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## **Introduction**

Teaching foreign languages to children at increasingly younger ages is becoming a global practice (Rokita-Jaśkow, 2025; Nikolov, Leticia Krevelj, 2025; Rokita-Jaśkow, Ellis, 2019). This trend is particularly evident in European countries like Poland, Spain, Germany, Greece, and in Asia, including China, Japan, and South Korea, despite limited linguistic justification for commencing language education so early (Pfenninger, Singleton, 2019). This movement has been partly shaped by the European Union's language policy, which fosters multilingualism to promote openness and tolerance, and is regarded as an essential competency for future European citizens (European Commission, 2019). The EU's approach to education is seen as a benchmark for policy development in other parts of the world, a process often termed 'policy borrowing' (cf. Enever, 2019). However, while the EU advocates for linguistic diversity, English remains the most frequently taught language in many coun-



tries classified within the Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1990), as it is viewed as a global lingua franca and a vital key to success in a globalised environment.

A new trend linked to globalisation and growing mobility is increased migration. As a result, numerous schools are seeing an unprecedented influx of migrant and multilingual children, for whom learning English or any other foreign language will add to their existing linguistic skills. Plurilingualism seems to be the new norm for many schoolchildren today (Piccardo, 2021), presenting a challenge for their teachers, who need to develop new teaching techniques to meet the needs and capacities of these learners.

This volume showcases these trends in early language learning. It contains a selection of papers presented at the Inaugural Conference of the Early Language Learning Research Association ([www.ellra.org](http://www.ellra.org)), held on 25-27 April 2024 in Kraków, Poland. They report on studies conducted in diverse settings, Poland, Croatia, Germany, Slovenia, Spain, and Japan, thus showing the complexity of early language learning and teaching processes.

To open, the article by **Anja Steinlen** and **Thorsten Piske** shows the dynamics of the language learning process, on the example of the changes in learner competences before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. As this study, conducted within a German-English bilingual primary school programme, reveals, the impact of the pandemic was domain-specific, affecting only certain language skills. What is essential, is that students' language backgrounds did not influence the results. The researchers conclude that this outcome can be largely attributed to the adaptability and creativity of the teacher, which has specific didactic implications that are also discussed in the paper. For instance, today's pre-service and in-service teacher education should include adequate training in remote and socially distanced teaching.

**Yuki Otsuki** presents ways of testing primary learners of English in the Japanese context with particular focus on oral performance. The author's starting point for reflection is that children are more holistic learners than adults and thus the assessment of their speaking skills should be reflected in appropriately selected criteria. Taking the above into consideration, the purpose of the study was to explore the construct of assessment criteria for speaking interactions, examining the elements that were perceived by raters as demonstrating high or low communicative ability of EFL beginners during a role-play test. The analysis of the collected data indicated six main factors which had a particularly strong impact on the raters' perception of young learners' performance, such as the flow of interaction. These insights could be applied in the holistic assessment of speaking tests in young beginners in the specific educational context presented.

Further, **Anna Szuchalska** shows the beliefs of pre-service teachers of Early Years education about six competencies for effective language

instruction. Participants were Polish pedagogy students majoring in early education, whose program included a course on the methodology of early English language teaching. Firstly, the ability to foster student motivation was deemed crucial among psychological and pedagogical competencies. Research participants highlighted its role in engaging young learners. Secondly, the significance of teachers' empathy, enthusiasm, and optimism was stressed as a vital educational competence, while the importance of using a foreign language during lessons came to the fore from substantive competencies. Next, teachers' tolerance and openness were marked as the most important intercultural competencies, while knowledge and skills in the concept of early school foreign language teaching were considered to be critical methodological and didactic competencies. Last but not least, among diagnostic competencies, the ability to interpret and evaluate lessons, observe and assess student involvement in linguistic activities, and recognize and understand errors were viewed as equally indispensable.

**Eva Jakupčević** refers to teacher discourse as a potentially important source of pragmatic input for learners. In her study, the researcher analysed directives in the teacher talk of L1 Croatian teachers working with primary school EFL learners to investigate the variety of patterns of interaction. She concluded that, although the observed teachers showed a preference for direct forms, the degree of directness is influenced by individual personal teaching styles, the type of activity, the use of the coursebook, and the type of interaction between teacher and students. These results confirm the necessity of going beyond quantitative analysis of directive speech acts, and emphasise the importance of the use of language by the teacher in the YLL classroom for providing a model to support learner development of pragmatic competence.

**Katarzyna Brzosko-Barrat, Silvia Baldassari, Tina Rozmanič and Mateja Dagarin Fojkar** present an example of a telecollaboration project as a way of enhancing teacher intercultural skills. They report on a transnational study conducted during three editions of a blended intensive programme in which over one hundred pre-service primary foreign language teachers from three countries participated. Each edition of the programme consisted of two parts, the first one being a three-month virtual exchange and the second a week-long face-to-face mobility of future teachers from Slovenia, Austria and Poland. The results of the study, which was conducted using different methods of data collection, showed the development of intercultural foundational competencies, i.e., strengthening of participants' self-awareness and self-reflexivity in developing their cultural and disciplinary identity.

**Gema Gayete** refers to young learners' plurilingualism and teacher attitudes towards using their whole language repertoire in EFL teaching. The investigation explores the use of translanguaging practices in two primary

schools of the Valencian Community, which is characterised by the presence of three languages of instruction (Catalan, Spanish and English). One of the aims of the study was to verify whether teachers' L1(s) or previous training on multilingualism influences their attitudes. Overall, the results indicate teachers' very favourable attitudes towards the use of translanguaging strategies in the EFL learning context of primary education, for example to foster empathy and solidarity. Furthermore, practitioners recognised several benefits of employing students' multilingual repertoires, such as an increase in children's motivation to learn English. However, no statistical differences were found when it comes to the impact of training courses, or L1, on teachers' attitudes towards translanguaging practices, although Catalan native speakers demonstrated the most positive outlook on the matter.

**Dominika Chrobak** also touches on the issue of plurilingualism, surveying the results of the study in which young learners of L3 Spanish rely on previously acquired languages: L2 English and L1 Polish. The researcher's aim was to investigate the impact of explicit reading strategy instruction on the strategy use and L3 reading performance of 11-year-old learners, after a 10-month intervention. The pre- and post-test strategy questionnaire results showed a general increase in the use of strategies across all the students, with translanguaging, re-reading and guessing emerging as the most popular ones. At the same time, strategy training enhanced multilingual competence and metalinguistic awareness, enabling learners to understand how to use the strategies effectively.

Pre-Primary FL learning is a subject of the remaining three articles. **Annett Kamiński** investigates pre-service teachers' opinions on teaching English to very young learners in the German context. In particular, the researcher's aim is to identify which aspects pre-service teachers perceived as challenging before and after their classroom experience. The results show that future EFL teachers share a concern for lesson planning, as well as anticipating and responding appropriately to students' behaviour in the school setting, especially managing unexpected situations in classrooms. However, a shift in perspective was observed post-teaching practice, based on reflections in their master's dissertations, from largely focusing on their personal insecurities pre-teaching to acknowledging learners' specific needs as their practical experience increased. As can be concluded, reflection on extended classroom practice can help pre-service teachers gain a better understanding of their learners' needs and adapt the lessons accordingly.

**Mojca Žefran, Silva Bratož and Sonja Rutar** present an example of a kindergarten project in Slovenia which fosters children's language awareness. The Multilingual Kindergarten Model, implemented over the course of one school year, was designed to facilitate the development of both Slovene

and Italian as languages of instruction, as well as develop English as a foreign language. The suitability and effectiveness of activities in meeting the needs of the pre-school curriculum in the area of developing plurilingual competences were assessed from the teachers', parents' and children's perspectives. Overall, the results indicate that language awareness, positive attitudes towards languages and interest in language learning were effectively stimulated through the adoption of appropriate approaches.

Finally, **Magdalena Olpińska-Szkiełko** and **Mateusz Patera** focus on the practice of shared reading of picture storybooks and its impact on the development of preschool children's L2 skills. The paper presents findings from an empirical study conducted in a bilingual Polish-German kindergarten. The research confirms that the impact of shared reading, particularly on enhancing receptive vocabulary, increases with time. Furthermore, very young learners demonstrated the ability to derive the meaning of new words through both illustrations and the verbal context. Lastly, the study revealed a weak correlation between the family language factor and learning outcomes. In conclusion, shared reading was found to be an effective approach for developing lexical competence in an early partial immersion programme.

The volume finishes with two timely reviews of recently published monographs on early foreign language learning, and a report on the Inaugural ELLRA conference. We hope the volume will interest current practitioners and encourage researchers to push investigation of young and very young learners of additional language(s) further.

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