2016; Takase, 2007). The role of reading motivation has also been identified as a main predictor in both theoretical frameworks and empirical studies on reading literacy (Becker, McElvany & Kortenbruck, 2010). Reading is part of a holistic literacy competence, affecting students' social, cultural and academic areas of lives. Nikolov and Csapó (2010) demonstrated that there is a close relationship between L1 and L2 performances in reading skills, which confirms that reading in both languages should be fostered. The aim of our study was to gain insight into the Slovenian students' frequency of reading in English and the types of texts they read, as well as the dimensions of reading motivation in FL, gender differences, and the relationship between reading motivation in their L1 and FL. For this purpose, we created a questionnaire which was answered by 198 students in grade 6 in Slovenian primary schools. The data were analysed with SPSS Statistics 22. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess reliability, and correlation/differences were measured using Pearson and Spearman coefficients and the t-test. Factor analysis was used to combine the variables into main factors. The results revealed that the majority of participants read in English once a week, and English movie subtitles were the most commonly read text type. We identified four factors that make up reading motivation in FL with the surveyed students, namely extrinsic and intrinsic reading motivation in FL, intrinsic reading motivation in L1, and parental influence. The study showed differences in gender motivation, with more girls reading voluntarily in English every day, while the majority of boys indicated that they do not voluntarily read in English, and they have lower intrinsic motivation for reading in their L1 than girls. The survey also demonstrated that those who never read in English voluntarily are less likely to be intrinsically motivated to read in their L1, and vice versa. The study confirms the correlation between reading motivation in L1 and FL and shows that a variety of reading materials, printed as well as digital, should be used to promote students' reading skills and motivation.

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# The effects of self and peer-assessment in writing among Indonesian young EFL learners

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The present research aimed to explore the impacts of self and peer-assessment on the writing skills of 68 young Indonesian EFL learners. Specifically focusing on fourth-grade (A-1 beginner) students in Lampung, Indonesia, the study incorporated a regular peer-assessment approach throughout half of the semester during their English classes. Drawing from Nikolov's diagnostic test framework for children (2016), a tailored writing test consisting of four writing tasks was utilized as both the pre-test and post-test. Prior to implementation, this adapted test underwent piloting and rigorous examination of its psychometric properties.

The participants were divided into three groups: one engaging in self-assessment, another assigned to peer-assessment, and the third serving as the control group. The data were analyzed through one-way ANOVA. Notably, the findings indicated the positive influence of both self and peer-assessment on students' writing capabilities, despite the relatively modest effect size. Additionally, no discernible superiority of one assessment method over the other was observed in terms of enhancing the students' English writing skills. Complementary insights were obtained from interviews with teachers, shedding light on their inclinations toward integrating self and peer-assessment within foreign language instruction, particularly in educational settings where the emphasis has traditionally been placed on teacher-centered and measurement-driven evaluation.

# Teacher preparedness and quality in early English language learning: Insights from EFL instructors in Croatia

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Teachers of young children play a significant role during the early formative years of schooling. The quality of teaching can influence academic achievements of these young learners (YLS). In order for early foreign language learning programs to have a lasting, positive impact on the learners' motivation and accomplishments, it is crucial to have well-prepared EFL teachers who are genuinely motivated to teach them. In Croatia, English language specialists are responsible for teaching at all levels of education. They are given legal advantages over generalist teachers (with a minor in English) when applying for teaching positions at the primary level. However, some researchers have raised concerns about their potentially insufficient knowledge and training in the various skills required to effectively teach YLS (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2004; Mihaljević Djigunović & Mardešić, 2009; Pavičić et al., 2006; Vičević Ivanović et al., 2019).

In this study, we present findings from a survey conducted with in-service generalist and specialist EFL teachers who shared their perspectives on what makes a teacher best suited for instructing YLS. Eighty in-service teachers of EFL for YLS completed an adapted version of a questionnaire by Emery (2012). The survey incorporated a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions, enabling teachers to report on their experiences with pre-service and in-service training. Furthermore, teachers expressed their opinions regarding the qualities and competencies of a well-prepared EFL teacher for YLS, and their dis/agreement with the arguments commonly raised in discussions about the suitability of specialist versus generalist teachers in early foreign language learning. The outcomes of this study have the potential to contribute significantly to the improvement of university and professional development programs aimed at ensuring the highest quality of EFL instruction right from the outset of formal EFL study in Croatia.

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## Early language learning in Ireland

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This paper will discuss the experience and outcome of primary school language learning in Ireland. Currently both national languages, Irish and English, are taught in all primary schools. Irish is a second language for all but a small minority of the school population, whereas English is the first language of the vast majority of Irish pupils. This situation has been complexified in recent years by the increasing immigration into Ireland of individuals and families whose first languages are other than English or Irish.

Most primary schools in Ireland are English-medium schools where Irish is taught as a compulsory subject. There are, however, a small number of schools (approximately 8%) that provide Irish-medium education. Until near the close of the 20th century, foreign languages (FLs) were taught on only an ad hoc basis in some Irish primary schools. Then in 1998, FLs were officially introduced at primary level under the terms of the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (1998-2012), which by its finish included 546 schools. FLs were again introduced into some primary schools via the “Say Yes to Languages” sampler model in 2021 (renewed in 2022 and again in 2023). This programme was initially offered in 500 schools, and 1,200 schools are registered for 2023.

Earlier this year, the Minister of Education formally announced that additional European languages would be added to the national curriculum in Ireland from 2025. The programme will see all pupils learn a FL for one hour per week in the second half of their primary education. This inclusion of an additional language in the curriculum comes at a price, however. Thus, for example, the time allotted to the teaching of Irish will be reduced from 3.5 to 3 hours a week.

In our paper we shall detail the situation in Ireland and evaluate the proposed developments against the backdrop of the national and international literature on early L2 instruction and development.

# The effectiveness of using songs to teach young learners of French in UK primary schools: a randomized control trial.

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Songs are popular resources with teachers of young language learners. Strong claims are often made about their effectiveness in achieving second or foreign language learning outcomes (Forster, 2006; Hamilton & Murphy, 2023; Paquette & Rieg, 2008). Whilst there is plenty of observational and anecdotal evidence about songs' putative effect on linguistic outcomes, there is little substantiating evidence for causal claims that are derived from trustworthy experimental research (Hamilton, Schulz, Chalmers & Murphy, 2023). To tease apart the relative effects of using songs, compared to alternative approaches commonly found in young language learner classrooms, we present preliminary findings from a randomized trial conducted with 108 Year 3 (7–8-year-old) learners in their first term of learning French in UK primary schools. The participants, from two primary schools, were randomly allocated to one of four comparison groups: songs, chants, stories, or business-as-usual French teaching. Treatment groups participated in a three-week intervention where they were exposed to complex French input in the form of either songs, chants or stories. The fourth group followed the schools' planned French curriculum. Differential effects on elicited imitation tasks between the groups were assessed. Findings are discussed with reference to the role of evidence for informing best pedagogical practice with beginner foreign language learners.

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# Lexical and syntactic accuracy, complexity, and fluency in L1 and L2 children's oral production

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**Purpose:** Despite the extensive research on complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF), the developmental facet of these constructs in second language (L2) production, particularly in children, has been understudied. Furthermore, previous research has focused on a single linguistic domain (e.g., syntactic complexity) or used a global index (e.g., accuracy) although all three constructs are related to multiple linguistic domains. This study, therefore, investigates how children learning English as an L2 (“L2 children”) develop their CAF in both lexical and syntactic domains in comparison to children acquiring English as their first language (“L1 children”).

**Methodology:** 41 L1 children (age: 4–7), who were recruited in the USA, and 39 L1-Korean L2 children (age: 5–12; age of onset: 4–6), who were recruited in Korea, completed an oral picture narration task where they created a story describing three sets of four pictures about a morning routine, fighting between friends, and nighttime parenting. The data obtained from this task were analyzed using six measures: lexical complexity, syntactic complexity, lexical accuracy, syntactic accuracy, lexical fluency, and syntactic fluency.

**Results:** A mixed-effects regression analysis on each of the six measures, including “group” and “length of learning” as fixed effects and “story set” as a random effect, showed a “group” effect only in syntactic accuracy, with L2 children exhibiting lower performance than L1 children. However, no significant interaction emerged between “group” and “length of learning,” indicating that the two groups did not differ in terms of development.

**Conclusion:** L2 learners develop CAF abilities similarly to L1 children.

**Significance:** Theoretically and methodologically, this study indicates that the CAF should be measured in multiple linguistic domains. Pedagogically, it suggests that explicit instruction on syntactic forms may enhance learners' syntactic accuracy in L2 production.



# Early learning of Spanish as a foreign language in Croatia: The teacher perspective

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Early foreign language (FL) teaching and learning process has been researched from various perspectives and many of its features are today rather well known. In addition to the issues related to, for instance, educational policies, teaching programmes or teaching methodology, the role of the teacher as the most important stakeholder is emphasised (Edelenbos et al., 2006; Enver, 2011; Nikolov & Curtain, 2000).

Within a long tradition of early FL learning in Croatia, the teacher role has been examined from various viewpoints in relation to English, French, German and Italian (Vilke & Vrhovac, 1993, 1995; Vrhovac, 1999, 2001, 2019). As far as early learning of Spanish in the Croatian context is concerned, it has only recently been introduced as a second foreign language and an optional subject in a limited number of classrooms in several large urban areas across the country. According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2023) there are currently ten primary school teachers teaching Spanish to young learners aged 9-14. However, data on their characteristics, views or practices are still lacking.

The paper presents the results of the research on the views of Croatian primary-school teachers of Spanish as a FL on their teaching situation. Two research questions were posed: (a) what is the teachers' perception of their current teaching environment, i.e. its characteristics at both the institutional and the classroom level, including, among other, the school, the curriculum, pupils, teaching materials, teaching methods and evaluation practices and (b) what are the teachers' views on the future perspective of teaching and learning Spanish at the primary school level in the Croatian context. The data were gathered by semi-structured interviews. The results suggest an overall positive outlook on early learning of Spanish as a foreign language in Croatia from the teacher perspective, but some qualitative differences also emerged.

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# Orthographic input and English pronunciation learning in Mandarin-speaking EFL children

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Children in mainland China receive formal instruction in Pinyin, a Roman alphabetic system used to represent the sounds of Chinese characters, at the beginning of Year 1 in primary school to help them develop Chinese literacy skills. They also begin formal English learning as early as Year 1, during which the phonological forms of novel English vocabulary are regularly presented alongside orthographic input (OI, the written forms of words). Studies have shown that OI can have a facilitative effect on vocabulary learning in monolingual children's first language (L1; Colenbrander et al., 2019). It has also been found that OI can have mixed effects on (mainly) adolescents and adult learners' phonological learning in a second language (L2; Bassetti, 2008; Hayes-Harb & Barrios, 2021). In light of these findings, the current study aims to investigate the influence of L2 OI on Mandarin-speaking EFL children's L2 vocabulary learning, with an emphasis on the learning of phonological forms. Eight-year-old children in Shanghai (N=34) participated in an individually presented online English vocabulary learning task, learning two sets of six real, novel English words through a paired-associate intentional learning paradigm. The two independent variables manipulated in this repeated-measures design were: (1) OI condition (whether words were learnt with written forms present or not); and (2) Pinyin-English phonic congruence (control words that exist only in English [e.g., sob], interlingual homographs with similar pronunciations [e.g., tan], and interlingual homographs with different pronunciations [e.g., tun]). Afterwards, participants were given immediate, one-day delayed, and two-week delayed post-tests on their memory of the words' pronunciations. Results from t-tests and linear mixed-effects models suggest that presenting OI facilitated children's word pronunciation learning both during training and across the post-tests. Findings have both pedagogical and theoretical implications for young L2 learners who are concurrently learning two phonological systems and three orthographies.

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# Plurilingual and intercultural education in lower grades of primary school – do language teachers cooperate enough?

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The educational and political recommendations of the Council of Europe point out that efficient functioning of an inclusive democratic society requires understanding and respecting linguistic and cultural diversity. To reach that goal, the implementation of plurilingual and intercultural education into national education systems is advocated (CM/Rec (2022)1). This holistic concept focuses on developing integrated individual language repertoires where languages are mutually connected, creating a dynamic plurilingual system (Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Hufeisen, 2010). This means that all the languages of the school context are taken into consideration, and their interaction is encouraged and pedagogically directed. Operationally, this educational concept requires the promotion of the awareness about possible language transfer and establishing cohesion among teaching content, methods and terminology in the language school subjects (Beacco et al., 2016; Candelier & Schröder-Sura, 2020; Bredthauer, 2018; Haukås, 2016; Hufeisen, 2018; Meißner, 2019). The implementation of such language teaching depends on teacher cooperation as indispensable for creating connections between languages and language school subjects.

Therefore, one of the aims of comprehensive research into the development of learners' plurilingual competence (Knežević et al., 2022; Petravić et al., 2023) was to investigate whether and how teachers cooperate in programming, planning and performing language teaching. An investigation including a survey (N=65) and interviews in focus groups (N=19) comprised primary teachers and teachers of English and German. The obtained quantitative and qualitative data show that the participants sporadically cooperate in planning parts of the teaching content or assessing learners' achievements, but rarely or never coordinate parts of the teaching content, designing teaching or exam materials and additional activities to enhance learners' language competences. The most frequent reasons for that are the lack of awareness of the need to synchronize and negative attitudes of colleagues and other school employees towards cooperation and educational changes. It has to be pointed out that primary teachers and language teachers take into consideration the similarities and differences between the languages taught and they draw the learners' attention to noticing certain phenomena, but do not take further steps to cooperate with their peers. These results point to the need of initial and lifelong teacher education focusing on cooperation among teachers and synergy in the system of education.

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# How old is a young learner? Defining the notion of a young learner of L2

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The aim of this paper is to offer a definition of the oft-elusive notion of a young learner of a foreign language. For more than two decades, a noticeable trend across Europe (and beyond) has seen children starting to learn a foreign language from an ever-younger age. With more young children learning foreign languages there came a number of issues, and researchers have been quick to follow and try to understand and explain how young children learn a foreign language and how teachers teach that specific group of learners (e.g., projects such as ELLiE: Early Language Learning in Europe, Developing learner autonomy and awareness through European Language Portfolio, Acquiring English from the early age: Analysis of learner language). With this expansion of research in different countries and contexts came a particular terminological problem – who, exactly, qualifies as a ‘young learner’? In order to find out who indeed is considered a young foreign language learner, we examined relevant research articles published in journals indexed in Web of Science. Based on a comparative analysis, we found, for example, that in certain publications the age is not referred to at all or that the term ‘young’ is tied to what the term ‘primary’ encompasses in the given education system. Hence, the age range of a ‘young learner’ in reviewed publications spans quite a long period, from three-year-old children to teenagers. Seeing that a 3-year-old and a 14-year-old are quite different in terms of their learner characteristics, we turned to developmental psychology to find a framework for a more specific definition of a young learner. As tying this notion to other terms with fluctuating meaning, such as ‘primary’ or ‘elementary’, does not contribute to the clarity of terminology, we find that a ‘young learner’ should be defined in line with the more stable stages of cognitive development and that the age of the participants should always be explicitly stated in research papers.

# Learning multiple languages at a young age in Croatia: Insights from a bilingual community

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Due to different social, political, and historical reasons, Croatia is a country with a long history of foreign language learning and a very positive social outlook on learning multiple languages. As in the majority of other European countries, the most commonly learned first foreign language is English, and an additional foreign language is offered as an elective in lower primary school, from grade 4. Additionally in officially bilingual communities of Istria County, depending on the language used as a medium of instruction, young learners learn Italian or Croatian as languages of the community which adds to their repertoire of language learning in a formal context.

Multiple language learning is in line with various Council of Europe policy documents that underline the importance of multilingual education (CEFR, 2001; RFCDC, 2018). However, to ensure effective multiple language learning in formal contexts there should be a clear policy on the expected outcomes of multiple language learning as well as a careful regard of teaching approaches and learning conditions.

To tap into the issue from the learners' perspective, the present study was conducted with 129 7<sup>th</sup>- and 8<sup>th</sup>- grade students; 65 from Italian-medium and 64 from Croatian-medium primary schools in Istria who were exposed to three or four languages in their lower primary education. It aimed to investigate learners' attitudes toward early multiple language learning, motivation for learning a particular language, satisfaction with teaching approaches, perceived learning difficulty, and perception of the usefulness of particular languages in their day-to-day functioning and in the future.

The results show that young learners value the experience of language learning and that they can reflect critically on their experiences. Yet significant differences in the attitudes between the two groups of participants suggest that attitudes to and motivation for learning multiple languages are shaped by contextual environments such as home language/s and the perceived usefulness of the languages learned in the formal context.

# Inclusive teaching in multilingual contexts: Insights from pre-primary teachers

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This study addresses the challenges faced by pre-primary teachers (specialists and non-specialists in additional languages) in multilingual settings, with a specific focus on attention to diversity (learning needs and special needs). Through content analysis, the study aims to identify the teachers' needs in these contexts and analyze their strategies to promote inclusive language learning experiences. Ten focus groups were conducted for this purpose, and 48 participants (pre-primary teachers) asked to reflect on their competencies to address groups of very young learners in multilingual settings. The participants originate from five different locations in Spain. The discussions were recorded and transcribed, and the software MAXQDA used to facilitate the content analysis of the obtained data. In line with Fojkar and Skubic (2017), Lengyel and Salem (2023), and Sandell Ring (2021), the findings reveal the complexity of adopting and incorporating the tailored approaches required by linguistically diverse and special educational needs (SEN) students. Several key findings emerged, including the difficulty adapting to changing educative contexts or the lack of guidelines to facilitate teaching in multilingual contexts. The results of this research underscore the importance of providing pre-primary teachers in multilingual contexts with multifaceted support (specific legal framework, training sessions, and classroom assistants, among others) to facilitate the inclusiveness of diverse young learners. The research, embedded in a national research project on pre-primary teachers' competencies, contributes insights into teaching strategies in diverse multilingual contexts.

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# Oracy in early English language learning in multilingual contexts: challenges and perspectives in teacher education

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In the last three decades the migration flows into Europe from diverse parts of the world, and the increasing use of English to communicate among speakers of different lingua-cultures, have gradually modified the European language landscapes turning them into multilingual landscapes. Current societal changes have affected European school population, language policies and classroom practice, particularly at lower school levels where an increasing percentage of school population is composed by migrant children who do not master the language of instruction of the country they moved to. These new conditions highlight two main challenges to a successful implementation of early foreign language learning: the challenge of working in multilingual contexts, and that of the plurilithic nature of English, the language mostly studied as second or third language, an aspect often overlooked in teacher education courses. All of this highlight the need in teacher education of:

- a) underlining the relevance and the role of oracy (listening & speaking) for scaffolding learning through spoken exchanges and action-oriented approaches among multilingual children since very early childhood;
- b) sensitizing English language teachers to the plurilithic nature of English by raising their awareness of the new role of English as currently used by non-native speakers, while valuing the notion of locally appropriate learning objectives and outcomes.

This contribution explores current changes in early English language classroom practices in multilingual contexts, and the role that oracy education is gaining in foreign language teaching practices. The findings of some recent research studies on young learners' oracy development in English, their pedagogical implications in multilingual classrooms, as well as samples of current teaching approaches, e.g. CLIL and translanguaging, are presented and discussed.

# “I refuse to work in a system like this, and I’m not leaving:” A case study of two EFL teachers of young learners in Hungary

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The talk explores two Hungarian EFL teachers’ practice and beliefs about (1) their approaches to teaching English to young learners, (2) the challenges they face, and (3) how they manage to cope with them. The study is embedded in the sociocultural theory, claiming that humans develop as participants in cultural communities, and their learning emerges from experiences in social contexts (Johnson, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). This theory provides an explanatory framework for understanding how the participants of this study reflect on their classroom practice and on their teaching careers in the primary school context in Hungary.

Case study research allowed for the in-depth exploration of the two participants’ emic perspectives and for capturing the contextualized meanings of their experiences and views (Duff, 2007). Case studies also implement thick descriptions of contexts and phenomena, which are essential in interpreting the meaning of data in terms of “cultural norms... community values, deep-seated attitudes” (Merriam, 1998, p. 119). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, while document analysis was used for triangulation.

Findings relate to (1) the teachers’ innovative practices in teaching young EFL learners, (2) the challenges they experienced in the classroom context, and (3) how parents’ and stakeholders’ beliefs and expectations shaped teachers’ pedagogical choices.

The study highlights links between teachers’ motivation and their willingness to implement innovations in teaching. It also draws attention to the role of the school environment and educational policies in developing teachers’ sense of agency and maintaining their motivation. Implications for teacher education refer to the need to provide trainees with relevant examples of good practice and opportunities for reflection, and raising awareness of the value of their classrooms as sites for teacher learning.

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# Trials and tribulations of Croatian primary English teachers

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The paper offers an overview of the beginnings, developments, and outcomes of the study programmes of primary English teachers in Croatia. The qualifications and competences of Masters of Primary Education and English are considered in the light of the original motivation and intentions of Mirjana Vilke when she initiated the education of primary English teachers, based on her research project conducted in the early 1990s. The introduction of foreign languages from the first grade of primary school in 2003 was conditioned by the capacities of these study programmes. Further, the results are presented of a quantitative and qualitative comparison of current study programmes for primary English teachers and general English teachers at the University of Zagreb. They are quantitatively very similar, but they differ in their respective approaches to the areas of education which they embrace. The trials and tribulations of the profession of primary English teachers are manifested in the impossibility of getting a job position they are prepared for. The reasons for this lie in faulty legal regulation of the status of the school subject English (and other languages) in the national curriculum and in the limitations of working positions which are possible in elementary schools. Besides, interests and intentions of decision makers have changed over time. This jeopardised the very existence of the study programme since its establishment 30 years ago and led to concessions, compromises and withdrawals. In the process, some Croatian universities abandoned the education of primary English teachers, and others reduced its scope. Now, despite the fact that it is praised and coveted in several European countries, and copied, rationally developed and exploited in Slovenia, its *raison d'être* needs to be reconsidered and steps need to be taken towards a reasonable and logical resolution.

# Developing young EFL learners' metaphoric competence: An online resource for teachers

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The goal of teaching figurative expressions to L2 learners is to develop their metaphoric competence – the ability to understand and produce metaphor (Littlemore & Low 2006). When it comes to young EFL learners, teaching figurative language is avoided altogether, and in textbooks which include tasks with phrasal verbs and idioms, no connection is made between their literal and figurative meanings. However, studies show that young learners have a capacity to think figuratively in L2 (Geld & Stanojević, 2018; Piquer Píriz, 2020), which implies they could benefit from explicit teaching of figurative expressions. This requires careful selection of linguistic items and specially designed resources for teachers, which can help them enhance learners' comprehension of figurative language.

This paper presents the concept of an online database containing English figurative expressions (under development) aimed at teachers of young learners, in which the Cognitive Linguistic approach to vocabulary teaching is applied (Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003; Boers, 2011). The linguistic items are related to topics covered in EFL textbooks for primary schools used in Croatia (grades 1–4). The following criteria for the selection of expressions have been established: their literal and figurative meanings are closely related, they contain familiar words and have simple structure. Figurative expressions are linked conceptually and their grouping is based on structure and meaning. For instance: phrasal verbs designating motion, e.g. *come in – go out*, *put on – take off* (clothes); similes containing words for animals which describe people's character and behaviour, e.g. *quiet as a mouse*, *swim like a fish*; idioms describing feelings, e.g. *happy and sad (over the moon, feel down)*. Given that children's understanding of figurative language depends on the input provided by teachers, an online resource with figurative expressions organized by meaning and/or concept can be a useful tool for developing learners' metaphoric competence in L2 at beginner levels.

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# Formative assessment of young FL learners – between theory and practice

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Formative assessment, or assessment for learning, has been recognized as a particularly appropriate approach to the assessment of young FL learners. Meaningfully and appropriately applied techniques, such as questioning, feedback, and self- and peer-assessment, facilitate learner engagement, involvement, and reflection during the assessment process (Ellis & Rixon, 2019; Porter, 2019). Previous studies looking into teachers' assessment of young FL learners (e.g., Tsagari, 2016; Prošić-Santovac et al., 2019) showed that techniques of formative assessment were still rarely implemented in many countries, although teachers knew the value and benefits of formative assessment.

The purpose of the present study was to examine teachers' use of formative assessment techniques as well as their beliefs about the usefulness and applicability of formative assessment in their work with young FL learners. A total of 46 English and/or German teachers filled in an updated version of Rea-Dickins and Rixon's (1999) questionnaire that, among other things, tapped into techniques of formative assessment. The quantitative data revealed that teachers use different techniques of formative assessment quite often. However, the qualitative analysis of their answers to open-ended questions revealed many problems and constraints in the implementation of formative assessment to young FL learners with regard to, for example, time, grading system, parents' expectations, etc. The results of the study opened up a question of how to combine formative with summative assessment of young FL learners purposefully and successfully, if at all. The discussion of this question might help in producing guidelines for formative assessment manuals for teachers of young FL learners.

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# Story-based approach to developing FL writing skills with young learners

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The presentation focuses on the Story-based Approach Model of Initial Literacy Development in EFL with the emphasis on developing writing skills. The presentation is supported by the study conducted with Year 5 pupils in which 64 written summaries were analysed in terms of content, structure, length and most often used words. Research indicates that developing EFL writing skills in primary school is one of the most demanding and time-consuming challenges that FL teachers face as it is the most complex cognitive domain of language (Cushing Weigle, 2014). Therefore, Hirvela (2016) suggests including reading as an integral component of the writing and summary writing is one of the obvious activities after reading. The story-based model adopted at a primary school, starts developing writing skills already at the beginning stages of learning EFL, by exposing pupils to stories, which offer a rich source of language. When pupils are able to detect the key words, the teacher helps them to organize the words into meaningful sentences and then into an organized text. At first, summaries are written by the teacher with the help of the pupils. In Year 4 pupils gradually start writing their own summaries, first in pairs and then individually. The study demonstrates that young learners (age 10 or 11) can write a summary of a story (*San Francisco Story* by John Escott, Penguin Readers) individually and in a given time frame. The results show that most of the pupils managed to finish a structurally organized summary and most of them wrote a summary which included the most important aspects regarding the content of the story. One of the significant findings is that pupils can master key (summary) writing skills when the teacher provides them with direct instruction and practice over a longer period of time.

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# Teaching foreign languages to young and very young learners in Poland. An overview of research and findings.

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Undoubtedly, Croatia being a pioneer country in introducing early foreign language learning and researching young learners in formal settings has set an example to other Central European countries, such as Poland, with whom it shared similar historical and sociopolitical past, ideologies and aspirations. For this reason on the occasion of celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of FL introduction to schools in Croatia, in my paper I would like to present a retrospective view on FL teaching in Poland over the last 2 decades, which started primarily as private enterprise, and ended in obligatory introduction of a FL from the onset of schooling in 2009, and in the pre-primary level in 2015. Secondly, on the basis of the search done through Google Scholar databases I am going to present an overview of Polish research on young and very young learners and its key findings, streamlined into key directions, such as language-oriented, pedagogical and ecological perspectives (e.g., Leśniewska & Pichette, 2014; Łockiewicz, Sarzała-Przybylska & Lipowska, 2018; Scheffler, 2015; Scheffler & Domińska, 2018). Conclusions from this overview and guidelines for future research in early foreign language learning will be presented, such as teaching a FL in multilingual classes, transfer of training in additional language learning etc.

# Creating digital stories with very young language learners

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The integration of digital storytelling and the use of digital tools in preschool education opens up opportunities for young learners to explore language development, creativity and technological literacy in an interactive and engaging way. This article emphasises the importance of using digital teaching tools for preschool and primary school teachers, particularly in multilingual classrooms. It focuses on the creation of digital stories to promote the pluralistic skills of (very) young language learners and to develop digital literacy and computational thinking through the use of technology that is in line with ethical guidelines and safety precautions for children. To emphasise the importance of digital pedagogy for early language learning, this paper discusses the results of a qualitative study that used a questionnaire to explore feedback from future preschool teachers and children on the creation and use of digital stories in kindergarten. As the study was conducted with children, we obtained informed consent from parents. The results show that creating digital stories with children is an effective approach to capture students' attention and increase their interest in new creating stories ideas through participatory pedagogy using their voices, drawings and videos. All in all, creating engaging, effective and learner-centred resources through participatory pedagogy develops children's and students' multiliteracy skills and enriches the overall learning experience.



# “No two groups are the same”: The implementation of the same story-based EFL lesson plan with two different groups of young learners

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Oral storytelling is a key element of early childhood and elementary education and its classroom application is widely recommended by educational experts. Planning and managing a story-based EFL lesson requires expertise, autonomy and responsibility on the teacher’s part, especially when compared to course book-based lessons. As its theoretical background, the present paper relies on teacher’s cognition as force behind classroom decisions (Borg, 2003). The purpose of the study is to examine how the same story-based EFL lesson plan is realized in two different groups. The aim was twofold: (1) to investigate what changes the teacher implements in the classroom to accommodate her learners’ needs and identify what makes the changes necessary, and (2) to see whether the same specific learning outcome (memorization and choral retrieval of the turn *Will you help me, please?/Sorry, I can’t.*) can be achieved in both classes. To answer our research questions, we used qualitative methods: classroom observation notes (an experienced investigator taking notes of what happened in the classroom), lesson plan logging (an assistant investigator time-stamping the lesson plan while comparing it to the actual lesson), and a follow-up interview with the teacher, which included tagging the observation notes with the teacher’s intentions and/or reasons (i.e. cognitive influences (Borg, 2003)) for changes. The learners’ performance was also assessed by applying observation as a method, filling in observation rubrics (*can produce on his/her own, can produce with help, can produce in choral repetition, does not produce*) in class.

Our findings show that identical lesson plans cannot be realized even though the age group (2<sup>nd</sup> graders), school, number of classes, and the teacher herself are the same, and the same learning outcome cannot be achieved either. The teacher’s decisions to divert from the plan are rooted in classroom management issues. The study underlines both the need for teachers’ professional autonomy and their ability to make autonomous decisions in the context of teaching.

The study is part of an ongoing project that aims at (1) developing teaching materials *for* and (2) introducing teacher education students *to oral storytelling with young learners in the EFL classroom*.

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# The motivation of Croatian EFL teachers

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Since the late 1990s and especially in the last decade there has been an increase in research on teacher motivation. However, the motivation of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) still remains an uncharted area within language motivation research.

This is supported by the fact that few studies on factors that motivate EFL teachers have been found (Addison, 2004; Gheralis-Roussos, 2003; Guilloteaux, 2007; Šarac Lekić, 2019). Furthermore, the attrition rate of teachers is high globally (OECD, 2021) and the attrition rate of second language (L2) teachers is also high (Swanson and Mason, 2018). The significance of teacher motivation research is also self-evident as it is a crucial factor closely related to a number of variables in education such as student motivation, educational reform, teaching practice and teachers' psychological fulfilment and well-being (Han & Yin, 2016).

To address the constant calls for teacher motivation research, this study attempts to contribute to the overall understanding of the nature of teacher motivation of Croatian EFL teachers. The purpose of this study is to measure factors that motivate and demotivate Croatian EFL teachers. One of the aims of this study is to examine teacher perception of their students' motivation and to get an insight into the relationship between this perception and teacher motivation. We also try to establish if a relationship exists between teacher motivation and their individual characteristics, their job satisfaction and school factors.

The materials used include: a questionnaire measuring teacher individual characteristics, their motivation and their perception of their students' motivation (Šarac Lekić, 2019).

The results confirm the research of Dinham and Scott (1998, 2000) and Šarac Lekić (2019) stating that motivation is influenced by intrinsic, extrinsic and school factors. The results also show the importance of intrinsic and school factors in relation to teacher motivation and extrinsic factors in relation to demotivation. The results show that teachers generally perceive their students' motivation.

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# Tracking brain representation of second language acquisition during the early learning period of children

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Successful language learning depends on several factors, which is also true for Early English development. This process happens with a remarkable speed, but over the sensitive period ESL seems slower and even more complicated.

The mystery behind early second language learning remains unexplored and raises many questions. How can neurolinguistic approaches contribute to a better understanding of the brain while learning a second language? Is there a "best" age to acquire a second language? Does starting a second language too early have drawbacks in the long run?

Research has already yielded results about the neural mechanisms underlying early second language acquisition. Oppenheim et al. (2020) adopted a skill-based view of language. It assumes that, in bilingual populations, the ability to speak two languages should depend on how much each language is practiced and not just on the order of acquisition. Bultena et al., (2020) relied on error-related negativity in their study. The participants initially made errors based on intuitions deriving from misguided generalizations of their native German grammar.

In my presentation, I would like to highlight the structural changes that early language learning represents in the white and grey matter of the brain compared to the language acquisition of monolingual children.

My presentation mainly focuses on the neurolinguistic aspects of second language acquisition at an early age. I am going to present a review of previous studies and literature on language development in childhood from a physiological perspective based on the studies of Cruz (2017), Kaisler and Radue (2015) and Li et al. (2014).

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# A multimodal analysis of English language learning materials for Croatian young learners

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Multimodal texts are important for language development in the early learning context as they offer different avenues for comprehension and encourage participation and repeated practice (Kaminski, 2010). As modern-day textbooks are highly visual and tend to include digital supplements, multimodal analyses of these materials are timely and necessary (Weninger, 2020). Textbooks can also be seen as cultural artefacts which offer learners a particular view of the world in the images, texts and sounds they present.

In the present study, we analyse selected culture-related units from seven sets of English language learning materials used in Croatian primary schools in year 1, including textbooks, activity books, audio and supplementary digital materials, when relevant. Based on the semiotic framework provided by Weninger and Kiss (2013), our analysis is a qualitative overview of the relationship between text (written and audio), image (still and moving), and pedagogic task within an activity, which is taken as the unit of analysis. The main aim is to ascertain the level of multimodality of the analysed materials, how the presentation of the content is supported by the multimodal elements and how they are tailored to the young language learners (YLLs), with a special focus on these elements as a potential source of cultural learning.

The results show that the majority of the analysed materials employ a variety of modes, mainly based on visual content appropriate for YLLs. The analysed materials differed in the way and the extent to which they included multimodal resources, as well as in how these were used to represent the topic of festivals. The results are expected to inform the development and implementation of English language learning materials for early learning and raise awareness of the importance of multimodality in this context.

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## Humour in teaching English to young learners

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Humour is a phenomenon hard to define and all throughout history there have been discussions about its position in human society – from Plato to modern researchers of humour - primarily psychologists, linguists and philosophers.

Humour in teaching foreign languages has been the topic of a number of studies, yet very few of them have looked into the use of humour in TEYL. In addition, none has encompassed both students and teachers as respondents. In Croatia this topic has not been addressed almost at all.

The first purpose of this study, conducted in two Croatian primary schools, was to establish whether young learners of English find any humour in their English classes, and if they do, whether they find it in the coursebooks, or whether their teachers of English provide humorous linguistic and/or extralinguistic contexts.

The second purpose was to investigate if young learners perceive humour as something good and motivating in their learning the English language.

The third purpose was to see whether English teachers perceive humour in the classroom as something positive, negative, or irrelevant. If they consider it to be positive, the question is how they incorporate it in their teaching.

The results show that both learners and teachers are inclined towards using humour in teaching English. Their answers show that when referring to *humour* both groups of respondents refer to *verbal humour*. Humour and play are closely connected (Kant, 1790; Morreall, 2016), so it could be expected that all children embrace humour as an integral part of their lives. The results show that some learners and teachers claim that humour may not always be welcome in class. The latter claim partly corresponds to some earlier findings, all of which looked into the position of humour in higher education (Martin & Ford, 2018; Zergollern-Miletić, 2021).

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