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**Marianne Nikolov & Stela Letica Krevelj (eds.)**

***Early Foreign Language Learning and Teaching:  
Evidence Versus Wishful Thinking***

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In recent years, the importance of early language education has gained substantial attention, with research highlighting its profound impact on cognitive development, social skills, and future academic success. The book titled “Early Foreign Language Learning and Teaching: Evidence Versus Wishful Thinking”, edited by Marianne Nikolov and Stela Letica Krevelj, proves to be an interesting read which addresses many urgent topics concerning young foreign language learners and their environments.

This edited volume is dedicated to professor Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović, affiliated with Zagreb University in Croatia, whose contribution to the field of teaching modern languages to young learners and the role of affective factors in language learning has been substantial (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006, 2010, 2016; Nikolov, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006). She has coordinated and participated in a great number of national and international projects, and has been a mentor for many scholars interested in early language education. The number of authors who contributed to this edited volume reflects how important a figure professor Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović is for the early language education community in Croatia and abroad.

The first two opening chapters of the book are two scripts of conversations. The first chapter is an interview with professor Richard Johnstone,



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who wrote the annual reviews of research on language learning and teaching in *Language Teaching* for seventeen years, between 1991 and 2008. Thanks to prof. Johnstone's extensive expertise and knowledge of the field, this conversation gives a broad perspective on the evolution of early language education, lays the theoretical foundation for the remaining chapters, and offers a valuable insight for policy makers and other stakeholders involved in language programme development.

The second chapter is a transcript of a conversation with professor Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović, who was generous in telling her personal story of becoming a teacher and shares her passion for early language learning. Among many topics raised in this valuable intellectual exchange, prof. Mihaljević Djigunović discusses the local context and the pioneering research projects in Croatia that laid the groundwork for further projects in early language learning research. This chapter also allows the reader to get an insight into the evolution of the field, observed and experienced firsthand by prof. Mihaljević Djigunović. The anecdotes and stories make it a memorable read and a source of inspiration for aspiring researchers and teachers.

The following three chapters explore issues connected with theoretical and practical considerations of doing research on and with young language learners. Chapter 3 titled *Innovations in research on and with young learners* by Annamaria Pinter touches upon the ethical concerns of doing research in the field of early language learning and approaching young learners as either passive or active participants. The author discusses the available research approaches and methods and offers useful guidelines, e.g., by promoting participatory research with children and emphasizing the importance of informed consents. These ideas are further elaborated on in Chapter 4 *The use of verbal report to describe strategies used by young language learners* written by Andrew D. Cohen. The author focuses on a systematic classification of verbal reports in doing research with children, providing more nuanced definitions of various types of verbal reports. Previous studies are presented and discussed, with the emphasis placed on the ways verbal reports can be analysed. The subsequent chapter entitled *Verbal reports as an instructional tool for young second language learners: An intervention study* by Yuko Goto Butler offers an empirical insight into the topic. In her intervention study, the author treats verbal reports as a pedagogical tool. The study involved 32 6th-grade male English learners in Japan, divided into intervention and control groups, who were asked to complete tasks with communicative and linguistic objectives using paired retrospection. It was found out that paired retrospection was positively received by the intervention group and was seen as a useful tool in improving communication patterns and collaboration, though it was not as effective in achieving the linguistic objectives.

The following four chapters revolve around the quality of both input and output and their significance in young language learner education. Chapter 6, entitled *Upper primary school learners' interaction in face-to-face and instant messaging modalities: A focus on metatask and metalanguage episodes* by Anna Vallbona and Elsa Tragant, investigates the impact of two modalities: instant messaging using tablets and face-to-face interaction in the instances of metatask and metalanguage. The study involved 24 6th-graders from Spain, whose task was to create a story and communicate with these two aforementioned modalities. The results showed differences in the output produced via face-to-face interaction and instant messaging. It was concluded that face-to-face interaction results in a more comprehensive output, i.e. a larger number of words used, and an increased amount of metalanguage and reliance on the students' L1. In a similar vein, the role of L1 input in an L2 classroom was the focal point of Chapter 7, *Translanguaging and meaning making in young learners' EFL classes in Israel* written by Rivi Carmel and Marianne Nikolov, who investigated the meaning-making potential of translanguaging in working with young learners. The researchers conducted a study using classroom observations and interviews with 8 EFL teachers working with 2nd- and 3rd-graders in Israel, focusing on the use of language repertoires by the teachers and their students. The results showed that L1 is used primarily for managing classroom and transitioning between stages of a lesson. It was observed that the teachers seemed to struggle with creating learning opportunities, relying predominantly on the students' L1. It could be assumed, then, that despite increasingly multilingual learning environments, monolingual bias and a fixed approach to languages prevail.

The subsequent chapter, entitled *Young learners' L2 vocabulary acquisition through extensive viewing* by Carmen Muñoz, Daniela Avello and Geòrgia Pujadas, on the other hand, deals with the impact of the audiovisual input on the young learners' vocabulary gains. This chapter presents the results of two studies: one conducted in the primary school context with 120 4th- and 5th-graders from Chile, and the second conducted in lower secondary school with 106 8th-graders in Spain. Both studies involved experimental groups and measured the exposure to English with the use of multimodal input: the first study using a captioned animated cartoon, and the second study using a sitcom including L2 captions, with and without instruction, as well as L1 subtitles, with and without instruction, with four experimental groups having one type of audiovisual exposure. The results offer several interesting observations; first, it was observed that previous vocabulary size might affect vocabulary gains – in other words, the greater the size of the vocabulary, the greater the gains. And second, the experimental groups which completed activities before and after the audiovisual exposure performed

better in vocabulary learning, particularly at the recall stage. This finding indicates that audiovisual input coupled with meaningful and carefully tailored instruction is the most effective way to enhance the students' vocabulary acquisition.

The role of multimodal input is also explored in Chapter 9, *Culture-related vocabulary in textbooks for young learners of English* written by Gloria Vickov and Eva Jakupčević, who investigated textbooks as the major source of intercultural input. The authors conducted a textbook analysis of 6 series of EFL textbooks for grades 1-4 used in Croatia – a total of 24 textbooks. They analysed culture-related vocabulary items and cultural topics within tasks. The major findings reveal that two thirds of the analysed textbooks lack culture-specific vocabulary in grades 1 and 2, and offer insufficient intercultural input. What is also interesting is that the textbooks published by local publishers in Croatia underrepresent students' L1 culture. There seems to be a need for more precise guidelines for textbook developers in terms of the intercultural content present in a textbook targeting young learners.

The increasingly multicultural landscapes of L2 classrooms require multilingual policies and programmes that would address the teachers' and students' needs for learning an additional language, at the same time recognizing and maintaining their heritage/home languages. Katalin Fenyvesi and Pia Suk Jensen, in their chapter titled *Natural Semantic Metalanguage: A bridge between languages in the multilingual classroom*, investigated Danish multilingual classrooms incorporating Natural Semantic Metalanguage, which operates on simple expressions, i.e. semantic primes, that can be used to analyse more complex expressions and negotiate meaning in a classroom where the knowledge of the majority language varies. The authors worked with 31 fourth graders in Denmark: 24 with Danish as L1 and 8 speaking Danish as L2. The results showed that working with NSM enhances students' metalinguistic awareness and promotes the use of the students' minority language in the L2 classroom. The topic of multilingualism is further elaborated upon in Chapter 11, titled *Early language oracy development: Challenges from research in multilingual contexts*, by Lucilla Lopriore, who explores the multilingual context of developing young learners' oracy, and provides an overview of educational projects on oracy. The author highlights the crucial role of translanguaging and relying on students' plurilingual repertoires in developing oracy.

The subsequent three chapters delve into the perspectives of the students themselves and provide a platform to promote the voices of young learners on their own attitudes, beliefs and experiences with learning foreign languages. Mirna Erk, in her chapter titled *Children's voices on starting*

*English at the primary vs. pre-primary level*, delves into young learners' beliefs regarding the widespread assumption "the earlier-the better", which underlies the common arguments for an early start in language education. First, the author introduces the local context of pre-primary and primary EFL education in Croatia. Next, she presents the results of her survey study investigating 70 sixth-graders learning English as a foreign language in Croatia, the aim of which was to inquire about the participants' perspectives on an early EFL start. The study rendered mixed findings, emphasizing the importance of individual and contextual factors. Although it might be assumed that an early start enhances primary EFL education, the participants exhibited a neutral attitude to introducing EFL to pre-primary education, questioning the common assumption that learning English early on would result in better achievements in the future.

In a similar vein, Andrea-Beata Jelić, the author of Chapter 13 *"Why do you learn Spanish?" "To play in La Liga." Attitudes and motivation of young learners of Spanish in Croatia*, also explores the students' perspective on their attitudes towards and motivation for learning Spanish. The author conducted her study with 134 learners of Spanish from Croatia, aged 9-15 (grades 4-8), with use of a questionnaire and a group interview. The results show that teachers play an important role in students' motivation: the students seem enthusiastic about their teachers and their teaching methods. Also, it could be assumed that greater informal exposure to the language might be linked to higher motivation. But most importantly, the findings corroborate the observation made by Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović (2012) that students' positive attitudes and higher motivation are the outcome, not the cause, of the process of learning.

In Chapter 14, *"I didn't know such a thing existed:" Young adults' early encounters with literature and the meanings they attach to them*, Réka Lugossy, in her longitudinal case study, presents the long-term impact of early exposure to foreign language literature through the eyes of her now grown-up children. The data collection process spanned 20 years, using observation, field notes, and narrative interviews. The results showcase a number of positive outcomes; an early exposure to English literature helped the participants to be able to confront challenges and difficult topics, enhance their agency, critically reflect, read more as adults, choose adequate reading strategies, as well as enrich their plurilingual repertoire, among others. In general, the participants' childhood literary experience had an immense positive impact on their cognitive, social, affective and multilingual development.

The following two chapters cover an important aspect of early language education – assessment. Vesna Bagarić Medve and Višnja Pavičić Takač offer a broader perspective in their chapter *Looking back to look*

*forward: Approaches to young foreign language learners' assessment in Croatia.* The aim of the chapter is to compare YLL assessment practices in Croatia by conducting a partial replication study 15 years after the original research project, to see if anything has changed in the way teachers approach assessment. The replication study involved 46 primary school teachers of English and/or German in Croatia who completed a questionnaire. It was revealed that much has improved regarding the teachers' language assessment literacy in terms of their approach, attitude, and the range of techniques, methods, tools and procedures at their disposal. It was also concluded that the new trends in language assessment research are reflected in the teachers' declared practices. A study reported by Vera Savić and Danijela Prošić-Santovac in Chapter 16, *EFL teachers' perspectives on and practices in assessing young learners in Serbia*, also involved EFL primary school teachers, yet in the Serbian context, and aimed to investigate their attitudes and self-reported practices in language assessment. The questionnaire data revealed that summative assessment and testing dominates other types of assessment in working with older groups of YLLs, although teachers declared using more appropriate assessment tools in working with younger groups, such as games, songs, role-plays or stories. Still, the authors urge the need for better tailored teaching programmes and professional development strategies for the teachers.

Chapter 17, titled *The role of aptitude in young learners' success: Domain-general or domain-specific analytic abilities?*, written by Jasenka Čengić, focuses on young learners' aptitude and language analytic ability as predictors of YLL's success. The study involved 209 YLLs in Croatia at the beginning of their primary education who completed an aptitude test and listening comprehension tasks. The quantitative analysis points to the significance of domain-general abilities for young language learners' aptitude.

The final two chapters consider policy issues and strategies implemented in two contexts: Ireland (Chapter 18) and China (Chapter 19). In Chapter 18 titled *Primary school L2 learning: The general empirical picture and specific policy issues in the Irish context*, Colin J. Flynn and David Singleton map primary L2 education in Ireland, critically considering the age factor for introducing additional languages into a bilingual education system, often at the cost of Irish. The authors reflect on the language programme "Say Yes to Languages" that aims at introducing modern languages in primary schools in Ireland, beginning in grade 3. Although the programme was well-received among parents, there is still need for providing better and more comprehensive support for the teachers. The authors also advocate for introducing additional languages into primary school curricula with the aim to, first and foremost, raise young learners' plurilingual awareness.

Finally, Jing Peng and Xuan Huang offer an even broader context in investigating the evolution of family language policies, language use and development in a multilingual region in China, the Three Georges Reservoir Area, which is home to many relocated immigrants. In the chapter, *A case study on family language policy of China in the Three Gorges Reservoir Area*, the authors report on their study involving over 700 participants: 401 students and 323 parents, who completed a questionnaire; three generations of five families were also interviewed. The results show a considerable change in the families' language policies over the past 25 years, following socio-economic changes on the macro-level and a transition towards stronger language beliefs.

The book is meticulously organized and well thought out, with shared themes and connections across its 19 chapters. The editors skillfully weave these elements into a cohesive and comprehensive volume. A key strength of this work is its exploration of diverse educational and cultural contexts, spanning from Spain to Japan. Yet, the primary focus remains on the current research with young learners in Croatia—a pioneering country in early language education. Each chapter presents practical teaching insights and proposes avenues for future research, offering invaluable guidance for educators and researchers alike.

Enriching the volume further are the two insightful interviews that frame the book's themes in broader perspectives. These dialogues bring unique insights into various facets of working with young learners, providing a wellspring of inspiration for scholars across the field. Through personal stories and reflective commentary, the discussions resonate deeply, making the topics and ideas accessible and relatable to readers' own teaching experiences.

This edited volume is a valuable resource for anyone with an interest in early language education. However, it holds particular appeal for two key audiences. The first group comprises aspiring researchers seeking inspiration for their academic pursuits – the multiple ways forward proposed at the end of each chapter might serve as a springboard for developing new research ideas. The second group includes policy makers and stakeholders involved in designing didactic materials and implementing language programmes – this edited volume provides invaluable insights into recent trends and offers critical reflections on early language education policies, crucial in informed decision-making.

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