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## **Inaugural ELLRA Conference Report – *Early Language Learning: Current Challenges and Future Opportunities***

The Inaugural Conference of the Early Language Learning Research Association (ELLRA), *Early Language Learning: Current Challenges and Future Opportunities*, took place between 25-27 April 2024 in Kraków, Poland (<https://ellra.weebly.com/>). As an international association, ELLRA supports scholarly cooperation and the dissemination of research in early language learning (ELL). This encompasses the learning of two or more languages by children (2-12 years old), and the teaching of additional languages to these age groups in formal settings (<https://ellra.org>).

The conference was organised by Professor Joanna Rokita-Jaśkow and her team from the Department of English Language Teaching, the University of the National Education Commission (UKEN) – Agata Wolanin (conference secretary), Werona Król-Gierat, Katarzyna Nosidlak, Sabina Nowak, and Joanna Aleksiejuk. It gathered more than 100 participants from 25 countries in 4 continents (Europe, Asia, North and South America).

During the three days of scientific discussions, five plenary talks were delivered by distinguished scholars in the field. Following the opening ceremony conducted by the Chair of ELLRA Sandie Mourão (Nova University Lisbon, Portugal) and Joanna Rokita Jaśkow, the Vice-Chair, the first talk *Early Language Learning in the context of the SDG (Sustainable Development Goal) 'Quality Education'* was given by Ana Llinares (Universidad



Autónoma de Madrid, Spain). Afterwards, the conference participants had the opportunity to attend a lecture by Marianne Nikolov (University of Pecs, Hungary) devoted to *Age-appropriate Assessment for Learning in Early Foreign Language Programs*. The second day of the congress opened with keynotes from Thomai Alexiou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece) entitled '*When we change, everything changes*'. *New insights in early EFL with research evidence from the EAN project in Greece*, and Agnieszka Otwinowska-Kasztelanica (University of Warsaw, Poland) on *Children's own voice in research? Child bilinguals, qualitative data and quantitative outcomes*. The closing ceremony was preceded by a closer examination of the *Long-term impact of early foreign language education*, delivered by Nils Jäkel from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

The conference was of great interest to researchers from all over the world. More than 80 individual papers were presented in 20 different sections, covering a variety of topics on teaching and learning languages at pre-primary and lower primary in formal settings as well as in the wild. These included the linguistic outcomes of ELL interventions, the development of literacy, the impact of affective factors, materials and assessment instrument design. Additionally, there were three self-organised symposia on the topics of *Child-initiated play in multilingual contexts* (Chair: Claudine Kirsch); *Child Gamers and English learning in the wild* (Chair: Annamaria Pinter); *Mapping good practices in very early multilingual education worldwide* (Chair: Beatriz Cortina Perez).

During the conference, the ELLRA Annual General Meeting took place, which included an overview of the Association's activities from the past year. Professor Janet Enever was awarded an honorary ELLRA membership in recognition of her contributions to establishing the ELL field as a distinct research area. Janet established the Early Language Learning Research Network within the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA), which after several years gave birth to ELLRA.

The inaugural conference programme included extra leisure activities that were intended to serve as an occasion for integration with other conference participants. On the first evening the guests were invited to a conference dinner at a restaurant situated in the heart of the charming Krakow Old City, wherein old Poland and its customs seem to be still alive. On the second day a guided walk around the Old City and Kazimierz (the Old Jewish Quarter) was offered, which was a perfect possibility to learn about the history and culture of these unique places.

The participation of numerous foreign speakers from renowned research institutions and the wide range of topics covered in the talks contributed to inspiring discussions, drawing out teaching implications and

pointing out directions for further research. At the closing ceremony, the ELLRA Executive Committee expressed their thanks to all participants and hoped for an equally fruitful meeting during the next edition of the conference in 2026.

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