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The Ecology of Pre-primary Foreign Language Learning

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The Ecology of Pre-primary Foreign Language Learning by Joanna Rokita-Jaśkow, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, is the first book on very early language learning in the *Early Language Learning in School Context* series (edited by J. Enever and A. Pinter) published by Multilingual Matters/Channel View Publications Ltd. It is a well-written and much needed monograph conceptualized as a survey of up-to-date research into pre-primary foreign language (FL) education. It contributes to the understanding of different stakeholders and their roles for the processes and outcomes of learning a FL by very young learners, i.e., children who start learning a FL before compulsory school entry.

The introductory chapter consists of a brief reminder of seminal publications about very early FL learning. It then clearly explains the theoretical underpinnings for a holistic approach and state-of-the-art survey of relevant research the book aims to offer. The author framed the book within two overarching and complementing theories: van Lier's ecological approach to language and language education (van Lier, 2004, 2010), and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the chapters that follow, the author successfully paints a comprehensive picture of the ecology of very young FL learners in low-input environments, typically characterized by various social agents and



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sociopolitical contexts. Through the ecological lens, the author examines different nested systems in the child's environment (including their flourishing biosystem) and shows how language development is impacted by the different systems. The author puts a special emphasis on the concept of agency, which serves as "the driving force that stands behind the motivation to strive" (p. 5) and typically brings the learner closer to their goal. In each chapter, the author brings us closer to answering the question imposed from the onset of the book: are very young FL learners capable of such agency? Prof. Rokita-Jaśkow concludes that FL learners' agency "seems to be least visible and activated" (p. 138). Next, it follows that very young learners are mainly recipients of others' agentic behaviours in a low-input, instructional FL learning setting. Finally, the author argues convincingly that its success is the outcome of agentic actions of "all actors involved in the process *except* for the children's" (p. 139).

The first chapter describes the child's biosystem and concentrates on the cognitive predispositions for language acquisition. It details first language development as a frame of reference for subsequent learning of language(s) in early childhood, as well as the cognitive limitations of the very young child. The chapter continues as an invaluable source of research-based knowledge about the development of very early learners' communicative abilities, and of insights into the role of metalinguistic awareness, executive functions, working memory and aptitude in the process of very early FL learning. Towards the end of this chapter the author concludes that the lack of child agency in low-input situations points towards other agents in the educational ecology bringing pre-primary FL learning into action.

In the chapter that follows, the author writes about how the educational institution in which FL learning takes place is a very important agent in the educational ecology of the child that operates at the micro level (in line with the Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory). On the basis of relevant research conducted worldwide, and following van Lier's proposition about the importance of quality of educational opportunities and experience, the author carefully analyzes the quality of instruction offered to very young FL learners and its various features. Special emphasis is given to research on teacher competences (e.g., the quality of teacher language) and the use of age-appropriate methodology, as evidence points to their significance for the (quality of) learning experience and attainment of very young FL learners. The chapter concludes with the notion that teacher agency matters more than children's agency in low-input FL learning situations.

Proximal and distal characteristics of the family environment make up the FL learning child's mesosystem, which is discussed in chapter three. It

depicts how very young learner's parents can manifest different roles and behaviours in an effort to ensure access to educational resources, quality instruction and opportunities for intercultural encounters in the FL of interest, most notably, English as a foreign language. In the long run these opportunities are believed to raise their child's professional prospects on the world/global market. Again, towards the end of the chapter, the author returns to questions of agency. The survey of research into the interactions between family factors (e.g., parental aspirations, FL proficiency, level of education, etc.) and very young learners' FL achievement, conducted in different parts of the world, indisputably leads to the conclusion that parental agency in early FL education has high importance.

Chapter four is about the exosystem in very young FL learners' language ecology. Here, the author focuses on the affordances of different linguistic landscapes and the value and status of FL learning in the world in which globalization, Englishisation and neoliberalism emerge as the forces behind very early FL education. Hence, the reader is thoroughly informed about the trends of privatization of the educational market and competitiveness between individuals, which are already found at the earliest levels of education systems. The author further shows how the agency of the linguistic landscape contributes to the promotion of particular languages and language practices, both in the natural and digital world, and especially so in the case of 'English frenzy' or 'English fever'.

The macrosystem of the child's FL ecology subsumes early language learning policy and planning. A brief outline of the history and current status of the European FL learning policy and beyond is provided in chapter five. This is complemented by related research that unveils problems with policy and its implementation, namely, equity and equality in FL education. By examining agents (institutions and individuals) behind top-down governmental decisions and bottom-up initiatives, the author shows that the interest of the child and their growth are hardly ever at the heart of these decisions. They are more dependent on the agency of stakeholders, whereas the opinions of experts in the field of early instructed second language acquisition and applied linguistics are "rarely taken into account" (p. 122).

Chapter six is about time and its role in the FL learning process, i.e., about two milestones in the very young FL learner's development: joining an FL class and the transition to primary education. The review of available research in neurolinguistics and FL classrooms provides arguments for and against a very early start, and the author highlights problems related to transition and continuity once the very young FL learner enters primary education. The author suggests that the point at which FL instruction starts can be seen as "a trigger to agentic behaviours of other agents in the ecosystem"

(p. 133) aimed to ensure high-quality FL learning experience over time. Such a view brings the concept of agency into a relationship with its temporal and dynamic dimension.

In the book's concluding remarks, the author reviews the key findings emerging from the research presented. As the findings have been previously discussed with the principles of van Lier's and Bronfenbrenner's theories in mind, the author offers a graphical presentation and a summary of very early FL learning through the ecological lens. For the time being, the author finds the long-term effects of very early FL contact in low-input contexts "only speculative" (p. 140). She sides with those who call for comparative international studies to investigate FL learning outcomes as a subject of environmental factors (e.g., Nikolov & Lugossy, 2021; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023).

As convincing empirical evidence for the linguistic benefits of *younger and better* FL learning in instructed settings is missing, this is an important book. It challenges the enthusiasm usually attached to the idea of very young FL learners by offering a theoretically underpinned and objective examination of the current state of pre-primary FL learning research. The author skillfully navigates through abundant and relevant source materials to clearly and effectively provide invaluable insights about very early FL education in the world today. She paints a realistic picture of the many stakeholders and their different interests in the introduction of FL in pre-primary. By addressing the different agents and nested systems relevant to the process of pre-primary FL implementation and its success, the book can serve as a source of inspiration for a holistic approach to researching the ecology of very young FL learners. It is my belief that this book is an absolute *must* for any teacher, doctoral student, fellow scholar, researcher/academic, and policy planner who wants to understand the complexity of current pre-primary FL education.

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