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Czasopismo Polskiego Towarzystwa Neofilologicznego

Early language learning: global and local perspectives

Pod redakcją:
Joanny Rokity-Jaśkow, Werony Król-Gierat, Agaty Wolanin

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Deklaracja o wersji pierwotnej:
wersją pierwotną każdego numeru czasopisma jest wersja elektroniczna

Adres redakcji
Collegium Novum UAM
al. Niepodległości 4, 61-874 Poznań, Polska
poltowneo@gmail.com

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Joanna Rokita-Jaśkow
University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6272-9548
joanna.rokita-jaskow@uken.krakow.pl

Werona Król-Gierat
University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6522-2550
werona.krol-gierat@uken.krakow.pl

Agata Wolanin
University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8513-2154
agata.wolanin@uken.krakow.pl

Introduction

Teaching foreign languages to children at increasingly younger ages is becoming a global practice (Rokita-Jaśkow, 2025; Nikolov, Letica 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), 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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Anja Steinlen
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9477-7969
anja.steinlen@fau.de

Thorsten Piske
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3561-0912
thorsten.piske@fau.de

Primary school students' German and English competences in a bilingual programme before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on language development within a bilingual programme with 50% instruction in the foreign language, English. It compares German and English test scores obtained by 184 students before, to those obtained by 71 students after the pandemic, controlling for cognitive ability and maternal education. English proficiency was measured in reading, writing, receptive vocabulary and receptive grammar. German proficiency was assessed through standardized tests for reading and spelling. While results indicated no significant differences in English reading, vocabulary, or grammar between pre- and post-pandemic groups, post-pandemic students performed worse in English writing. In German, the post-pandemic group scored significantly lower in reading, but not in spelling. Importantly, students' language background did not influence the results. The bilingual programme demonstrated resilience in maintaining English proficiency, though challenges remained

with preserving German reading skills. Possible reasons for these findings are discussed in the light of previous research.

Keywords: CLIL, COVID-19, primary school, German, English, reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, minority language

Słowa kluczowe: Zintegrowane kształcenie przedmiotowo-językowe (Content and Language Integrated Learning), pandemia COVID-19, szkoła podstawowa, niemiecki, angielski, czytanie, pisanie, słownictwo, gramatyka, język mniejszościowy

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022), schools in Germany remained closed for extended periods, resulting in a temporary discontinuation of traditional in-person teaching. This period was mainly characterized by a combination of distance learning, blended learning and in-class teaching for groups of varying sizes, depending on the incidence rate (e.g., Fickermann, Edelstein, 2021; Friesch, in prep.; Schult, et al., 2022). This was also the case for primary schools with bilingual programmes.

Many studies have reported a decline in reading and writing skills in school language German after the pandemic, but there are only a few studies comparing foreign language (FL) learning before and after the pandemic, and none relate to the bilingual school context. The aim of this study is, therefore, to examine primary school students' performance in German and English tests before and after the pandemic.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Primary school programmes in Germany

In Germany, bilingual programmes are offered by more than 2% of all primary schools (FMKS, 2014). Some of these schools follow an intensive bilingual approach based on immersion principles, which means that 50% or more of the teaching time is conducted in the foreign language (FL). Different subjects (e.g. science, math or music) are taught exclusively in a FL (mostly English or French) in each of the primary school grades (Years 1–4 in most federal states in Germany). The effectiveness of bilingual programmes for monolingual and multilingual students has been demonstrated in a very large number of studies (for reviews, see, e.g., Steinlen, Piske, 2022; Steinlen, 2021).

2.2 German competences before and after the pandemic

Large-scale studies (e.g., PIRLS: Ludewig, et al., 2022; IBQ-Bildungsbericht 2021: Stanat, et al., 2022; Depping, et al., 2021 for Years 3-5; Schult, et al., 2022 for Year 5) have indicated a decline in German reading and writing skills among young students following the pandemic. Multilingual students (often with a migration background) also showed significantly lower performance in German tests compared to their monolingual peers. Similar findings have been reported internationally for reading and writing skills in Years 4 and 9 (e.g., PIRLS, 2021: Mullis, et al., 2022; PISA, 2022: OECD, 2023; De Witte, François, 2023), which have identified several factors contributing to the decline in literacy skills in the school language. For example, during the pandemic, students experienced reduced learning time, lower motivation, fewer peer interactions, and less direct instruction and feedback from teachers. Many children faced internet access issues and insufficient parental support.

The interpretations relating to multilingual students' poorer performance in the school language did not change after the pandemic and include references to mismatches between home and school languages, and lower parental educational background, socio-economic status, and cultural capital compared to monolingual peers.

2.3 English competences before and after the pandemic

Numerous studies on FL learning during the pandemic relate to good teaching practices in the context of distant and blended teaching (for Germany, e.g., Gitschthaler, et al., 2022; Lay, Giblet, 2020; Rogge, 2022; Weltgen, et al., 2022; and for the international context, e.g., Chung, Choi, 2021; Ghanbari, Nowroozi, 2021; Hartshorn, McMurry, 2020; Kałdonek-Crnjaković, 2022; Klimova, 2021; Krajka, 2021; Psoinos, 2021; van der Velde, et al., 2021; Werker, Royal Society of Canada, 2021; Wright, 2021).

However, only two studies in Germany have compared FL learning before and after the pandemic. Hopp and Thoma (2020) examined 269 students in Year 4 before and after fifteen weeks of school closure in 2020, assessing receptive vocabulary and receptive grammar in regular English classes. The two groups (pre/post school closure) did not show any significant differences in FL development, and they retained and even marginally improved their FL skills when very little or no EFL instruction was available. As possible reasons, Hopp and Thoma (2020) suggested possible parental or other non-institutional tuition in English during school closures.

Stanat and colleagues (2023) compared English reading and listening skills of 31,159 Year 9 students in 2022 with those from 2009 and 2015. They found improvements in these skills from 2009/2015 to 2022, regardless of students' language background. The authors attributed these gains to increased school-related activities and greater extracurricular use of English, facilitated by more English-language internet resources. For multilingual students, as noted in previous studies, regular use of an additional language at home may have positively impacted their English competencies.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research questions

Because the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the school language (and particularly on FL competences) have not yet been examined for bilingual programmes in primary schools, this paper will address the following research questions:

1. Were German and English competences in an intensive bilingual primary school programme affected by the pandemic?
2. Were there effects of students' language backgrounds?

3.2 The school context

Data were collected at a primary school in southern Germany that offers both a regular and a bilingual programme. The bilingual programme, which is the focus of this study, involves teaching all subjects in English except for German, religious education, and mathematics, with 50% of teaching time in English. Teachers only use English in class, although technical terms are introduced in both English and German. The programme follows the curriculum of Baden-Württemberg (Ministerium Baden-Württemberg, 2004, 2016), requiring students to achieve level A1 (Council of Europe, 2018) in English after the end of primary school in Year 4. Although the school does not formally test for placement in the bilingual or regular programmes, preselection effects may occur as parents typically enrol children in the bilingual programme if they believe that they will succeed (e.g., Steinlen, 2021).

3.3 The time before and after the pandemic

During the pandemic, the school closed for eight weeks in 2020, followed by a mix of temporary closures and face-to-face instruction for small groups (2020/21), then longer periods of in-person teaching for all students, with interruptions in 2021/22. During the closures, teaching was conducted online. Later, teachers prepared both online and offline lessons, as some students were at school, while others were at home. The focus was on German and maths, and it is unclear whether 50% of the curriculum was indeed still taught in L2 English. However, for subjects such as science, teachers aimed to cover as much of the curriculum as possible, using English video clips and home experiments with photos and worksheets. Unlike in-class lessons, there were no content tests for bilingual subjects such as science, music, art, and PE during online sessions and alternate teaching periods (pers. comm.).

3.4 Research paradigm

The children in this study participated in a broader longitudinal project investigating (foreign) language learning in regular and bilingual primary school programmes (e.g., Steinlen, 2021), Notably, the primary focus of this project was not on the effects of the pandemic on learning. Data were collected annually from 2012 to 2019 and from 2022 to 2024, encompassing 11 cohorts (8 pre-pandemic and 3 post-pandemic), involving qualitative and quantitative methods (i.e., questionnaires and (standardized) language and cognitive tests).

In this empirical study, the research focus is on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on 255 monolingual and multilingual 4th Year students' German and English reading and writing skills, who attended a bilingual primary school programme in Germany. Pre- and post-pandemic test scores have been used to identify differences and infer potential impacts of the pandemic, while controlling for contextual factors such as cognitive ability and maternal education.

3.5 Procedure

Testing was conducted on different days by the authors and trained research assistants in students' classrooms to ensure consistent procedures and comprehension of tasks, with all instructions given in German. Students

were not prepared for the tests and were informed that results would remain confidential. Parental informed consent was obtained, and student participation was voluntary. The project received approval from the Ethical Review Board of the FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg in 2021.

3.6 Participants

The sample included 255 students with a mean age of 10 years and 2 months (SD: 6.7 months), 57% of whom had a multilingual background. Among them, 184 were tested before COVID-19 (56% multilingual), and 71 were assessed afterward (62% multilingual). Parental questionnaires revealed seventeen family languages (e.g., Albanian, Arabic, French, Greek, Korean, Persian, Russian, Spanish, Tamil, Turkish), each spoken by a few children, who acquired German as their L2. Participation in all tests varied due to illness or school activities. All tests were conducted as group tests.

3.7 Test instruments

3.7.1. Control variables

To control for cognitive abilities in Year 4, the *Standard Progressive Matrices* (SPM; Raven, 1976) were used as a non-verbal intelligence measure, avoiding the need for German language skills, which may have negatively affected L2 German students. The test involved completing geometric patterns within 20 minutes, with 48 items grouped into four sets of increasing difficulty.

In a questionnaire, parents provided details about their child's age, country of birth, and home language(s), and rated their own educational background from "1" (no school certificate) to "6" (university entrance certificate). This rating served as a proxy for the students' social background (Zaunbauer, et al., 2012). Out of 255 parents, 184 responded, yielding a 72.2% response rate, which is generally acceptable (Draugalis, et al., 2008). Non-responses were mostly due to survey skepticism or time constraints. Maternal educational background data was more comprehensive than paternal data, so the following data pertains to maternal education.

3.7.2. The language tests

German reading comprehension was assessed using *Ein Lesetest* für Erst- bis *Sechstklässler* (ELFE, Lenard, Schneider, 2006), which evaluates reading at

the word, sentence, and text levels. Students matched pictures with words, selected sentence options, and identified correct answers for text comprehension within 16 minutes. Internal consistency reliability was high (.92-.97), with moderate to strong correlations to other reading tests and teacher evaluations (.45-.71). The maximum score was 120 points, with a normative value of 88 points for Year 4 students.

The *Hamburger Schreibprobe* (HSP; May, 2010) is a German spelling testfor Year 4 students, consisting of 16 individual words and five sentences. Internal consistency reliability estimates range from .93 to .98, with high correlations observed compared to other reading and writing test formats and teacher evaluations (.72 -.85). A maximum of 42 points can be obtained, with norm values ranging between 30 and 33 points.

The *Primary School Assessment Kit* (PSAK; Little, Simpson, Catibusic, 2003) was initially developed to assess English language skills in immigrant children in Ireland, covering writing, reading, speaking, and listening. This study used only the reading and writing subtests, aligned with CEFR levels A1 (Breakthrough), A2 (Waystage), and B1 (Threshold). Its colourful design was motivating for many students. The reading test (PSAK-R) assesses comprehension at word, sentence, and text levels, using tasks like word-picture matching and multiple-choice questions, and the maximal score was 45 points. The writing test (PSAK-W) involves picture prompts, gap-filling, and short compositions, scoring up to 39 points. Both tests were completed in 45 minutes. Previous studies (e.g., Steinlen, 2021) showed good reliability for Year 4: PSAK-R had a split-half reliability of .85 and .80 and moderate correlations (.56-.57) with other tests; PSAK-W had values of .68 and .42.

The receptive English vocabulary and grammar tests were adapted for group administration. Both are picture-matching tasks conducted in paper-and-pencil format. Using sets 2-5 of the *British Picture Vocabulary Scale II* (BPVS; Dunn et al., 1997), students matched 48 English words to corresponding pictures. The *Test for the Reception of Grammar* (TROG, Bishop, 2003) assessed the comprehension of 20 syntactic constructs - such as word order, singular and plural inflection, and object and subject relative clauses - using 80 image-based prompts.

3.8. Data analysis

Descriptive and non-parametric statistics were computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS, version 29, 2022) to examine group differences on the basis of data obtained from the two German tests, the cognitive test, the four English tests, and maternal education. The analy-

ses used a 2 (German background: L1 vs. L2) x 2 (pre/post-COVID-19) design, with Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc comparisons. The magnitude of significant differences was assessed using eta-squared, with thresholds for small (≤.05), medium (.06–.13), and large (≥.14) effects (Cohen, 1988), with the significance level set at 95% (p<.05).

4. Results

Table 1 presents the results for the control variables, showing significant group differences with medium effect sizes. The L1 (monolingual German) groups, both pre- and post-COVID-19, achieved age-appropriate scores on the SPM, while the L2 (multilingual) groups scored slightly below age norms. Parent questionnaires revealed that the programme mainly attracted parents with higher educational backgrounds, typically holding university entrance certificates, except for the L2-Pre-COVID group, where mothers generally held certificates for universities of applied sciences.

Table 1. Comparing monolingual German (L1) and multilingual (L2) students pre- and post-COVID-19 (own data). Mean values, standard deviations [SD], sample sizes (N), maximum points, norm values, ANOVA group comparisons (* p<.05), and effect sizes (η^2) for nonverbal intelligence (SPM), maternal education (Educ.), German reading (ELFE), German spelling (HSP), English vocabulary (BPVS), English grammar (TROG), English reading (PSAK-R) and English writing (PSAK-W).

Test/ (Max. points)	**Norm values**	**L1 Pre-COVID** M [SD] (N)	**L2 Pre-COVID** M [SD] (N)	**L1 Post-COVID** M [SD] (N)	**L2 Post-COVID** M [SD] (N)	**Group comparisons**	**η^2**
SPM (48)	41-43	41.0 [6.5] (N = 67)	37.2 [6.8] (N = 83)	40.4 [68.8] (N = 24)	37.0 [7.9] (N = 42)	F(3, 212) = 4.734, p = .003*	.13
Educ. (6)		5.5 [1.3] (N = 73)	5.0 [1.3] (N = 78)	5.8 [0.6] (N = 15)	5.6 [0.9] (N = 16)	F(3, 178) = 3.027, p = .031	.11
ELFE (120)	88	96.8 [15.9] (N = 68)	89.4 [22.2] (N = 80)	83.7 [20.8] (N = 19)	82.6 [17.4] (N = 25)	F(3, 188) = 4.559, p = .004*	.14
HSP (42)	30-33	32.7 [6.7] (N = 77)	31.4 [8.3] (N = 93)	33.1 [5.1] (N = 29)	28.4 [10.1] (N = 38)	F(3, 203) = 2.904, p = .056	.09
BPVS (48)		35.1 [4.8] (N = 76)	34.7 [6.6] (N = 93)	34.2 [7.0] (N = 22)	35.4 [7.9] (N = 40)	F(3, 227) = 0.204, p = .894	.14

Table 1 – cont.

Test/ (Max. points)	**Norm values**	**L1 Pre-COVID** M [SD] (N)	**L2 Pre-COVID** M [SD] (N)	**L1 Post-COVID** M [SD] (N)	**L2 Post-COVID** M [SD] (N)	**Group comparisons**	**η^2**
TROG (80)		50.0 [13.8] (N = 27)	47.9 [18.6] (N = 33)	52.2 [8.6] (N = 26)	50.8 [12.5] (N = 39)	F(3, 121) = 1.469, p = .782	.36
PSAK-R (45)		39.0 [4.0] (N = 66)	38.4 [6.0] (N = 79)	36.8 [6.0] (N = 23)	36.9 [8.3] (N = 42)	F(3, 206) = 1.456, p = .373	.05
PSAK-W (39)		26.6 [5.7] (N = 65)	26.3 [5.3] (N = 79)	19.3 [2.8] (N = 6)	19.4 [2.8] (N = 13)	F(3, 159) = 8.895, p = .001*	.06

Note that maternal education was rated on a scale ranging from „1" (no school certificate) to „6" (university entrance certificate).

Due to significant group differences regarding children's cognitive and social background, univariate analyses of variance were conducted for the German and English tests, using maternal educational background and children's cognitive ability as covariates.

4.1. Effects of the pandemic on German and English tests

The results of the German reading test (ELFE) revealed significant group differences. Pre-pandemic, students performed at age-appropriate levels, while post-pandemic, they exhibited a learning gap equivalent to half a school year relative to normative values. In contrast, the German spelling test (HSP) showed no significant group differences, with students maintaining age-appropriate performance both before and after the pandemic.

For the English tests, the findings were mixed. No significant effects of the pandemic were observed in English reading (PSAK-R, level A2), receptive grammar (TROG), or receptive vocabulary (BPVS). However, English writing scores declined significantly post-pandemic, with a medium effect size, and performance in writing dropped from level A2 to A1.

4.2. Effects of language background on German and English tests

The results for the four reading and writing tests were consistent. Post-hoc analyses did not reveal any significant effects of language background on either the German or the English tests ($p>.05$ for all).

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on German and English skills in a bilingual primary school programme in Year 4, with a focus on students' language background. A total of 255 monolingual and multilingual German students completed a cognitive test and two German tests in reading and writing, along with four English tests in reading, writing, receptive grammar, and vocabulary.

5.1. Effects of the pandemic on German and English reading and writing tests

The study showed that the pandemic negatively affected students' German reading skills in the bilingual programme, resulting in a learning delay of half a year. This finding aligns with other research on regular primary school programmes, indicating adverse effects on reading in the school language due to the pandemic (e.g., Depping, et al., 2021; Ludewig, et al., 2022; Stanat, et al., 2022; but see Schult, et al., 2022).

In contrast, the pandemic did not affect students' German spelling skills, which remained age-appropriate before and after the pandemic. This contrasts with Henschel et al. (2022), who reported lower spelling scores post-pandemic, particularly among multilingual students, who experienced a half-year delay. The discrepancy may be attributed to sample differences, such as higher socioeconomic status (SES) and cultural capital in our study compared to Henschel et al. (2022). Additionally, teachers in our study may have emphasized spelling more during the pandemic, and/or spelling in German (with a relatively transparent writing system) could be less cognitively demanding than reading comprehension at sentence and text level (following, for example, Cognitive Load Theory, e.g., Sweller, 1994), leading to less impact from remote education.

This study found inconsistent effects of the pandemic on English test scores. While there were no significant differences between pre- and post-pandemic groups for English reading, receptive grammar, and vocabulary, the post-pandemic groups scored significantly lower in the English writing test. Similar non-significant effects of the pandemic on English competences have been reported by Hopp and Thoma (2020) for receptive grammar and vocabulary in Year 4 and by Henschel et al. (2023) for English reading in Year 9 in regular EFL programmes. Several factors may explain these findings: Increased use of digital media (often in English) may have prevented declines in reading (Henschel, et al., 2023) and receptive vocabulary. Additionally, as

Hopp and Thoma (2020) have suggested, students may have received more parental or non-institutional English instruction during school closures, particularly in vocabulary learning and reading, which could be more prevalent among students with higher SES like those in this bilingual programme.

Regarding proficiency, students in the bilingual programme remained at level A2 for English reading and correctly answered 73% of the vocabulary and 63% of the grammar items. Similar results have been reported in previous studies with slightly different samples (Steinlen, 2017, 2018, 2021). Notably, the reading results exceed the expectations of the Ministry of Education in Baden-Württemberg, which sets A1 as the target English proficiency level at the end of primary school (Ministerium Baden-Württemberg, 2004, 2016).

The effects of the pandemic on FL writing has not been explored in previous research. This study found that the pandemic negatively affected English writing, with students achieving level A1.2 instead of A2.1. However, since this still exceeds level A1, it was considered satisfactory by the school's teachers, especially given that English writing was not the focus in bilingual lessons during the pandemic (pers. comm.).

5.2. Effects of language background on German and English tests

Multilingual and monolingual students performed similarly in both German tests, which is consistent with previous research on bilingual programmes before the pandemic (e.g., Steinlen, Piske, 2022; Steinlen, 2021), but differs from the results of large-scale studies conducted in regular primary schools (e.g., Henschel, et al. 2022; McElvany, et al., 2023; Stanat, et al., 2022). This trend appears to extend into the post-pandemic period and may be attributed to preselection effects, relating, for example, to multilingual students' parents with a relatively high SES who may have been more inclined to support their children to complete assignments at home than multilingual parents in other schools.

The most important finding regarding English competences before and after the pandemic relates to language background: multilingual students performed equally well as their monolingual peers in all English tests, both before and after the pandemic. This result is consistent with other studies on regular and bilingual programmes in primary schools (Steinlen, 2021; Steinlen, Piske, 2022), and it is noteworthy given the challenges posed by the pandemic. Although English is often a third language for multilingual students, this did not pose a significant issue, possibly due to preselection effects, such as the multilingual students' high SES. This advantageous

background may have provided them with better access to digital media, a quiet study environment, parental support, and extracurricular learning opportunities during the periods of school closures and fluctuating instruction (Schneider, et al., 2022).

Other, more general factors likely played a role regarding the insignificant effects of language background, including the typological proximity between German and English, multilingual students' proficiency in German, and heightened metalinguistic awareness due to the acquisition of German as the L2. Moreover, the quality of teaching was high in the bilingual programme, and multilingual students may have particularly benefited from effective teaching strategies such as contextualization, scaffolding techniques, and negotiation of meaning (e.g., paraphrasing, clarification requests). These approaches likely facilitated the acquisition of English and subject content for all students, regardless of their linguistic background (Steinlen, 2021; Steinlen, Piske, 2022), even during the pandemic.

6. Limitations and future studies

This study has several limitations: First, it is based on a small sample size, particularly for the three cohorts tested after the pandemic. Second, many positive results may be due to preselection effects, which have repeatedly been reported for bilingual programmes (see Steinlen, 2021). Third, while Schult et al. (2022) suggested that the negative effects of COVID-19 decrease over time, an informal inspection of our annual German reading test scores did not yet show this trend. Nevertheless, future longitudinal studies should explore changes in intra-individual learning gains, particularly in post-pandemic times. Fourth, there still is limited data on possible effects of COVID-19 on English speaking abilities and subject-specific knowledge in areas such as science, PE, art, and music (cf. Weltgen, et al., 2022). Finally, this paper is not a controlled study on language development *per se*; instead, it documents early German and English development during a period of disrupted and varied instruction in a bilingual programme.

7. Conclusions

This study showed that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on competencies in German and English within a bilingual programme was domain-specific, affecting only certain language skills. This positive outcome, which partially deviates from findings in other studies on school language skills, can largely

be attributed to the adaptability and creativity of the teachers. Although it is hoped that school closures will be avoided in the future, hybrid teaching and blended learning have nowadays become integral to young language learners' education (Council of Europe, 2023). Nonetheless, these methodologies and their effects on language competencies require careful monitoring. Therefore, it is essential that pre-service and in-service teacher education include adequate training in remote and socially distanced teaching.

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Yuki Otsuki
Meisei University, Japan
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7331-0198
yuki.otsuki@h.meisei-u.ac.jp

Assessment of speaking interaction: Rater perception and testing criteria in Japanese elementary English education

This study aimed to explore assessment criteria for speaking interactions in performance tests conducted under the curriculum of formal elementary school English education in Japan, that are intended to foster students' communicative competence in an authentic language use environment. Building on the framework of Sato and McNamara (2018), a qualitative analysis of rater perceptions of communicative elements of young learner oral interaction was conducted. The current study examined the perception of nine raters. The material for analysis consisted of transcripts from video recordings of the elementary school students' role-play test. The findings indicated that the *flow of interaction* had a particularly strong impact on raters, along with five other factors. Perceptions of the use of *L1* and *nonverbal behaviors* were nuanced, and only sometimes viewed favorably. Furthermore, in interaction involving limited vocabulary and use of formulaic expressions, speed was not always perceived positively and was occasionally seen as rote memorization. These insights could be applied in the holistic assessment of speaking tests in young beginner learners.

Keywords: oral communication assessment, elementary English in Japan, factors affecting rater perception

Słowa kluczowe: ocena komunikacji ustnej, językangielski na poziomie podstawowym w Japonii, czynniki wpływające na percepcję oceniających

1. Introduction

Foreign language (FL) education in Japan is governed at the national level by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) through the *Course of Study*, which operates as a guideline (MEXT, 2017). The objective of FL education is to nurture communication skills among third and fourth grade students, who participate in 35 hours of FL activities per year and among fifth and sixth grade students learning an FL as a compulsory subject, involving 70 hours per year. Compulsory subjects require assessments each term, and MEXT outlines the assessment criteria which guide and maintain educational standards across the country. Aligned with this national framework, 47 prefectural boards of education operate in Japan, each adapting the guidelines to best serve the distinctive needs of their communities. They select textbooks for compulsory subject courses and secure additional teaching staff, or assistant language teachers (ALTs). While ALTs are sometimes placed in classrooms, English is mainly taught by generalist elementary school teachers many of whom have not studied methods of teaching English in their pre-service teacher training. Consequently, further support is needed, as only 6.7% are certified English teachers (MEXT, 2022). In this context, well-structured and supportive textbooks may play a vital role in ensuring more uniform instruction nationwide. However, each textbook includes approximately eight to nine opportunities for oral performance assessments throughout the year. Teachers, who may lack specialized knowledge in English teaching methods, are required to conduct these performance tests. Given this background, research and support in this area are particularly needed in Japan. As also highlighted by Nikolov and Timpe-Laughlin (2020), despite the clear focus on enhancing listening-comprehension, speaking, and interaction in age-appropriate teaching methodology and achievement goals for young learners, research on assessing young learners' oral and aural language abilities remains insufficient.

Given this need, this study aimed to explore the criteria for assessing the elementary school students' oral interaction, specifically within the framework of Japan's formal education system, where *the Course of Study* emphasizes the development of communication skills as the core educational objective. Drawing on Sato and McNamara (2018), which holistically analyzed listener perception to assess communication ability, I conducted a qualitative study to identify assessment criteria based on listener-as-rater perception. This study utilized audio data from classroom instruction, using the textbook provided by the local board of education, and having raters assess the students' role-play interaction to identify assessment

criteria. The following section reviews previous studies on children's oral interaction and assessment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Oral interactions

Children begin FL learning through auditory reception activities, such as songs and games, while engaging in play. Concerning cognitive processes, Hulstijn (2015) proposed basic and higher language cognition (BLC–HLC) theory, stating that BLC primarily consists of largely implicit knowledge in the domains of phonetics, prosody, phonology, morphology, and syntax, which is combined with explicit lexical knowledge. BLC is limited to the processing of oral language skills in utterances and contains high-frequency lexical, grammatical, phonotactic, and prosodic elements (Tracy-Ventura, et al., 2014). Johnstone (2009) contended that young learners of a second language (L2) initially receive sounds in whole chunks and that their reception becomes more analytical as they develop. From both the cognitive aspect of language learners' skill levels and the perspective of children's cognitive development stages, the approach of connecting auditory input to interaction is appropriate and aligns with second-language acquisition (SLA) theory (e.g., Ellis, 2015; Gass, et al., 2022; Lightbown, Spada, 2022). From the perspective of SLA theory, which emphasizes the shift from target language (TL) input to output, communication pressure promotes language acquisition. Long's (1980) interaction hypothesis posits that input is processed through negotiating meaning during interactions, providing opportunities for speech production. Mackey (2020) reviewed the cognitive-interactionist paradigm, defining how interaction and corrective feedback facilitate language acquisition through input, output, and feedback processes. This perspective highlights how interactional processes offer learning opportunities and how corrective feedback can enhance learners' linguistic outputs. However, assessments of oral interactions, especially among young learners, remain limited (Mora, 2006).

2.2. Assessing oral interactions in young learners

In terms of assessing oral interactions, research focusing on adults typically quantifies speech data from the perspectives of complexity, accuracy, and fluency, or develops rubrics appropriate to the context. In young leaners'

classroom, Genesee and Upshur (1996) advocated continuous and formative assessments that include supportive feedback to aid learning. Similarly, Butler (2005) introduced the concept of classroom harmonization to link learning and teaching in the classroom context: "It includes both the arrangement of the physical conditions of a given classroom as well as the integration of various psychological variables pertaining to both students and teachers" (Butler, 2005: 438). Likewise, Britton (2021) emphasizes the need for assessment practices tailored to the unique context of each classroom, a concept referred to as *assessment for learning,* which aims to effectively monitor and support students' progress. Furthermore, in young learners' classrooms, the importance of *assessment for learning* has been widely recognized (e.g., Brown, 2005; Butler, 2022; 2024; Carless, 2005; Nikolov, 2016; William, 2011; William, Thompson, 2017). Rather than focusing solely on assessing specific skill elements, this approach emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive, holistic understanding in assessing students' progress, which reflects the way children learn, as argued by Pinter (2017). Children are more holistic learners who focus on meaning and the whole message delivered instead of analyzing the structure of language. They are eager to use language immediately and tend to use it before learning the rules (e.g., Cameron, 2003; Rich, 2019; Rixon, 2016). To incorporate this holistic learning into assessment, understanding the perceptions of raters seemed essential. Therefore, identifying what elements of children's interactions are rated highly and what are rated lower became necessary. Aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing assessment, I sought to thoroughly capture the raters' perception through a series of dialogues, based on Sociocultural Theory (SCT). SCT, which originated from Vygotsky's psychology on children's learning, emphasizes the importance of interactions with environmental factors, such as teachers' scaffolding, in supporting cognitive development, particularly in language learning. According to this theory, language mediates thought, and the social environment is not merely a setting for learning, but a source of development itself (Vygotsky, 1987; Lantolf, Poehner, 2014). Therefore, when assessing the language of young second language learners, it became crucial to understand how listeners, often teachers and raters in the classroom, interpret the development of interactions that take place uniquely within this specific context.

2.3. Layperson perspectives on L2 communicative competence

Sato and McNamara (2018) argued that the assessment of L2 communication ability has rarely been conducted from the perspectives of non-native speakers, even though interlocutors in real-world communication are not al-

ways trained language professionals, or native speakers. Their study focused on layperson views at a Japanese university, where 23 individuals provided intuitive ratings of their L2 communication ability after watching video performances. They rated performances on a 7-point scale and provided open-ended feedback without predetermined criteria, from which seven categories affecting perceptions of competence were identified: (a) English-language features, (b) overall communicative success, (c) content, (d) interaction quality, (e) nonverbal behaviors (NVBs), (f) speaker composure/attitude, and (g) other. These categories may serve as potential assessment criteria. However, the participants in that study were adults. Therefore, the current study aimed to apply Sato and McNamara's (2018) research method to investigate which elements of oral interaction in the FL education of Japanese elementary school beginners are perceived by listeners as demonstrating high communication ability. The results are likely to be useful for assessing oral interactions.

3. Research design and methodology

3.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to investigate which elements of oral interaction in FL education for young beginner learners in Japanese elementary schools were perceived by raters as demonstrating high, or low, communicative ability. Drawing on Sato and McNamara (2018), this study sought to determine which elements affect the ease, or difficulty, of understanding oral interactions among elementary students, by adopting a partial replication study approach. While Marsden and colleagues (2018, p. 328) argue that "direct or close replication is not appropriate" for qualitative research involving multi-faceted interpretation, this study is arguably justified in replicating the framework of the original study, as it does not focus on ideologically-driven exploration. One of the notably distinctive features of this study is the selection of the raters. In contrast to Sato and McNamara's (2018) study, which used layperson raters, this study selected raters with some understanding of the context and developmental stages of children.

3.2. Research questions

Two research questions were established:

1) What elements of spoken interaction by Japanese fifth-grade students contribute positively to raters' impressions during the English role-play test?

2) What elements of spoken interaction by Japanese fifth-grade students negatively impact raters' impressions during the English role-play test?

3.3. Research paradigm

This study is grounded in the constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998), which emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge through interaction. The themes explored were developed through a process in which both the raters and the researcher (author) collaboratively deepened their understanding of raters' value perceptions.

3.4. Methodology

This research used a case-study methodology (Merriam, 1998), focusing on fifth-grade students in Japan. This approach was chosen to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the phenomena within the real-life context of classroom interactions, using role-play tasks from textbooks, aiming to simulate how students use language in real-world situations.

3.5. Participants

Nine raters participated in the study. The raters' demographics and background knowledge of Japanese elementary school English policies are summarized in Table 1.

Four men and five women participated (age range: 20–60 years). Seven participants were native speakers of Japanese, while one spoke Taiwanese Mandarin and another Tagalog as their L1. Additionally, information was acquired concerning their occupational backgrounds and knowledge of elementary school education of English.

Table 1. Summary of the raters' characteristics

Name	Age	Gender	Knowledge of English policy	Occupational background
A	50s	F	5	Junior high school English teacher (29 years) and Elementary school English advisor (1 year)
B	60s	F	5	Elementary school English teacher (3 years)

Table 1 – cont.

Name	Age	Gender	Knowledge of English policy	Occupational background
C	20s	F	3	Japanese lecturer in Chinese university (2 years)
D	30s	M	3	Senior high school English teacher (5 years)
E	30s	F	4	University lecturer (3 years)
F	30s	M	4	University lecturer (1 year) and cram school teacher (10 years)
G	20s	M	3	Cram school teacher (4 years) and Japanese language institute instructor (4 years)
H	30s	F	5	Assistant language teacher at an elementary school (3 years)
I	20s	M	3	Senior high school English teacher (1 year)

Note. Knowledge of English policies of Japanese elementary schools was self-rated on a 5-point scale (5 = well known, 3 = somewhat familiar, 1 = no knowledge)

3.6. Materials

Video recordings of children's interactions were collected, and transcriptions were prepared. These materials allowed participants to listen to authentic children's interactions. In a typical fifth-grade textbook, speaking- performance tests are included, such as tests that ask students to "introduce your friend" or "give a friend directions." The former is an example of speaking–presentation, while the latter is an example of speaking–interaction. For this study, the speaking-interaction test on "restaurant role-play" was chosen.

Fifteen transcripts were randomly selected from video recordings of one-on-one interactions between a total of 82 fifth-grade students and a Filipino female ALT who has been teaching throughout the year.

As the textbook suggests, seven class hours were used in this study to introduce and practice the following formulaic expressions:

A: "May I help you? What would you like?"
B: "I'd like a hot dog."
A: "Here you are."
B: "How much is it?"
A: "It's 300 yen."

The one-on-one role-play interactions with the ALT used phrases from their textbook in simulated restaurant scenes, as referenced in Szpotowicz and Lindgren (2011). Additionally, general greetings were also incorporated before the role-playing began. These role-play interactions were

video-recorded by the students themselves as routine work, and the recordings submitted to the teacher were transcribed.

The four transcriptions (out of 15) were specifically selected for their notable characteristics: one with the most interaction turns, one with the fewest interaction turns, one with the longest periods of silence, and one with the shortest total interaction time, indicating the fastest speech.

Supplemental material in the form of video-recordings was also collected from an out-of-school club. Five fifth-grade students who were familiar with the same textbook, and who belonged to this club, also performed the same role-play interaction while being video-recorded. This enabled the use of video materials, in addition to transcribed data, as only transcribed data were allowed to be used in public schools.

3.7. Data collection methods and procedure

Data were collected using open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Raters were asked to intuitively judge the level of communicative competence, such as English proficiency, of speakers, assigning a four-point scale rating and then providing open-ended explanations for their assessment during the period from March to April 2022. All raters received 15 transcriptions and five videos of Japanese fifth-grade students' interaction data, in total approximately 40 minutes. Initially, they were asked to provide an overall rating (A = excellent, B = good, C = fair, and D = poor) to judge the speakers' communication abilities. Along with the scoring sheet, a questionnaire containing two open-ended questions regarding points and reasons for assigning high and low scores was also included. The questionnaire was distributed via email, and respondents had the option of returning their answers either by email, or by handing in a paper copy in person.

After the data were collected, four raters were asked to participate in further interviews to clarify written answers that the author had difficulty understanding. Each participant met the author individually face-to-face. Each participant was interviewed for 10 minutes to 1 hour. First, the author asked the participants whether they would like to add to the answers they had written in March. They were then asked to explain the meanings of expressions in their written answers that were difficult for the author to understand, such as "parroting" and "L1 content words," including the interpretation of filler use, and L1 use that appeared to be evaluated as both positive and negative. After the themes were summarized, a report was sent to each participant for member checking in May 2022.

3.8. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019), which involved identifying, analyzing, and extracting themes from the raters' open-ended answers. The study aimed to inductively identify the reasons for high and low evaluations in student interactions. Additionally, a deductive approach was used to compare the findings with those from the initial evaluations.

3.9. Ethical consideration

In conducting this study, strict adherence to ethical guidelines was prioritized to ensure the protection of participants' privacy and integrity. Approval was obtained from the school principal to use verbatim transcripts of audio recordings of classroom interactions, with a clear condition that all data would be treated in accordance with children's privacy protection standards. Additionally, for data involving five children from an out-of-school international exchange organization, written consent was obtained from their parents or guardians affirming their agreement to participate and their understanding of how the data would be used.

For the raters involved in evaluating the interactions, written consent was obtained. Raters were informed of the privacy measures in place and agreed to participate by submitting their responses via an online form. This process ensured that all participants were fully aware of the study's aims and their rights, including confidentiality and the use to be made of the data they provided.

4. Results

4.1. Thematic analysis of positive elements

Regarding high evaluations, thematic analysis generated four themes from 14 codes. The highest percentage was accounted for by statements related to *interactions* (48.57%). *Interactions* included *flow*, *negotiation of meaning*, use of *communication strategies (CSs)*, *repetition*, and *no silence.* For example, "the students who ask for *clarification* and use *active responses* keep conversation *flowing*" (Rater A; B; G; E; I). Rater B specifically stated, "Using *active responses* and *fillers* to show that the student is thinking was more favorable than providing articulated quick responses in this interaction."

The second highest percentage was for *English language knowledge* (22.85%). Basic knowledge of *formulaic expressions* and *listening comprehension* ability, which was also expressed as an understanding of what the interlocutor asked, seemed to be the baseline for evaluation. Rater C pointed out that one of the primary causes of silence is a lack of listening skills and emphasized the importance of listening comprehension in English. A further 11.42% of the participant explanations highlighted *attitudes* such as *confidence*, *willingness to communicate*, and *listenership*. Rater E also mentioned affective factors such as "speaking without anxiety" and "students should not worry about making mistakes." McCarthy and McCarten (2018) identified four core concepts of conversational behavior: (a) organizing one's own talk, (b) taking into account other speakers, (c) listenership, and (d) organizing the conversation as a whole, with listenership involving showing positive attitudes to interlocutors and using expressions such as "right" and "Uh huh." These *active responses* form of *CSs*. Such strategies were included in the theme of *interactions*, when speakers physically expressed their intent both verbally and nonverbally. *Overall communicative success,* accounting for 8.57%, encompassed features such as *goal-oriented* and *task-related behaviors*; for example, "the goal of this interaction is to convey meaning using English, so being able to place an order and make a payment is a primary indicator" (Rater D; E). Only one code, *NVB*, was presented in one video sample, which showed a student nodding and using hand gestures to fill the interaction gaps. *L1 use* was not favored, except for *fillers*. Some questionnaire answers were vague and elicited mixed interpretations; therefore, further explanation of these answers

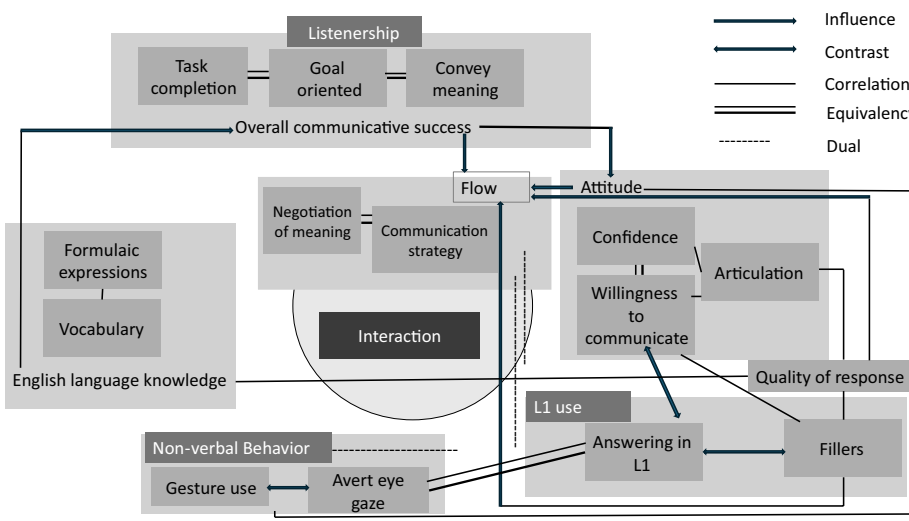

Figure 1. Themes concerning reasons for high initial evaluations

was requested later in the individual interviews. Figure 1 thematically maps the raters' initial high evaluation points. As shown, the main theme, *interactions*, overlapped with *English language knowledge*, *overall communicative success*, and *attitude*. The *L1* category emerged distinctively as negative in terms of *L1 use* and positive for *fillers*.

4.2. Thematic analysis of negative elements

The reasons for low ratings were generally the opposite of those for high ratings; for example, "a student stopped the flow of interactions" (Raters F; G; A) or "a student did not solve problems in conversations" (Raters B; I). As with the findings of Sato and McNamara's (2018) study, no codes related to *content* and *cohesion* were found among the reasons for high or low ratings in this study. Most of the themes that emerged corresponded to *interactions* (48.48%) and *English language knowledge* (18.18%). Two themes that markedly differed from the high-ratings findings were the number of *NVBs* (12.12%) used and the *quality of response*. *NVBs*, especially averting eye gaze, resulted in low ratings. *Quality of response* was variously specified as follows: (a) excessive *L1 use*, (b) *L1 use* for content words, (c) too many *fillers*, and (d) *mimicking* or *parroting*. Excessive use of *CSs* such as *fillers* and *repetitions* yielded a negative impression. Moreover, two answers indicated that some students pretended to understand the questions as, even if the students answered immediately, the dialogue was somewhat disconnected. Ambiguity was present in situations where both high and low ratings were given for *L1 use* and *quality of response*. Thus, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify some answers.

4.3. Follow-up interviews

None of the respondents indicated that they wished to provide additional remarks. However, they were prepared to provide further examples from their teaching contexts that helped confirm that there were no discrepancies in the results.

Concerning unclear responses, clarification was sought regarding *parroting* and *L1 content words*.

Parroting was indicated by Rater B: "*Parroting* or *mimicking* is not a strategy intended to be a *filler* to connect interactional turns nor finding one's own words, but rather to pass the moment by responding immediately by repeating the word used in the question." Rater A noted: "The immediate

response made the role-play like a rote memorization test of *formulaic expressions*. In real-world interactions, *hesitation* and *rephrasing* seemed more natural than quick responses."

L1 use was explained by two participants, Raters G and H, as meaning that L1 was used not as a *filler* but as a response to the question, such instances were not seen as using CSs. Rater G stated that using *content words* not only revealed a lack of knowledge of the TL but also a lack of imagination, reflecting that the listener may not be able to understand the L1 that the students used. Rater H added that frequent *L1 use*, not only for *content words*, would make her feel as if her Japanese proficiency was dismissed and that she perceived the students' lack of imagination regarding the listeners' feelings. Such a response would involve an overt attitude of *good listenership*. However, a few *fillers* used in the L1 were favorably received in terms of playing a crucial role in connecting the *flow* of interactions. It would also appear that students' low English proficiency led them translate entire interactions word-for-word, giving the impression that they were far from the level at which they could use formulaic expressions naturally. Overall, *continuity* and *flow* of conversations, even in short exchanges, appeared to be the key features of oral interaction.

4.4. Additional emerging themes

In this section, themes indicating positive and negative elements, as well as the final themes that emerged from interpretations as clarified in interviews, are presented and briefly discussed.

Interactional flow. Strategies necessary to continue *interactional flow* are important. These include *negotiation of meaning,* such as *clarification requests,* and use of *CSs*, along with *NVBs*. These should be used to avoid *disfluency features* such as s*ilent pauses* and *L1 use* for *content words*.

Task completion. Whether *communicative success* is achieved is highly important for accomplishing simple tasks such as role-playing tasks using textbooks.

English-language features. *Formulaic expressions* need to be memorized and used simultaneously. Simultaneously, basic *listening skills* for the task must be learned.

Attitude. *Confidence* and *articulation of speech* have the potential to produce a positive atmosphere with interlocutors, which enhances good listenership during communication.

NVBs. Using physical gestures to convey messages may help achieve communicative success, such as nodding intended to mean "yes." However,

averting eye gaze and other negative *NVBs* can negatively affect communication.

Quality of response. Mimicking and *parroting* to respond quickly in order to maintain *flow*, or "pass the time," during the interaction resulted in a negative impression for raters. Excessive *L1 use* and of L1 *fillers* exerted both positive and negative influences. A summary is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of speaking-interaction criteria for fifth-graders in Japan

Element	Positive	Negative
Interactional flow	Smooth, flow	Too long and too many silences that make listeners uncomfortable
Task completion	Task was accomplished	Task was not accomplished.
	(Task example)	
English language feature	Attainment of target formulaic expressions	
Attitude	Showing to the listeners his/her understanding. Speaking clearly enough to be heard.	Not ready or willing to interact.
Quality of response	Clear voice to be heard by the interlocutor. Controlling the speed and placing an emphasis to clearly deliver the message.	Not too fast. Not overuse of L1. Not answering in L1.
NBV	Nodding and use of hand gestures to implement English words.	Avert eye gaze

5. Discussion

Through dialogue with the raters, I reflexively learned from the initial responses on the questionnaire as well as from the oral interviews. This corresponds to the concepts illustrated by Yagi and Nakayama (2021). The raters indicated what is appropriate and effective for developing oral interaction skills in Japanese elementary school students.

In addressing the research question regarding what elements in spoken interactions positively influenced listeners, six themes were identified from the intuitive responses of the raters: *interactional flow, task completion*, *English-language features, attitude*, *NVBs*, and *quality of response*. These findings suggest that the use of formulaic expressions learned in class during role-play tasks notably facilitated listener perception in terms of promoting effective achievement in these areas.

These themes largely align with the findings of Sato and McNamara (2018), who focused on adults. However, there were notable differences in that issues related to *cohesion* or *content* were not evident in this study. This absence may reflect the developmental and educational contexts of elementary students, who are naturally more focused on basic language functions and interactional dynamics. Therefore, it is clear from the results that applying adult assessment criteria directly to children is not appropriate. Teachers developing assessment criteria should be mindful of these differences and modify them accordingly.

Concerning the second research question, pertaining to the elements that pose difficulties for listeners in the spoken interactions of fifth-grade elementary students in Japan, most of the negative factors identified were inversely related to the positive elements from the first question. For example, issues such as "insufficient basic listening comprehension" and "inability to complete tasks" were frequently mentioned. These difficulties mirror the challenges faced when elementary students fail to apply or understand the formulaic expressions taught in class.

Sato and McNamara (2018) focused on adult learners and highlighted *English-language features* primarily related to aspects of fluency, such as *speech rate*, *pause phenomena*, and *repair phenomena*. In contrast, the participants in this study specifically noted that the elementary students often struggled with the fundamental skills of *listening comprehension* and in using *formulaic expressions* appropriately. These basic competencies formed the core of the English-language features assessed in this study.

Fluency components such as *repair* and *breakdown* yielded a complex mixture of both positive and negative responses. For instance, *parroting* or *mimicking* was not regarded as a strategy merely to fill gaps or connect conversational turns to find one's own words. Instead, such usage was seen as a way to respond quickly by immediately repeating the word used in the question, which made the role-play resemble a rote memorization test of formulaic expressions. This approach contrasts with real-world interactions in which hesitation and rephrasing are often perceived as more natural than quick responses.

Furthermore, when the L1 was used not only for *fillers* but also for actual *content words* or excessively in responses, it was typically perceived negatively. This type of response, however, could signify an overt demonstration of good listenership (McCarthy, McCarten, 2018). When the L1 was frequently used, it often gave the impression of a basic deficiency in English knowledge, leading to negative perceptions among the listeners. However, when the L1 served to provide *fillers*, it reduced silence and conveyed to raters that the speakers were actively trying to formulate responses, which

could be seen as a positive aspect of engagement. Overall, the way the L1 was utilized played a significant role in how listeners judged the continuity and flow of conversations, which are crucial factors for assessing students' L2 fluency and comprehension.

These reconsidered responses clearly highlight the difficulties faced by elementary students and contrast with findings involving adult learners, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that hinder effective communication in this educational context.

6. Implications and limitations

The summarized criteria for elementary school students' speaking interactions highlight important aspects that can be adopted for speaking assessments. These criteria, when aligned with classroom-based tests, could potentially be applied to the holistic component of speaking interaction. Furthermore, it is suggested that the flow of interaction may have the most substantial influence on rater perception.

The limitations of this study include its small sample size and the very narrow lenses of the scope. Further studies are recommended to deepen the understanding of these findings by exploring similar research.

7. Conclusion

This study yielded six important themes relevant to the assessment of fifth grade students in English classroom-based role-play tasks in Japan. The analysis focused on the reasons underlying high and low ratings given to children's English performances. Each of the six themes was intricately related to one another, with most of them showing a connection to *interactional flow.* However, the presence of *L1 usag*e and *NVB* may act as a double-edged sword and could potentially be considered as reverse-coded items, making it necessary to further investigate how specific elements impact a holistic perspective.

In speaking research on adults, where criteria based on CAF are commonly used, Sato and McNamara (2018) employed a qualitative approach to extract assessment criteria based on raters' perceptions. This method was partially replicated with this study. The current study focused on Japanese children revealed some alignment with adult criteria, however, there were differences. These were interpreted as due to children's limited vocabulary knowledge and the use of formulaic expressions in classroom-based

tests. Specifically, temporal aspects were not always interpreted in the same way. Fast responses, often relying on memorized formulaic expressions, may not reflect natural spontaneous interaction. Additionally, fillers, which were often categorized as disfluencies, were not necessarily perceived as negative as in adult interactions, but rather viewed as strategies to avoid silence.

Ultimately, while assessing interactional flow provides valuable insights into children's speaking interactions, it may also be worthwhile to distinguish between formulaic expressions and spontaneous interaction in the assessment process.

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Anna Szuchalska
University of Bialystok, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2358-0696
a.szuchalska@uwb.edu.pl

Exploring teacher competencies in early language education: Perspective of MA pedagogy students

The article aims at exploring students' perceptions of the significance of particular teachers' competencies in early language education. In the first part, a literature review synthesizing diverse definitions of teacher competencies based on varied criteria is presented. The second part depicts the results of a quantitative study involving a survey undertaken at the University of Bialystok, with 54 fourth-year pedagogy students majoring in early education participating. The survey instrument comprised closed-ended questions categorized into six competencies. The findings revealed that, among psychological and pedagogical competencies, skills and knowledge in fostering student motivation were deemed vital (59.3%). Educational competencies highlighted the significance of teacher's empathy, enthusiasm, and optimism (68.5%), while substantive competencies emphasized the importance of using the foreign language during lessons (63%). Intercultural competencies highlighted the importance of teacher's tolerance and openness (65%), and methodological and didactic competencies identified knowledge and skills in the concept of early school foreign language teaching as critical (53.7%). Among diagnostic competencies, the ability to interpret and evaluate lessons, observe and assess student involvement in linguistic activities, and recognize and understand errors were equally important (51.9%). The research

outcomes offer valuable insights into the perspectives of MA pedagogy students, shedding light on the competencies they deem essential for effective early language education.

Keywords: teacher competencies, early language education, quantitative study, survey, MA pedagogy students

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje nauczyciela, wczesne nauczanie języków obcych, badanie ilościowe, badanie sondażowe, studenci pedagogiki

1. Introduction

In the era of globalisation, the role of language teachers, particularly in early education, has become increasingly significant. In Poland, like in many other countries, the demand for proficient language instruction at the primary level has surged, driven by the growing recognition of early language acquisition as a basis of lifelong linguistic and cognitive development. With English being the prominent foreign language in Polish schools, the competencies required of language teachers in early education have received increased attention.

The importance of well-qualified language teachers in the early years cannot be overstated. Early education serves as the foundation for children's future academic success, and language skills are a critical component of this foundation. In Poland, educational reforms and the introduction of new curricula have emphasized the need to educate teachers who are not only proficient in the language they teach, but also equipped with the pedagogical skills necessary to engage young learners effectively. However, the concept of teacher competencies is multifaceted, encompassing not only linguistic proficiency, but also a deep understanding of pedagogical methodologies, cultural awareness, and the ability to foster a positive and inclusive learning environment.

This article seeks to explore students' perceptions of the significance of particular teachers' competencies in early language education within the Polish educational framework. The initial section of this paper provides a review of the literature, beginning with a description of professional requirements to be met in order to become a foreign language teacher in early education. Following this, the concept of 'competence' is defined and an extensive list of foreign language teacher competencies in early education is provided. The subsequent sections detail the study's methodology and present the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion, which includes final observations on the topic.

2. Teaching a foreign language in early education in Poland – Literature review

2.1. Professional requirements

Having analysed various European education policy documents, Komorowska and Krajka (2024) observed that all of them emphasize the importance of introducing foreign language instruction in early education, even as early as in pre-school. Recommendations contained in these documents resulted in several countries implementing foreign language education in early kindergarten, e.g. Poland, Luxembourg and Belgium at the age of 3, Greece at the age of 4, Cyprus and Malta at the age of 5 (Komorowska, Krajka, 2024: 28).

Professional requirements to be met in order to become a foreign language teacher in early education in Poland were defined in § 7 of the *Regulation of the Ministry of National Education* of October 10, 1991 and in the *Journal of Laws* No. 98, item 433 (with amendments). Teachers in early education who teach foreign languages are obliged to hold a diploma from a master's or professional degree programme in philology or applied linguistics, with accompanying pedagogical training, or a diploma from a teacher training college with pedagogical preparation, or a diploma from a dual-specialization master's programme in early childhood pedagogy and foreign language instruction. To teach a foreign language in a kindergarten, one is required to hold a language proficiency certificate at least at an upper-intermediate level (B2) and have completed postgraduate studies or a qualifying course in the field of early teaching of a given foreign language. The Annex to the *Regulation of the Ministry of National Education* of 12 March 2009 provides a list of certificates confirming knowledge of foreign languages with required grades. These are: a) First Certificate in English (FCE), b) International English Language Testing System (IELTS), c) Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) – Educational Testing Service (ETS), d) City & Guilds Level 1 Certificate in ESOL International (reading, writing and listening) Communicator (B2), e) Pearson Test of English General, f) Pearson Test of English Academic, g) Education Development International (EDI).

The need to develop a structured and consistent approach to teaching a foreign language in early education is essential as "YL [young learners] teachers are responsible not only for developing skills and building appropriate pronunciation and grammar, but also for fostering learners' motivation, [and] triggering their interest in the new language and appreciation for foreign cultures" (Komorowska, Krajka, 2024: 27-28). Thus, Stec (2009: 54) suggests that educating language teachers-to-be should be broadened to encompass early education, as students in their academic training

need to engage with both theoretical and practical aspects of both specializations. These include areas such as general, developmental, and educational psychology of children; general pedagogy; didactics; as well as theories and methodologies related to early education. Furthermore, students should be introduced to aspects of music, art, and speech therapy, and they should have the opportunity to participate in voice production classes, literary and drama courses, aesthetic education for children and youth, as well as remedial and compensatory education.

2.2. Teacher competencies in early language education

When asked what it means to be 'a good language teacher', respondents most often list diverse personality traits. They claim that an effective language instructor should be, *inter alia*, sincere, open to acknowledge students' mistakes, committed, tolerant, self-confident, creative, passionate, firm, fair, patient, respectful and authentic (Werbińska, 2004, 2011; Nosidlak, 2021, 2024). Being a proficient language teacher also means possessing certain competencies which might be defined as "a set of professional skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that every teacher must have in order to perform their job effectively" (Průcha, 2006: 306). The *Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport* of September 7, 2004 on teacher education standards provides a catalogue of competencies that should be acquired within preparation for the teaching profession. These are teaching, educational and social competences.

While teacher competencies are undoubtedly a crucial aspect of teacher education, there is no overall agreement on what these competencies entail. Werbińska (2011) identifies two reasons for this state of affairs:

> firstly, the conceptual foundation of teacher knowledge is very complex because it intermingles so much with the individual teacher's identity; secondly, it is so complex because it draws heavily on a number of related disciplines, such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, psychology and pedagogy, to name but a few (p. 39).

Indisputably, teacher competencies are dynamic, continually needing to be re-evaluated and developed, as they are "by their nature always unfinished, still insufficient and constantly in flux" (Kwaśnica, 2004: 294). This stems from the unique nature of the teaching profession, where each teaching scenario is distinct. Enhancing competencies is an integral part of a teacher's professional growth, which continues throughout their entire career.

Drawing from the analysis of both theoretical and empirical studies (Andrzejewska, 2008, Werbińska, 2011, Erenc-Grygoruk, 2013), several competencies can be identified as essential for fostering effective language acquisition and developing a positive learning environment. The different competencies of a teacher should be viewed as interconnected, not treated in isolation.

To facilitate the clarity of description and analysis in this article, the teacher competencies in early language education have been divided into six categories.

2.2.1. Psychological and pedagogical competence

Psychological competence may be defined as "the teacher's ability to communicate effectively with students" (Werbińska, 2011: 49) and is considered to be the core of being a good teacher, as it influences the teaching-learning atmosphere and student-teacher rapport. This competence also involves considering the characteristics of children's learning and behaviour that stem from their stage of psychomotor development. It is crucial, particularly in early education, as the teacher assumes a significant role in students' lives during this phase of development, acting more as a caregiver than a traditional educator.

Pedagogical competence refers to "those dimensions of teaching regarded as essential in the repertoire of any teacher, regardless of the subject matter" (Werbińska, 2011: 51). It is acquired in teacher education studies and various professional courses.

Broadly speaking, psychological and pedagogical competencies encompass the knowledge and skills in the fields of: holistic, multisensory teaching, applying the principle of visualization, task diversity, appropriate work pace during the lesson, developing motivation, using didactic games, developing autonomy, using various social forms of work during lessons, giving feedback for students and parents, selecting and structuring educational content, developing learning skills, individualizing the didactic process, using open forms of work, and implementing artistic activities (Andrzejewska, 2008: 44).

2.2.2. Educational competence

Educational competencies are described as the comprehensive set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that teachers need to effectively plan, deliver, and

assess educational experiences, while also addressing the developmental, psychological, and social needs of their students. According to Shulman (1987), these competencies involve not only content knowledge but also pedagogical content knowledge, which is crucial for delivering subject matter in ways that are understandable to students. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) emphasize that effective teachers must also possess the ability to manage classroom dynamics and use a variety of instructional strategies to meet diverse learners' needs. Furthermore, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) highlight that ongoing professional development is essential for teachers to refine these competencies and adapt to the changing educational landscape.

2.2.3. Substantive competence

Substantive competence may be defined as "the teaching skills specific to a particular subject matter" (Werbińska, 2011: 47). In the area of teaching English as a foreign language to young learners substantive competence refers to the teacher's deep understanding of the subject matter, including knowledge of English language structures, vocabulary, phonetics, and grammar, as well as the pedagogical skills required to effectively teach these elements to children. This competence involves the ability to select and apply appropriate teaching methods and theories that align with the developmental stages and learning styles of young learners.

According to Richards (2010), substantive competence is critical as it allows teachers to adapt their instructional strategies to suit the linguistic and cognitive abilities of their students. Cameron (2001) emphasizes the importance of understanding how young learners acquire a second language, noting that teachers must be skilled in creating engaging, meaningful, and contextually relevant learning experiences that promote language acquisition. Brewster and colleagues (2004) also stress the necessity of integrating language teaching with content that is relevant to the children's world, thus ensuring that language learning is both effective and enjoyable.

2.2.4. Multicultural competence

Multicultural competence refers to the capacity to communicate and collaborate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds who speak other languages. In order to do so, the teacher must be open and tolerant, able to shift perspectives, and possess the knowledge of both their own culture and that of the foreign language community. Multicultural competence is

essential for teachers to facilitate students' understanding, not only of foreign culture, but also their own, and to prepare them for effective intercultural communication. The competence is particularly important in the case of teaching a foreign language in early education, as one of the teachers' roles is to raise students' awareness of linguistic diversity in order to arouse their interest in learning other languages, which is stated in *the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 February 2017 on the core curriculum for preschool education and the core curriculum for general education for primary school, including for students with moderate or significant intellectual disabilities, general education for vocational schools of the first degree, general education for special schools preparing for work and general education for post-secondary schools.* The regulation establishes that one of the tasks of preschool is to "create educational situations that are conducive to building a child's interest in a modern foreign language and the desire to learn about other cultures."

2.2.5. Methodological and didactic competence

As Pfeiffer (2001: 195) describes it, methodological-didactic competence is "the ability to create and conduct effective glottodidactic processes". This means that it involves a teacher's proficiency in choosing, organizing, and implementing suitable teaching methods and strategies that correspond to children's developmental needs and learning styles. This competence includes the ability to design and structure lessons that capture the interest of young learners, encourage their active participation, and facilitate language acquisition through relevant and meaningful activities.

Educators with strong methodological and didactic skills are proficient in creating a learning environment that encourages interaction, curiosity, and motivation. They are capable of employing a range of instructional techniques, such as storytelling, games, songs, and visual aids, to make language learning both enjoyable and effective for young learners. Furthermore, they are able to assess students' progress and modify their teaching approaches to address the varied needs of their students, ensuring each child reaches their full potential in learning English.

2.2.6. Diagnostic competence

Diagnostic competence may be defined as "knowledge and skills necessary for effective implementation of tasks related to recognizing individual de-

velopmental and educational needs and psychophysical abilities of students (Klimek, 2016: 168). According to Andrzejewska (2008: 46), the ability to effectively assess and support a student's language development is multifaceted, encompassing a variety of skills. Teachers must possess knowledge of the methods available for obtaining information about a student's language progress. This includes the ability to create and utilize control tasks that are appropriate for a specific group of students, as well as to independently develop these tasks in ways that are engaging and attractive to children.

Monitoring students' language development progress is also crucial, as is recognizing and understanding the potential causes of errors. Teachers must be adept at observing and evaluating students' engagement during language activities and identifying their individual learning styles. Based on these observations, educators can make informed decisions regarding the most suitable didactic activities for each student.

In addition to these skills, teachers should be able to communicate effectively, with both students and parents, by preparing descriptive assessments that clearly articulate a student's knowledge and skills, particularly when they are beginning to learn a foreign language. Furthermore, the ability to interpret and evaluate lessons plays a significant role in the learning process, as does the capacity to use diagnostic results to enhance and support ongoing learning.

3. Method

3.1. Research aims and questions

The primary objective of this research project was to explore how pedagogy students majoring in early education perceive language teacher competencies. To align with the research objectives, the following questions were formulated:

1. What are the prevailing beliefs among MA pedagogy students majoring in early education about the essential competencies needed for effective language instruction in the fields of:
   a) psychological and pedagogical competencies
   b) educational competencies
   c) substantive competencies
   d) multicultural competencies
   e) methodological and didactic competencies
   f) diagnostic competencies?

3.2. Participants

Fifty-four MA pedagogy students majoring in early education from the University of Bialystok participated in the study. All of the respondents were fourth-year students. The reason for the selection of this particular group of participants was that they possessed characteristics and experiences directly related to the research questions, as earlier in the current academic year they had had a lecture on the methodology of early English language teaching, during which they discussed various topics related to the learning and teaching of English to young children. One of those topics was the competences of an English language teacher in early school education. All participants in the study were women, which is due to the specific nature of this particular university programme. It is unsurprising, given the historical perception of teaching as a profession predominantly associated with women. According to a report by the European Parliamentary Research Service, data from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries indicate that, on average, women comprise over two-thirds of teachers across all educational levels, from pre-primary to tertiary education (EPRS_ATA(2020)646191_EN). A similar trend is observed in the European Union, where in 2017, women accounted for 72% of the nearly 6 million school teachers in the EU (EPRS_ATA(2020)646191_EN). The majority were full-time students, while about one-fourth were part-time students.

3.3. Procedure

The study was conducted in November – December 2023. The participants were asked to complete an anonymous self-administered questionnaire. In order to limit ambiguity and ensure students' understanding of the survey, the questions were asked in Polish, as the participants' native language. The questionnaire was made available online (via Google Forms) for access at any time and from any location. The questionnaire was divided into six parts, corresponding to various competences under study. Each part consisted of several statements in Likert scale where 1 meant 'not significant' at all and 5 – 'highly significant'. A survey was selected as a research instrument because it is "a system for collecting information from or about people to describe, compare, or explain their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour" (Fink, 2003: 1), which means that it is the most convenient tool for gathering data from a large group of respondents.

The data was statistically analysed and the results were then interpreted.

3.4. Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted with R software (version R-4.1.2). Distribution of outcomes was presented using proportions.

4. Research findings

The next section outlines the main research findings, structured around the topics addressed in the questionnaire and corresponding to the research questions mentioned earlier.

The initial portion of the questionnaire facilitated the gathering of quantitative data, providing an understanding of participants' beliefs concerning psychological and pedagogical competences. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of outcomes in the field of psychological and pedagogical competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge and skills in the field of holistic, multisensory teaching	0.0	0.0	7.4	35.2	57.4
Knowledge and skills in the field of applying the principle of visualization	0.0	0.0	9.3	59.3	31.5
Knowledge and skills in the field of task diversity	0.0	5.6	11.1	31.5	51.9
Knowledge and skills in the field of appropriate work pace during the lesson	0.0	0.0	13.0	35.2	51.9
Knowledge and skills in the field of developing motivation	0.0	3.7	3.7	33.3	59.3
Knowledge and skills in the field of using didactic games	0.0	0.0	13.0	31.5	55.6
Knowledge and skills in the field of developing autonomy	0.0	3.7	27.8	27.8	40.7
Knowledge and skills in the field of using various social forms of work during the lessons	1.9	3.7	14.8	33.3	46.3
Knowledge and skills in the field of feedback for students and parents	1.9	0.0	13.0	48.1	37.0
Knowledge and skills in the field of selecting and structuring educational content	0.0	3.7	5.6	33.3	57.4
Knowledge and skills in the field of developing learning skills	0.0	1.9	1.9	38.9	57.4

Table 1 – cont.

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge and skills in the field of individualizing the didactic process	0.0	0.0	11.1	40.7	48.1
Knowledge and skills in the field of using open forms of work	0.0	3.7	25.9	37.0	33.3
Knowledge and skills in the field of ability and readiness to implement artistic activities (plastic, musical, theatrical, dance)	1.9	5.6	18.5	38.9	35.2

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

The analysis of the data in Table 1 shows that the competence students considered most vital was the teachers' knowledge and skills in fostering students' motivation (59.3%). This suggests that motivation is seen as a key factor in the learning process, and students place a high value on teachers who can inspire and engage them effectively. Respondents also felt that teachers should exhibit a similar level of proficiency in holistic, multisensory teaching, organizing and selecting educational content, and enhancing students' learning skills (57.4%). This indicates that students appreciate a comprehensive and well-structured approach to learning. They recognize the value of varied teaching methods that cater to different learning styles and the importance of a clear and coherent curriculum. Conversely, the expertise that received the least emphasis from participants was in the areas of applying the principle of visualization (31.5%) and using open forms of work (33.3%). This may suggest that students may either feel less impact from these methods or believe that other competencies are more crucial for their learning success.

The second section of the questionnaire focused on educational competencies. The findings are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of outcomes in the field of educational competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge of educational psychology	0.0	1.9	18.5	29.6	50.0
Ability to diagnose behaviours characteristic of a given age group	0.0	3.7	5.6	42.6	48.1

Table 2 – cont.

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to shape norms and principles of conduct and attitudes	0.0	1.9	9.3	38.9	50.0
Sensitivity and caring of the teacher	0.0	1.9	9.3	29.6	59.3
Empathy, enthusiasm, optimism of the teacher	1.9	1.9	3.7	24.1	68.5

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

As indicated by the data analysis in Table 2, empathy, enthusiasm, and optimism are highly valued, with 92.6% of respondents rating these qualities as „significant" or „very significant". This suggests that personal qualities and a positive attitude are seen as crucial for effective teaching. The sensitive and caring nature of the teacher are also rated highly, with 88.9% considering it „important" or „very important." This underscores the importance of a nurturing and supportive approach in education. The ability to shape norms, principles of conduct, and attitudes is considered significant, with 88.9% of respondents rating it as „important" or „very important." This highlights the role of teachers in guiding students' behaviour and moral development. Knowledge of educational psychology is also regarded as essential, with 79.6% of respondents considering it „important" or „very important." This reflects the value placed on understanding psychological principles in teaching. The ability to diagnose behaviours characteristic of a given age group is highly valued, with 90.7% rating it as „important" or „very important." This indicates the importance of teachers being able to recognize and respond to developmental stages.

The third part of the questionnaire concentrated on substantive competencies. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of outcomes in the field of substantive competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Teacher's oral language skills	1.9	5.6	14.8	46.3	31.5
Ability to respond spontaneously and correctly to situations occurring in the classroom	0.0	3.7	9.3	38.9	48.1
Ability to explain the rules of language games	0.0	1.9	11.1	37.0	50.0

Table 3 – cont.

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to tell fairy tales	0.0	11.1	27.8	33.3	27.8
Ability to use a foreign language during lessons	0.0	3.7	3.7	29.6	63.0
Excellent pronunciation	0.0	1.9	7.4	33.3	57.4
Knowledge of the characteristic register of the language, including rhymes, poems, songs, children's games	1.9	3.7	16.7	48.1	29.6
Ability to adjust the level of difficulty of the utterance to the recipient - a child starting to learn a foreign language	0.0	0.0	7.4	37.0	55.6
Ability to manage one's own professional development	0.0	3.7	22.2	38.9	35.2

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

Based on the data provided in Table 3, several conclusions can be drawn about the participants' perceptions of various substantive competencies. The ability to use a foreign language during lessons is considered highly important, with 92.6% of respondents rating it as either „significant" or „very significant." This suggests that practical language usage is a top priority for effective teaching. Excellent pronunciation and the ability to explain the rules of language games are also seen as crucial, with 90.7% and 87% of respondents, respectively, rating these skills as „important" or „very important." This highlights the value placed on clear communication and the ability to clarify concepts in teaching. The ability to respond spontaneously and correctly to situations in the classroom is rated as important or very important by 87% of respondents, emphasizing the need for teachers to be adaptable and responsive to dynamic classroom environments. The ability to tell fairy tales is considered moderately important, with 61.1% of respondents rating it as „important" or „very important." While valued, it is not as highly prioritized as other competencies. The ability to adjust the level of difficulty of language to suit a child's learning stage is highly regarded, with 92.6% rating it as „important" or „very important." This reflects the importance of tailoring instruction to the learner's level. The ability to manage one's own professional development is also seen as significant, with 74.1% rating it as „important" or „very important." This indicates a recognition of the need for continuous learning and self-improvement among teachers. Knowledge of the characteristic register of the language, including rhymes, poems, songs, and children's games, received a lower importance

rating, with 77.7% of respondents finding it „important" or „very important." While still valued, it appears to be less critical compared to other competencies.

The following section of the questionnaire focused on multicultural competencies. The findings are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of outcomes in the field of multicultural competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
The ability to communicate and cooperate with people from other cultural backgrounds and speaking other languages	0.0	3.7	24.1	40.7	31.5
An attitude of openness and tolerance	1.9	0.0	9.3	25.9	63.0
Knowledge of the culture of one's own country and the country and community speaking the foreign language	0.0	0.0	20.4	50.0	29.6
Making students sensitive to linguistic diversity in order to develop their linguistic awareness and interest in other languages	0.0	3.7	9.3	42.6	44.4

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

As indicated in Table 4, an attitude of openness and tolerance is rated as highly significant, with 88.9% of respondents considering it „important" or „very important." This suggests that students view these qualities as crucial for effective communication and cooperation in multicultural environments. Making students sensitive to linguistic diversity is also regarded as significant, with 87% of respondents rating it as „important" or „very important." This indicates a strong recognition of the importance of developing students' interest in and awareness of different languages. The ability to communicate and cooperate with people from other cultural backgrounds is seen as important by 72.2% of respondents. While still valued, it ranks slightly lower than openness and linguistic awareness, suggesting that students prioritize attitudes over specific skills. Knowledge of one's own culture and that of others is moderately emphasized, with 79.6% of respondents viewing it as „important" or „very important." This suggests that while cultural knowledge is important, it is considered slightly less critical than openness and tolerance.

The last but one section of the survey centred on methodological and didactic competencies. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution of outcomes in the field of methodological and didactic competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge and skills in the area of the processes of acquiring the first language and foreign languages,	0.0	1.9	16.7	38.9	42.6
Knowledge and skills in the area of the concept of early school foreign language teaching,	0.0	1.9	13.0	31.5	53.7
Knowledge and skills in the area of the ability to plan the process of teaching a foreign language	0.0	0.0	11.1	38.9	50.0
Knowledge and skills in the area of supporting the development of foreign language learning strategies by children	0.0	0.0	16.7	40.7	42.6
Knowledge and skills in the area of using information technology during lessons (selection of materials and their appropriate, goal-oriented use)	1.9	0.0	20.4	37.0	40.7
Knowledge and skills in the area of supporting the development of students' skills in using media to learn a foreign language	0.0	5.6	18.5	44.4	31.5
Knowledge and skills in the area of acquiring and using additional (authentic) teaching materials in lessons	1.9	0.0	24.1	38.9	35.2
Knowledge and skills in the area of preparing their own teaching materials	1.9	1.9	18.5	35.2	42.6
Knowledge and skills in the area of knowledge of methods of early school foreign language teaching in the area of individual skills	0.0	3.7	13.0	40.7	42.6
Knowledge and skills in the area of using narrative texts	0.0	3.7	40.7	35.2	20.4
Knowledge and skills in the area of teaching a foreign language through meaningful action in an authentic situational context	0.0	5.6	20.4	46.3	27.8
Knowledge and skills in the area of developing self-assessment skills, working with a portfolio	1.9	7.4	33.3	37.0	20.4
Knowledge and skills in the area of evaluation and selection of textbooks	0.0	7.4	13.0	51.9	27.8
Knowledge and skills in the area of integration of teaching content with language teaching	0.0	1.9	16.7	37.0	44.4
Knowledge and skills in creating your own methodological background	0.0	0.0	20.4	37.0	42.6
Knowledge and skills in understanding the place of teaching children a foreign language in the context of further learning of this language	0.0	1.9	16.7	44.4	37.0
Knowledge and skills in explaining the goals and methods of teaching to children, parents and other teachers	0.0	7.4	18.5	37.0	37.0

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

Based on the data from Table 5 regarding methodological and didactic competencies, the following conclusions can be drawn from the highest and lowest scoring statements. The statement concerning knowledge and skills in the area of the concept of early school foreign language teaching received the highest score, with 53.7% of respondents rating it as „very important." This indicates a strong emphasis on understanding foundational concepts in early foreign language education, suggesting that participants believe this knowledge is crucial for effective teaching practices. Another high-scoring statement was knowledge and skills in the area of the processes of acquiring a first language and foreign languages, with 42.6% rating it as „very important." This highlights the importance of understanding language acquisition processes, which is essential for developing effective teaching strategies. The statement about knowledge and skills in the area of using narrative texts received the lowest rating, with only 20.4% of respondents marking it as „very important." This suggests that participants may view the use of narrative texts as less critical in their methodological approach to language teaching, potentially indicating a preference for other teaching strategies. Similarly, the knowledge and skills in the area of developing self-assessment skills and working with a portfolio also scored low, with only 20.4% rating it as „very important." This could reflect a lower priority placed on self-assessment techniques in the overall teaching methodology.

The final section of the survey focused on diagnostic competencies. The findings are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6. Distribution of outcomes in the field of diagnostic competencies

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Knowledge of possible methods of obtaining information about the student's language development	0.0	1.9	24.1	33.3	40.7
Ability to use control tasks appropriately for a given group of students	0.0	1.9	11.1	57.4	29.6
Ability to independently create control tasks	0.0	3.7	16.7	48.1	31.5
Ability to prepare control tasks in a form that is attractive to children	0.0	1.9	13.0	40.7	44.4
Ability to monitor progress in students' language development	0.0	0.0	9.3	50.0	40.7
Ability to recognize errors and search for and understand their possible causes	0.0	1.9	14.8	31.5	51.9
Ability to observe and assess the student's engagement in language activities during the lesson	0.0	3.7	7.4	37.0	51.9

Table 6 – cont.

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to recognize the learning styles of individual students	0.0	5.6	13.0	42.6	38.9
Ability to make decisions about appropriate didactic activities concerning individual students	0.0	1.9	7.4	50.0	40.7
Ability to formulate information addressed to the student and parents and to prepare a descriptive assessment	0.0	7.4	9.3	35.2	48.1
Ability to assess the knowledge and skills of a student starting to learn a foreign language	0.0	3.7	5.6	48.1	42.6
Ability to interpret and evaluate the lesson	0.0	5.6	9.3	33.3	51.9
Ability to use the results of the diagnosis to support learning processes	0.0	1.9	7.4	42.6	48.1

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

The analysis of the data in Table 6 shows that the ability to recognize errors and search for and understand their possible causes also scored highly, with 51.9% rating it as „very important." This suggests that the ability to diagnose and analyse errors is viewed as a key competency in fostering students' language learning. Additionally, the statement concerning knowledge of possible methods of obtaining information about the student's language development received the highest rating, with 40.7% of respondents marking it as „very important." This indicates that participants see this knowledge as crucial for effectively understanding and supporting students' language development. On the lower end, the ability to recognize the learning styles of individual students received a modest rating, with only 38.9% indicating it as „very important." This may suggest that while recognizing learning styles is acknowledged, it is not considered as critical as other diagnostic competencies, indicating a potential area for development in teacher training. Another statement that scored relatively low was the ability to independently create control tasks, with 31.5% rating it as „very important." This suggests that participants may feel less confident in, or place less priority on, this specific skill, compared to other diagnostic abilities.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the perceptions of MA pedagogy students regarding the essential competencies of language

teachers in early education. Students placed significant emphasis on the teacher's ability to foster motivation, highlighting its role in engaging young learners. This is consistent with Werbińska's (2011) view that creating a motivating learning environment is central to effective teaching. Empathy, enthusiasm, and optimism emerged as the most valued traits, highlighting the importance of personal qualities in shaping the educational experience. These findings resonate with Darling-Hammond and Bransford's (2005) assertion that effective teaching relies not only on content knowledge but also on emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. The emphasis on using a foreign language during lessons aligns with Richards' (2010) focus on practical language application in teaching. Foundational knowledge of early language acquisition and teaching methods was prioritized, reflecting the need for a solid theoretical basis in practice. The high importance placed on openness and tolerance aligns with the growing emphasis on intercultural awareness in education (Komorowska & Krajka, 2024).

These findings suggest a need for balanced teacher training programs that emphasize both theoretical and practical aspects of language education. While the competencies highlighted by the participants reflect a strong foundation for effective teaching, areas such as intercultural communication and innovative methodologies could be further reinforced. Additionally, the relatively lower emphasis on diagnostic competencies points to the importance of integrating these skills more prominently in teacher preparation curricula.

6. Final remarks

The conclusions drawn from the literature review and the quantitative analysis of the collected data have been organized according to the research questions.

As for psychological and pedagogical competence, the conclusions suggest that, for the respondents, the most effective teachers are those who can motivate, engage, and provide structured, multisensory learning experiences, while less emphasis is placed on more experimental or visual teaching methods.

The data concerning educational competence implies that participants place significant importance on both the personal qualities of the teacher, such as empathy and enthusiasm, and their professional skills, such as understanding educational psychology and managing student behaviour. The combination of these competencies is seen as essential for effective teaching and student development.

In the field of substantive competence the information gathered in the study indicates that teachers prioritize practical language use, clear communication, adaptability, and professional development as key competencies in their roles. Skills such as storytelling and specific language knowledge, while important, are viewed as somewhat less critical.

In the area of multicultural competence, the data collected in the study reveals that participants place the highest importance on fostering openness, tolerance, and linguistic awareness in a multicultural setting. Communication skills and cultural knowledge are also valued but are seen as somewhat less critical than these overarching attitudes.

Regarding methodological and didactic competence, the findings indicate that respondents highly value competencies related to foundational concepts in foreign language teaching and language acquisition processes. In contrast, there is less emphasis on the use of narrative texts and self-assessment skills, suggesting areas where teachers may feel less confident or may prioritize other teaching methods over these approaches.

Overall, the data concerning diagnostic competence reveals that participants prioritize competencies related to understanding students' language development and diagnosing errors, highlighting the significance of these skills in effective teaching practices. In contrast, competencies such as recognizing learning styles and independently creating control tasks are viewed as less critical, which may reflect areas where teachers feel less equipped or prioritize other aspects of their diagnostic expertise.

As Werbińska (2011: 64) concludes, the competencies of language teachers in early education are multifaceted as "the composite elements are interrelated with one another and, as one framework, correlate positively with a construct of human wisdom as an educational value", and essential for facilitating effective language learning. Pedagogical knowledge, linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, interpersonal skills, and the ability to assess and reflect on practice are all critical components of a successful language educator's skill set. As the literature suggests, developing these competencies is vital for teachers to create engaging, supportive, and effective language learning environments for young learners. Continuous professional development and training are essential to ensure that teachers can adapt to the evolving needs of their students and the educational landscape.

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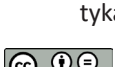
Eva Jakupčević
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split, Croatia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6695-4531
ejakupcevic@ffst.hr

Directives in teacher talk with primary school EFL learners: A study of five teachers in Croatia

Teachers represent important pragmatic models for their students (Barón, et al., 2020). While teacher talk has been viewed as providing learners with a limited variety of pragmatic language (e.g., Nikula, 2002), there has also been evidence that it can be pragmatically attuned to the learners' needs (Martí, Portolés, 2019). The present study is an analysis of directives in the teacher talk of five L1 Croatian teachers working with primary school EFL learners (aged 12/13). Five 45-minute EFL lessons were analysed, one for each teacher, with the aim of identifying and quantifying the occurrences of directives in instructional and regulative classroom discourse. A further qualitative analysis provides insight into how the teachers' choice of directives relates to contextual matters in respect to their realisation (i.e., degree of directness, use of modifying strategies). The results are in line with previous studies, with teachers showing an overall preference for directness (e.g., Chen, Tseng, 2015; Liu, Hong, 2009). However, all of the teachers used directives to build interaction and scaffold their students' language, while maintaining a relatively informal atmosphere, which may be linked to their choice of more direct forms. Ultimately, the highly diverse individual styles of the teachers seemed to be reflected most in their preference for particular forms.

Keywords: teacher talk, directives, pragmatics

Słowa kluczowe: język klasowy nauczyciela, akty dyrektywne, pragmatyka



1. Introduction

In the context of learning a second or foreign language (L2), pragmatic competence is the skill of applying the knowledge of words and structures of the L2 in actual communication and adapting it to different social situations (Glaser, 2018). Language teachers represent important pragmatic models for their students, as well as a potential source of a wide range of language input, such as the basic rules of politeness, or appropriate formulaic expressions (Barón, et al., 2020; LoCastro, 2012). For these reasons, it is important to analyse teacher talk as a relevant source of pragmatic language for young language learners (YLLs), i.e. learners between the ages of 5 and 12-13 (Drew, Hasselgreen, 2008). Due to the specificities of classroom talk, especially regarding the teacher's central role in the organisation and management of discourse, teachers spend a lot of time asking the students to do (or stop doing) something, i.e., employing directive speech acts. The ubiquity of directives in L2 teacher talk means that an analysis of these forms may offer fruitful opportunities for exploring how teachers manage interaction and whether they provide pragmatically rich and varied input. Such exploration is especially important given that EFL classrooms are sometimes described as offering restricted opportunities for pragmatic development (Romero-Trillo, 2002). Existing studies of directives in teacher talk focus mostly on secondary (CLIL) and adult contexts, and studies with YLLs are very scarce. Thus, the present study focuses on the use of directives in the classroom talk of five Croatian EFL teachers working with YLLs, with the aim of shedding light on the teachers' pragmatic choices as well as their potential as pragmatic models for their students.

2. Theoretical background

Although studies on the pragmatic competence of L2 learners have mostly focused on adult or adolescent learners, interest in pragmatics in the YLL context has been on the rise (see Schauer (2022) for an overview of relevant research). LoCastro (2012) states that teachers are responsible for including work on pragmatic competence in their classrooms, as this involves presenting language as a means of communication, and not simply as an object of study. In other words, teachers should ensure that their language includes a wide variety of pragmatic forms and that they draw their students' attention to these forms in some way.

However, there is a widely held perception that teacher-managed discourse presents an impediment to pragmatic learning (Martí, Portolés,

2019). The traditional three-part classroom exchange pattern, known as initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) or initiation-response-feedback (IRF), has been prevalent in language classrooms (Hosoda, Aline, 2013), and the limited space it leaves for the development of skills necessary for real-life conversations can also be seen as detrimental to the students' pragmatic development. Furthermore, as Cohen (2018: 2) notes, "teachers may not have easy access to practical suggestions as to what to do about their own gaps in knowledge when it comes to pragmatics."

For all of these reasons, studies of how teachers use aspects of pragmatic language, such as speech acts, in the very specific context of the L2 classroom are of relevance. According to Dalton-Puffer (2005), school lessons are characterised by the clearly differentiated roles of the participants, in terms of hierarchical status, who are at the same time familiars. The teacher is the one who allocates turns in most classroom situations, which is commonly seen as teachers enacting control over the students' contribution (Fasel Lauzon, Berger, 2015). It is therefore not surprising that directives are a frequent feature of different types of classrooms (Dalton-Puffer, 2005). Directives are speech acts (requests, questions, warnings) used by a speaker when they want the hearer to do, or to stop doing, something (Ellis, 1992). This can refer to physical or mental actions which are part of either regulative or instructional discourse (Martí, Portolés, 2019). Regulative discourse refers to the teacher using the L2 to manage the social environment of the classroom, and embedded into it is instructional discourse, where language is used to talk about the 'content' being taught (Christie, 2000). The efficacy of directives is essential to optimizing learning outcomes, making them a crucial part of classroom discourse (Waring, Hruska, 2012).

Because of the very specific role teachers play in the classroom, even when they do not utter an explicit directive, students are required to pay attention by the very fact that they are in an educational setting, so, many types of utterances can acquire the force of directives (Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, 2006). Classroom directives can be realized as requests, but also as questions or warnings (Martí, Portolés, 2019), and we can differentiate between requests for information and requests for action (Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, 2006). Requests for information, mostly display (knowledge-testing) and referential (genuine information-seeking) questions, dominate the instructional discourse. The realization of directives can vary in degree of directness, depending on the linguistic choices made by the speaker. These choices, in turn, are influenced by factors such as the degree of familiarity, or distribution of social power, given the potential of directives to be face-threatening (Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, 2006). However, transfer of information is the socially sanctioned purpose of classroom settings, which means that

directives in support of this goal are low imposition by definition. Therefore, direct strategies, with minimal internal or external modification, are expected in this context (Dalton-Puffer, 2005).

Studies in various L2 contexts (CLIL, adult, young learner) have confirmed the ubiquity of directives in classroom discourse, as well as teachers' preference for direct strategies, especially when it comes to requests for information (Basra, Thoyyibah, 2017; Chen, Tseng, 2015; Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, 2006; Liu, Hong, 2009; Martí, Portolés, 2019). In CLIL secondary school contexts, regulative discourse features more variety when it comes to how directives are performed, which seems to be dependent on a number of contextual factors, such as the teachers' language proficiency, the interactive style of their L1, or the students' age (Dalton-Puffer, 2005; Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, 2006). In the primary English classroom, studies of teacher directives are scarce. In this context, directness seems to be the norm in regulative discourse, such as in the study conducted by Liu and Hong (2009), who found that imperatives accounted for a majority (62.69%) of teacher directives. However, it is necessary to go beyond qualitative data in order to gain more insight into the potential appropriateness, or usefulness of teachers' directive behaviour, which few studies do. In a rare study with very young language learners, Martí and Portolés (2019) studied the pedagogic functions of two teachers' directives, by analysing two 45-minute lessons with pre-schoolers between the ages of 4 and 5. The predominance of display questions and imperatives in the study was in line with previous studies across different ages and instructional settings; however, a deeper analysis showed that pragmatic skilfulness should not be measured only according to the level of directness, or the use of peripheral modification devices, or the teachers' proficiency. The authors' analysis reveals a range of contextual factors that counterbalance the teachers' directness, for example, their avoidance of threats, co-occurrence of praise in their feedback and so on. The authors conclude that the degree to which the teachers strive to establish good rapport with their students, and demonstrate their awareness of students' needs, linked to contextual factors, are key variables

Studies of how teachers use pragmatic language in the YLL classroom can be of great use to practitioners and of interest to researchers, especially if they provide both quantitative and qualitative data, thus providing a more detailed picture of teachers' language use. However, such studies are still few and far between, especially within the Croatian context. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to fill this gap, by providing insight into the extent to which Croatian EFL teachers use their directive language in a pragmatically attuned way, and examining the contextual factors influencing this use.

4. The present study

4.1. Research questions

Given the importance of pragmatic competence as an essential part of communicative competence and the relevance of teacher talk as a key source of pragmatic input (LoCastro, 2012), the present study uses both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the young learner classroom as a pragmatic environment, through an analysis of teacher directives. The study is focused on the following research questions:

1. What types of directives are used by the five Croatian teachers of YLLs in their L2 English classes as part of regulatory and instructional classroom discourse?
2. How does the teachers' choice of directives relate to contextual matters with respect to how directives are realized?

4.2. Data and methodology

This study was conducted on data from authentic classroom settings – five EFL lessons given by five English language teachers, L1 Croatian speakers (T1 - T5). The teachers were specialist EFL teachers with a university degree in English language teaching from different Croatian universities, with 5 or more years of experience working with primary-age students. They were a convenience sample and volunteered to participate in the study. The five recorded lessons were conducted with students in the 7th grade of primary school (aged 12/13), who were predominantly in their 7th year of learning English. A foreign language, typically English, is a compulsory subject in Croatian primary schools from year 1 (age 6/7), taught in two 45-minute lessons per week in the first four years (70 lessons per year), and three lessons per week in grades 5-8 (105 lessons per year). In addition to English language lessons at school, Croatian children sometimes attend additional lessons at private foreign language schools which offer courses that complement the regular school programme. Two of the lessons in our sample were recorded at public primary schools (T1, T2), with approximately 20 students per class, and three at private language schools (T3, T4, T5), with 10 students per class, on average.

Before the recording took place, approval was obtained from the school principals and informed consent was sought from the parents and the students. The classes were recorded by the teachers using audio recorders placed on their desks to minimise intrusion and ensure authenticity. In total,

approximately 225 minutes of classroom time was recorded, and the recordings were transcribed.

The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data with contextual examples, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the use of directives in our corpus. In the first step of the analysis, teacher directives, defined as any instance of a teacher's utterance aimed at getting the hearer to do, or stop doing, something (Ellis, 1992), whether to perform an action or provide information, were identified in the corpus. The QualCoder software (Curtain, 2023) was used to code the occurrences of directives in the transcripts in line with a pre-determined coding scheme, based on previous studies (Liu, Hong, 2009; Martí, Portolés, 2019). The coding categories included:

a) directives performed within the instructional vs. regulative register;
b) requests for information vs. requests for action;
c) type of request head act (Table 1); and
d) presence of internal and external modifying devices (Table 2).

The coding was performed by the author of the study and repeated a month later, yielding an intra-rater reliability score of 95%. The QualCoder software was then used to calculate the frequencies of the relevant categories, both overall and for individual teachers. Finally, specific examples were selected to illustrate the use of particular directives as well as related contextual issues.

Table 1. Typology of request head acts in teacher directives with examples from the corpus (adapted from Liu & Hong, 2009; Martí & Portolés, 2019) (own study)

Imperatives	Elliptical	Full sentence. (T2)
	Bold	Do this in your notebooks. (T4)
	Prefaced	Ok so do it together as a group. (T5)
	Inclusive	Let's do exercise six. (T3)
Declaratives speaker-based	Hedged performative	I will ask you please X to sit here with Y. (T1)
	Want/need	I want you to do your workbook page forty-five. (T4)
Declaratives hearer-oriented	Obligation	You have to describe it. (T5)
	Permission	You can take another one. (T1)
	Inclusive	We'll read all of the sentences. (T1)
	Hint	Everybody is listening in this row. (T1)
Interrogative	Ability	Can you talk to me in English? (T5)
	Willingness	Will you please read the first sentence in this plan of action? (T4)
	Permission	May I get the other one please? (T1)

Table 2. Examples of internal and external modification from the corpus (own study)

Internal modification		External modification	
Type	Example	Type	Example
Attention-getters	**Come on**, figure out something, just one. (T1)	Grounders Reasons/ conditions	Now um **since we're talking about adjectives in this unit** um I want you to choose a person um who you admire (T5)
Fillers (appealers)	Try to find those that are a little bit more difficult, **ok?** (T5)	Disarmers Cost-minimizers/ sweeteners	**If it's easier for you** you can also do exercise one, complete the table with the words in blue (T4)
Softeners	Two ok well one more and that's enough **just** cut cut um um those pieces of paper. (T5)	Expanders	What happened Vicky in English **what happened?** (T2)
		Appreciation	Going out with, so this is a? three-part phrasal verb, **thank you**, the next one, Martin, will you please?

5. Results and discussion

A total of 891 directives were identified in our corpus, 372 of which were used in the instructional and 507 in the regulative register (Table 3). This confirms that directives are ubiquitous in primary school teacher talk, with the individual teachers using between 132 (T2) and 248 (T5) instances of this speech act in their lessons. However, in comparison to pre-primary teacher talk explored in Martí and Portolés's (2019) study, where the two teachers used a total of 826 directive speech acts, directives are less widely employed. We can presume that this is because of the age of the students who are already very familiar with the classroom setting and thus may need less direction than pre-primary students.

Table 3. Individual teachers' use of directives in the regulative and instructional register (own study)

Teacher	Regulative (RA/RI)	Instructional (DIS/REF)	Total
T1	184 (133/51)	38 (4/34)	222
T2	67 (59/8)	65 (30/35)	132
T3	57 (44/13)	80 (61/19)	137

Table 3 – cont.

Teacher	Regulative (RA/RI)	Instructional (DIS/REF)	Total
T4	82 (61/21)	70 (32/38)	152
T5	117 (85/32)	117 (45(72)	248
Total	507 (382/125)	370 (198/172)	891

Note: RA – requests for action; RI – requests for information; DIS – display questions; REF – referential questions.

In line with previous studies (e.g., Dalton-Puffer, 2005; Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, 2006; Martí, Portolés, 2019), directives were generally more frequent in the regulative register, with notable differences between individual teachers. While teachers T2 and T5 used an (almost) equal number of directives in both registers, teacher T3 employed fewer directives in the regulative register, and T4 used more. Teacher T1 stands out, with 38 instances of this speech act employed in the instructional, and almost five times more, 184, in the regulative register. According to Dalton-Puffer and Nikula (2006), teachers' regulative talk tends to be more monologic than instructional talk, so a high ratio of directives in the regulative register could be taken as an indication of more authoritative, or teacher-centred, classroom talk. However, as noted by Martí and Portolés (2019), there are many other contextual factors at play. The classrooms in this study are what Dalton-Puffer (2005: 1282) calls "a prototypical one-vs.-many participant situation, combining a clear hierarchical differential between participants with an uneven distribution of speaking rights." This means that teachers do most of the speaking. However, although teacher-fronted activities are predominant in the corpus, there are also instances of pairwork and groupwork. In other words, there is variation in classroom activities depending on the material taught by teachers, as well as their personal teaching styles.

For example, while all the lessons included activities related to grammar, most of the teachers relied on the students completing and reading activities in the coursebook, while teacher T1's lesson included several activities where students worked on the topic in pairs and groups using an inductive approach. This type of classroom organisation is more demanding when it comes to classroom management and calls for more use of directives in regulative discourse (Martí, Portolés, 2019). Example 1 illustrates a section of T1's talk in which she first asks several students to change places to be able to work in pairs, followed by an explanation of the activity. The teacher used a variety of realizations of directives to organize the activity, such as direct infinitives and hedged performatives modified by "please" (line 1) and the interrogative (line 3) and declarative (lines 4 and 5) modal

+ 2nd person (ps.) pronoun forms, also modifying her directive in line 3 with a grounder explaining the reason for her request. In lines 6 and 7, the teacher asks a rhetorical question about the purpose of the task and answers it, which acts as another grounder explaining the reason for the directives she employs (lines 6 and 7). Despite the less direct forms and modifying devices used by this teacher, it is clear from the way she nominates students that they are expected to comply, highlighting the teacher's authority. This excerpt also illustrates T1's very verbose personal discourse style.

Example 1

1 T1: Don't open it please, it's a sentence and in your pairs I will ask you please Paul to sit
2 over there with Dean and Daisy you come here to Pete so that the two of you can
3 can also participate in the activities (2) Lilly can you come next to Phil please, ok
4 you can go next to Ken. If you finish earlier, you have four more sentences, you can
5 take them and work on them as well, they are the sentences with words, and please
6 make sentences out of these words. Why, to see what we are going to talk about
7 today, right?

As shown in Table 3, only requests for information, i.e., questions, were found in the instructional register, with a total of 370 instances. Requests for information were also found in the regulative register (a total of 125). The fact that questions feature so frequently in the teachers' speech is not surprising, as transfer of information is one of the key tasks of the school as an institution, with teachers offering curricular content and demanding information about their student's state of mind about this content (Dalton-Puffer, 2005). In other words, requests for information are sanctioned by the teacher's institutional role. For this reason, it is hardly surprising that questions are usually asked very directly, without any modification. In the regulative register, requests for information are generally questions related to issues such as attendance, turn-taking and classroom organisation. In Example 2, the teacher asked a question about the student's absence as part of the regulative register, i.e., the attendance-taking portion of the lesson (line 1). In the lines that follow, the teacher showed interest in the student's personal life by asking two referential questions (lines 3 and 5). While the teacher used English during the exchange, the student kept responding in Croatian, with the teacher recasting her responses in English. This was a regular feature of some of the lessons, with the teacher presumably using these opportunities to present new language to students, blurring the lines between the regulative and instructional register. However, the fact that the teacher in this example did not ask the student to respond in English also indicates that English might not be the usual norm in this portion of the class,

with the teacher potentially insisting on English because the recording was taking place, as in the later sections of the class it becomes obvious that the student in question did indeed have the linguistic ability to respond to the teacher in English.

Example 2
1 T4: Mary, where were you last time?
2 S: *Bila sam na pregledu* /I had a check-up/
3 T4: Oh you- so you were at the doctor's, are you okay?
4 S: *Ma nešto mi je bilo s uhom* /it was something with my ear/
5 T4: Okay mhm have you got earache?
6 S: A?
7 T4: Earache? *Uhobolja?*
8 S: *Baš za sluh* /for my hearing/
9 T4: Ah okay.

Looking at the type of questions asked by the teachers in the instructional register, the results indicate that, overall, the teachers asked slightly more display (198) than referential (172) questions (Table 3). This difference is much less emphasised than in some other studies, e.g., Martí and Portolés (2019), where 86% of the questions were display questions. Once again, the results differ for individual teachers (Figure 1). Teachers T2 and T4 asked only slightly more display than referential questions, while T1 employed only 4 referential questions in contrast with 34 display questions. Teacher T3 asked the second highest number of questions in instructional discourse, after T5, and the highest number of referential questions overall.

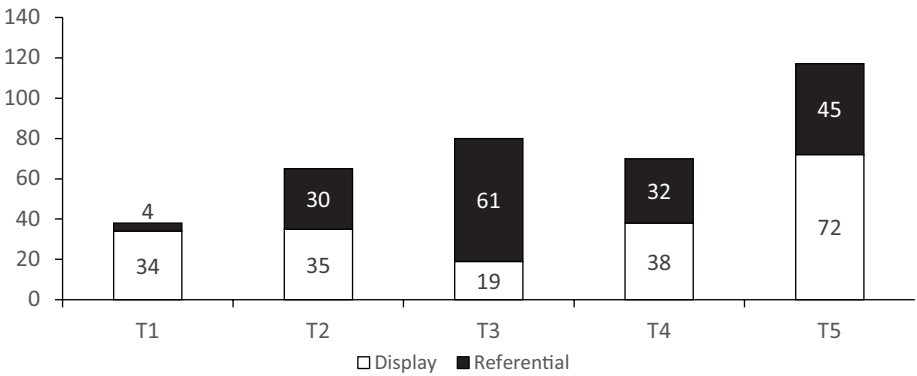


Figure 1. Individual teachers' use of display and referential questions in the instructional register

Source: own study.

Referential questions have often been seen as providing more opportunities for extended student responses, while display questions elicit shorter, more mechanical responses (Ho, 2005). Referential questions could thus be seen as proof that the teachers move beyond the IRF/IRE patterns of questioning typical of display questions to engage students in instances of real, information-seeking conversation (Martí, Portolés, 2019); however, this type of questioning may sometimes not be conducive to more extended interaction, with many instances of referential questions in our corpus yielding limited responses. Moreover, as Lee (2006: 691) noted, "display questions are central resources whereby language teachers and students organize their lessons and produce language pedagogy". For this reason, the differences between the teachers' use of display vs. referential questions cannot be directly attributed to the quality of the discourse in their classes. Overall, a high ratio of directives in instructional discourse may be seen as a reflection of more typical IRE/IRF sequences, with students spending most of their time responding to teacher questions. For example, the high number of questions in T3's class was a result of her constant effort to get the students engaged with the topic of the class and the difficulties she had in eliciting extended answers from them. Despite the small size of the class (10 students) and a topic which may be regarded as something that could be of interest to that age group (celebrities as role models), her efforts were made more difficult by two disruptive students who spent a lot of the class talking in Croatian and commenting on the other students' answers. In other words, the general unwillingness of the students to produce longer responses might be caused by the atmosphere in the classroom. Example 3 illustrates the many referential questions this teacher asked throughout the lesson to elicit extended responses, or to encourage students to engage in conversation. In the process she often repeated questions (line 4, line 6/7) or expanded them (line 2). She received short responses (line 3), at times quite direct or even rude (line 8). S3's answer in line 10 seemed almost like the student was doing the teacher a favour in answering the question, after several attempts by the teacher to get the conversation going.

Example 3

1 T3: Ok what about David Beckham they mentioned David Beckham could he be a
2 role model to someone to a little boy little child I don't know.
3 S1: Well maybe.
4 T3: Maybe ok in which ways in which ways?
5 (laughter)
6 T3: There's always this maybe ok (3) what could be the reasons to look up to him
7 what could be the reasons? (3) Toni you can help.
8 S2: I have no clue

9 (laughter)
10 S3: He was a great footballer.
11 T3: Ok so he's a great footballer footballer ok.

The next example (Example 4) shows how the disruptive student (S2 in this example) speaks out of turn (line 4, 8 and 12), with the teacher largely ignoring her comments. In line 4, she comments on S1's question sarcastically, and in line 8, she laughs at his response. Finally, in line 12, she even gives a rude comment that pertains to the teacher's question, which is once again ignored by the teacher. The teacher's lack of reaction in these situations indicates that this type of behaviour is not unusual but may also be further cause for discouragement for the other students in the group.

Example 4
1 T3: Leo what about you?
2 S1: *Um jel sa slika il?* /From the pictures or?/
3 T3: Yes yes among these.
4 S2: *A ne s poda.* /No from the floor/
5 S1: Shakira.
6 T3: Aha why?
7 S1: Um she's good.
8 S2: Good (laughter)
9 T3: She's good she's a good singer or she's a good person?
10 S1: Um singer.
11 T3: Ah singer ok.
12 S2: We don't know her in person.
13 T3: Yes ok.
14 S1: She have good songs.
15 T3: Has good songs ok.

Teacher T3 used a request for information as an attempt to control the situation in her classroom, which is something Dalton-Puffer and Nikula (2006) also found in their study, noting that directives in the instructional register tend to be more prevalent in classrooms that have more teacher-fronted activities. The opposite pattern could be seen in teacher T1, who stands out with the lowest number of questions asked in the instructional discourse (38). As already mentioned, this teacher favoured a less teacher-centred approach, requiring students to work on tasks in pairs and groups. However, outside these activities, teacher T1 relied mostly on the typical IRE/IRF pattern in her communication with the students, largely focusing on checking their answers and providing feedback. Example 5 illustrates a portion of the lesson where the teacher guided students in inducing rules about phrasal verbs through a series of full and short questions. After the students'

responses, she usually repeated the answer and provided brief feedback (e.g., lines 3, 5, 7, 17, 21).

Example 5

1 T1: Ok, give give me one of the phrasal verbs.
2 S1: Um take off.
3 T1: Take off, right, ok, take off.
4 S1: Verb.
5 T1: Ok verb so here is a verb, and?
6 S2: On off out.
7 T1: Yes on off out, in, from, what are they?
8 S2: Prepositions.
9 T1: Prepositions, they're prepositions, ok,
((4 lines omitted))
14 T1 And so um how many parts (3) can you, how many parts does your phrasal verb have,
15 two, yours? Tony?
16 S3: Two.
17 T1: Two, anybody else's? How many parts did your phrasal verb have?
18 S4: Two.
19 T1: Two, do they always have two parts?
20 S5: No.
21 T1: No, sometimes they have?
22 S5: Three.
23 T1: Three parts, so let's draw a chart and write down two-part (4) phrasal verbs and (5)
24 three-part phrasal verbs. Ok? two and three part phrasal verbs.

On the other end of the question frequency spectrum is teacher T5, who asked the highest number of questions overall (117), but also the highest number of display questions (72). As opposed to T3's lesson, this one was characterised by several instances of "real" conversations with students; for example, teacher T5 began the class by asking students about their weekends, and in instances when students had a story to tell, she asked many follow-up questions which seemed to stem out of actual interest. Teacher T5 also stood out with the second highest number of directives in regulative discourse, after T1, which stems from the fact that, like T1, she used different types of classroom organisation in her activities. Example 6 shows an introductory part of the lesson where teacher T5 used a range of referential questions (e.g., lines 1, 3, 5, 9). However, she only occasionally got the student to give more extended responses in English (e.g., line 12).

Example 6

1 T5: What did you do for the weekend?
2 S: I went to play paintball.
3 T5: Really? Where?

4 S: In Mravince.
5 T5: Aha and how was it did you win?
6 S: Um I lost but I didn't lost.
7 T5: You didn't?
8 S: No lost like lost in the woods actually.
9 T: What, you mean got lost?
10 S: *Ima šuma to vam je poligon xx.* /There's a forest, it's a polygon xx/ I got-
11 T5: You got lost
12 S: I didn't got lost but everybody was looking for me and I didn't heard them.
((5 lines omitted))
17 T5: Well how many of you how many of you were there?
18 S: Eleven. Or ten.
19 T5: Ten or eleven mhm from your class or?

In the following part of the analysis, the focus is on the different types of requests for action within the regulative discourse, which provided a much richer source of directive behaviour than the instructional register, with activity type also being a key factor, which is also seen in previous studies (Dalton-Puffer, 2005; Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, 2006). Overall, the requests for action in our corpus were realized as imperative, declarative and interrogative forms (Figure 2); however, imperatives prevail in the regulative register overall, with 243 (63.6%) directives realized as imperative, 82 (21.5%) as declarative and 57 (14.9%) as interrogative forms. All teachers resorted to imperatives most often to realize their directives, which is a pattern also prevalent in previous studies (Chen, Tseng, 2015; Liu, Hong, 2009; Martí, Portolés, 2019; Nikula, 2002). Once again, there are emphasised differences in the distribution of these forms in different classrooms, which is in line with Dalton-Puffer and Nikula (2006). For example, teachers T2, T3 and T4 stand

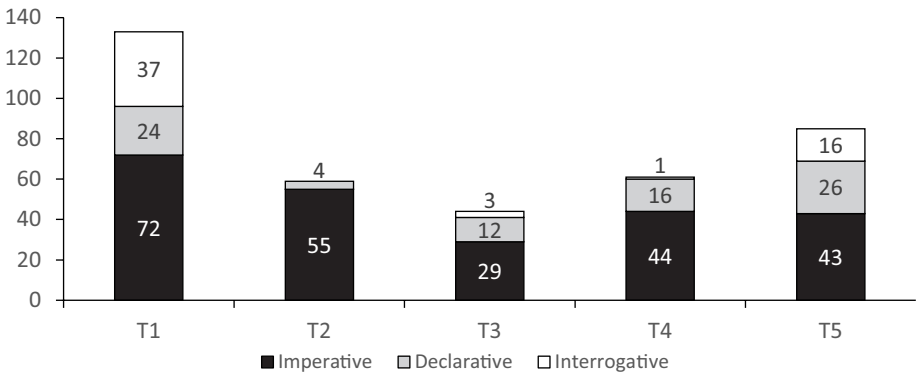


Figure 2. Individual teacher's use of different request head acts in the requests for action

Source: own study.

out for using no, or hardly any, directives in the interrogative form, while T2 also used only 4 declaratives as directives. However, the unequal distribution of the three types of directives must be further examined by looking into the sub-types of the request head acts.

A closer look at the most direct sub-type, the imperative (Table 4), shows that bold and elliptical infinitives are favoured by the majority of the teachers, followed by the inclusive form "let's" and prefaced infinitives. The most direct form, the elliptical infinitive, was often used to allocate turns and assign, for example, sentences to be read by the students, as in Example 7 (lines 1, 3 and 6). These types of very "dry" IRE/IRF sequences could be found in each of the five lessons. They offer no opportunities for interaction or extended responses from the students, while the input from the teachers was also minimal in these situations.

Example 7

1 T3: Okay, let's continue Lucy three.
2 S1: (in Croatian)
3 T3: No no you you.
4 S2: Because she helps poor- pure.
5 S1: Pure (laughter)
6 T3: Poor people okay poor people okay Lydia four.

Table 4. Types and frequencies of infinitive forms used by the teachers (own study)

Teacher	Bold	Elliptical	Inclusive	Prefaced	Please
T1	18	22	15	7	10
T2	27	10	12	6	0
T3	8	10	6	5	0
T4	13	14	7	4	6
T5	15	14	6	8	0
Total	81	70	46	30	16

Bold infinitives were used largely when teachers instructed students on what they needed to do to complete a task, like in Examples 8 and 9. In both excerpts, the teachers used the inclusive form "let's" to introduce the task. In example 8, teacher T2 followed this form with two bold infinitives (prefaced by the discourse marker "so"), concluding with the appealer "ok?" in line 3, which softens the directness of the previous lines. In Example 9, teacher T1 used a declarative form to give the turn to a specific group (line 2), finishing her utterance with a bold infinitive which also served as a warning, as the students were not paying attention. When the students continued talking, she interrupted the reading and issued a warning directed

to a group of students using the inclusive "shall", finishing with a bold infinitive instructing learners to continue. In both of these examples, the orders are issued in ways that construct the teachers' roles of authority

Example 8

1 T2: Let's match the text the names here with the questions from task two, so read
2 the text again who who doesn't eat meat, so write the names of the people next to
3 these questions, ok?

Example 9

1 T1: You've finished? Good, let's read um short um letter to Jack, what do you think,
2 this group I believe is the first, listen.
3 ((students talking unintelligibly while another student starts to read))
4 T1: Um just a second, Frank and the others, shall we listen to them? Go on.

As opposed to the imperative forms, there was more variety in how often and whether the teachers used the other, less direct subtypes. For example, while T2 used only 4 instances of directives in the declarative form, teachers T1 and T5 used 24 and 26 instances, respectively, mostly to express permission with the modal "can". Example 10 shows the teacher giving instructions for a task by using indirect forms using an initial "please" followed by two expressions of permission (lines 2 and 3), modified by a cost-minimizer and a final appealer "right?", which further emphasises the feeling that she was seeking agreement with the students, instead of telling them what to do. Despite the teacher's indirectness in this excerpt, the students proceeded with the task without any comments or disturbance.

Example 10

1 T1: Frank Alice, have you understood it? Have you got any unknown words to ask me?
2 (4) Hm? No, then please um in- you can do it in your books together in pairs if it's
3 easier for you, you can underline all the phrasal verbs you can find here, right?

Similarly, a variety of conventionally indirect forms were used by teacher T5 in Example 11 while explaining a task to a student who completed the previous activity. Speaking directly to a student, the teacher used a conventionally indirect, interrogative "can" + 2nd ps. pronoun form to present the task, together with a modifier (grounder) explaining why the task was set (line 2). After a less direct introduction, the teacher used a bold infinitive to conclude the explanation, going from less to more direct forms, which is a pattern also commonly employed by the teachers in Dalton-Puffer and Nikula's (2006) study. In line 7, in response to the student's query about the task, the teacher used an expression of permission to

provide an example, while in line 10 she continued with an expression of obligation (declarative form) using the modal "well". Once again, while it is obvious from the excerpt that the teacher is in a position of authority in this conversation, she used a variety of directive forms and modifiers in the excerpt, varying her level of directness while maintaining a relatively informal tone when providing instructions for the task. This is in line with the relaxed atmosphere the teacher maintained throughout the class, which was not abused by the students, who readily complied with the teacher's requests.

Example 11

1 T5: One more minute and then we'll check. (3) Anna um since you've finished, can you
2 find um some words in the book from unit three and four, and write them on a
3 piece of paper ok? So for example I don't know cheerful you write it on a piece of
4 paper and then um you know the others will have to um paraphrase um the words in
5 order to guess, ok? So um um choose I don't know six or seven words.
6 S1: Okay, from any-
7 T5: From units three or four (2) or you can choose a phrase like that thing that we did a
8 big break um those words ok?
9 S1: So I can just write them
10 T5: Yes and then you will cut them ok? So one word on each um a little piece of paper
11 and then we will see how good you are with vocabulary.

Interrogatives were the least-used subtype of directives within the regulative discourse in our sample, with T1 using 37 interrogative forms, T5 using 16, while T2, T3 and T4 employed 0, 3 and 1 instances, respectively. This further confirms that conventionally indirect, hearer-based strategies were not popular with some of the teachers in our study. For example, two of the teachers (T4 and T2) did not use the modal verb + 2nd ps. pronoun frame (e.g., "can you") at all. This is in contrast with Dalton-Puffer (2005), where an overwhelming majority of teacher requests used indirectness strategies of one kind or another, mostly conventionally indirect, hearer-based strategies, with a clear preference for the construction frame modal verb + 2nd ps. pronoun "would you", "could you", "can you". The overall impression of directness in the majority of the analysed classes was further supported by the fact that only two of the teachers used the modifier "please" in their directive speech, which is unusual as it is probably the most ubiquitous expression of politeness in English (Sato, 2008). Directives are one of the most face-threatening acts in the politeness system of English, and some of the teachers did little to mitigate this, employing mostly direct forms and not using polite forms such as "please" or "thank you".

To sum up, although the teachers in our study showed a preference for direct forms, the differences between the individual teachers'

personal styles and choices of activities seem to have a greater influence on their directive speech in the classroom. Two of the teachers (T1 and T5) used the greatest range of directive forms of varying directness and showed a higher degree of pragmatic sophistication in their directive speech. Although these two teachers worked in different contexts, with T1's lesson recorded in a larger public-school class and T5's in a small private language school, they both employed activities which included pair and group work and provided classroom talk which featured greater pragmatic diversity.

6. Conclusions and implications

Our analysis confirmed the necessity of going beyond quantitative analysis of directive speech acts and accompanying features, emphasising the importance of context in attempting to shed light on the YLL classroom as a pragmatic environment. The individual styles of the teachers, their choices of activities and the behaviour of the students were all contextual factors which seemed to influence the range and directness of directive speech acts used by the teachers. Our findings showed that this did not necessarily mean that the teachers who relied on more direct forms had a more authoritative style, as all of the teachers seemed to nurture informal relationships with the students, at least to some extent. In fact, this may have also contributed to their directness, as the teachers were all familiar with their students and had taught them for a number of years. Directness was also linked to the prevalence of the IRE/IRF pattern, with very little elaborate explanation or instruction-giving present in some of the lessons, which seemed to stem from the fact that the tasks and the procedures for their fulfilment were so expected and familiar to the students. Generally, a task from the coursebook is set, the students do it individually, the answers are checked. This is usually interspersed with referential questions related to the topic of the lessons (celebrities, healthy food), where the teacher still holds the floor and has to nominate students. This is reflected in how teachers T2, T3 and T4 use directives, with less variety and more reliance on the imperative form. Thus, taken together with a serious lack of politeness expressions, these teachers' use of directives does not seem to provide opportunities for varied pragmatic input for students, nor does it seem to encourage the students' responses. On the other hand, teachers T1 and T5 demonstrated more pragmatic sophistication, employing a wider range of directive forms. Both teachers provided richer pragmatic input, despite the differences in their quantitative data. While teacher T1 focused on giving instructions for pair and groupwork

tasks, T5 engaged students in "real" conversation, showing genuine interest in their responses.

In summary, although the directive speech of all of the teachers was pragmatically attuned to their students' needs, at least partially, the analysed classes differed in the extent to which the teachers' directive language offered varied pragmatic input, especially related to basic politeness and conventionally indirect forms, which are ubiquitous in the English language. Teachers should be encouraged to reflect on their use of directives to maximise opportunities for providing pragmatic input for their students and to become more aware of the language they use in class.

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Katarzyna Brzosko-Barratt
University of Warsaw, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5636-8416
k.brzosko-barratt@uw.edu.pl

Tina Rozmanič
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4890-9953
tina.rozmanic@pef.uni-lj.si

Silvia Baldassari
University College of Teacher Education Tyrol, Austria
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5204-3597
silvia.baldassari@ph-tirol.ac.at

Mateja Dagarin Fojkar
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0953-1065
mateja.dagarin@pef.uni-lj.si

Enhancing intercultural teaching competencies through internationalisation of pre-service primary foreign language teachers

As schools are getting linguistically and culturally more diverse, it is necessary to develop teachers' intercultural teaching competencies. This paper focuses on a transnational study conducted during three editions of a blended intensive programme in which 107 pre-service primary foreign language teachers from three countries participated. The goals of the programme were to engage future teachers

in practices strengthening international and intercultural dimensions, and to broaden their knowledge and skills on language and content integration in different European contexts. The results of the study, which was conducted using different methods of data collection, including focus group interviews, surveys, analysis of lesson plans and classroom observations, showed the development of intercultural foundational competencies, i.e., strengthening of participants' self-awareness and self-reflexivity in developing their cultural and disciplinary identities. The participants also developed competencies necessary to recognise learners' needs to build effective classroom communities. Participants found it difficult to respond to diversity in the classroom by planning and implementing global and intercultural learning activities for pupils. The study shows that internationalisation is crucial for pre-service primary language teachers to improve their professional and intercultural competencies.

Keywords: intercultural teaching competencies, internationalisation, pre-service primary teachers, teacher education

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje międzykulturowe w nauczaniu, umiędzynarodowienie kształcenia nauczycieli, nauczyciele szkół podstawowych, kształcenie nauczycieli

1. Introduction

The teaching of foreign languages at primary level is starting at a younger age, leading to a greater demand for teachers and a greater diversification of teacher profiles. In recent years, generalist teachers (i.e., primary school teachers who teach all subjects together with English) have been getting a more prominent role in early foreign language education (European Commission, 2023). As schools are becoming linguistically and culturally more diverse, intercultural teaching competence plays a key role in the training of future primary language teachers. Many authors point out (Kelly, Grenfell, 2004; McKeown, Kurt, 2012; Niculescu, Bazgan, 2017; Okken et al., 2022) that intercultural competence should be embedded in the competence profile of teachers, as they play one of the main roles in the development of students' intercultural competence. Huber (2012) refers to intercultural competence as a key component of education that should be reflected in primary education curricula. Curriculum designers try to follow Byram's model of intercultural communication competence, which includes knowledge of cultural components, the development of a positive attitude towards otherness, the ability to interpret and identify with other cultures, the ability to interact and think critically in other cultures, and finally, awareness of one's own culture (Byram, 1997).

The most effective way to develop intercultural teaching competencies is through internationalisation, but research indicates that there are few opportunities for students in primary education programmes, compared to other faculties of higher education. Internationalisation in teacher education is hindered by an often-observed narrow focus on the needs of local and regional education systems (Koh et al., 2022). This is unfortunate, as internationalisation in teacher education enables the integration of international, intercultural and global dimensions in the curriculum, teaching methods and organisational policies of teacher training programmes. Furthermore, it enables the establishment of international teaching relationships and the development of language skills. When student teachers encounter other student teachers abroad, they can build lifelong connections that can help them find partners for future international teaching projects. Using English as a lingua franca in international exchanges or projects also benefits student teachers' English language skills, which is particularly important if they wish to teach English as a foreign language (hereafter FL).

The most common form of internationalisation is internationalisation abroad (IA). Okken and colleagues (2022) point out that the study abroad experience during teacher education contributes to the development of student teachers' cultural awareness, and improves their understanding of diversity, which can help them to adapt to the needs of their pupils in their future profession. Shadowen and colleagues (2015) also pointed out that facing critical situations during study abroad can help students develop problem-solving skills and reflect on their own teaching philosophies and values.

Nevertheless, not all student teachers are able to study abroad for a semester for various reasons. A Blended Intensive Programme (hereafter BIP) is an international mobility programme that combines a longer virtual exchange experience with a short-term mobility in one semester, allowing students to develop their intercultural and linguistic skills during their studies at a home university with a shorter period of studying abroad. This experience might entice students to complete a long-term learning mobility in the future (cf. European Commission, 2022).

Unfortunately, not many primary education student teachers decide to study abroad. Only an average of 3.8% of pre-service primary education teachers from the universities involved in this study (University of Ljubljana, University College of Teacher Education Tyrol, University of Warsaw) took part in mobility programmes between 2019 and 2023. The number of students studying abroad across Europe is similar (Eurostat, 2023). In 2021, only 2.2% of students came from the field of education. Of the ten different fields of study presented by Eurostat (2023), education ranks second to last

among study fields for tertiary students studying abroad, with fields such as business, law and engineering dominating. Similarly, the European Commission (2023) reports that almost 30% of modern foreign language teachers surveyed in the EU have never been abroad for professional purposes and emphasizes that this can affect the quality of their teaching. Thus, any kind of mobility of education students should be encouraged, especially when primary school teachers take on the responsibility of teaching English as a FL. The Eurydice report (European Commission, 2023) states that the issue of FL competence of primary school teachers is crucial in many European countries, as it is mainly generalist teachers who teach foreign languages in primary education.

A review of the literature shows that the development of the intercultural teaching competencies of student teachers in primary education is still largely unexplored. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this gap by investigating the development of intercultural teaching competencies of pre-service primary school teachers after participating in a BIP "Integrating English into the Primary Curriculum" organised by three European universities and conducted over three consecutive years. Furthermore, it aims to examine how an international learning community can support the development of intercultural teaching competencies of students of primary education who will also teach English as a FL.

2. Internationalisation in teacher education

Internationalisation is gaining a prominent role in education, mainly due to globalisation and the interdependence of the world. De Wit et al. (2015) define internationalisation in higher education as the "intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education in order to improve the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society" (p. 281). Phan, Tran, and Blackmore (2024) state that internationalisation encompasses various processes, such as international mobility, professional development, transnational research collaboration, cross-border partnerships, and internationalisation of curricula. Knight (2012) divides internationalisation into two distinct categories: internationalisation abroad (IA) and internationalisation at home (IaH). The former includes activities that take place abroad, e.g., mobility of staff, students, projects and the like, while the latter includes international activities that take place at the home institution, e.g., internationalisation of the curriculum (Knight, 2012). A third category has only recently been added,

namely internationalisation at home through online learning, which includes activities such as online exchange, virtual mobility and collaborative online international learning (COIL) (Mittelmeier et al., 2019).

Research on the internationalisation of primary school teacher education has shown many benefits. Killick (2011) found that exposure to different cultures improves teachers' ability to deal with diverse classes and promotes empathy, tolerance and respect. In addition, internationalisation can improve the quality of education by incorporating different teaching methods and philosophies, encouraging the adoption of best practices, and promoting innovation and creativity in teaching (Leask, 2015). Teachers gain international experiences and perspectives that enhance their career prospects and promote lifelong learning and professional growth (Cushner, Mahon, 2002). In addition, internationalisation facilitates global networking and creates opportunities for international partnerships, collaborative research and exchange programmes (Altbach, Knight, 2007; O'Dowd, 2023). Pająk-Ważna (2013) asserts that an interculturally competent teacher should be able to interpret, evaluate and relate to different intercultural contexts, put their frame of reference into perspective and apply behaviours and skills appropriate to specific intercultural contexts.

Despite these benefits, internationalisation is also associated with some challenges. It may require significant investment of resources, time, and administrative support, which might limit participation for some institutions (Dewey, Duff, 2009). Another disadvantage is unequal access to international opportunities, as not all institutions or individuals can participate equally, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities (Marginson, 2006). There are also implementation challenges, such as integrating international perspectives into existing curricula and overcoming resistance from staff accustomed to traditional methods (Knight, 2004). Leask and Bridge (2013) also point out the need to ensure that internationalisation is aligned with national educational standards and requirements. Language barriers pose a further challenge, as they can hinder effective communication and collaboration in an international environment (Beelen, Jones, 2015).

3. Intercultural teaching competencies

Dimitrov and Haque (2016) have developed a model of intercultural teaching competencies to help teachers reflect on their teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. Their framework includes key competencies that are categorised into three main groups, i.e., foundational competencies, facilitation competencies and curriculum design competencies. As this model is the

most comprehensive and applicable to primary education, it serves as the main conceptual framework for the research presented in this paper. The foundational competencies include teachers' awareness of their own cultural and disciplinary identities and understanding of their students' cultural background, values and beliefs. This awareness is crucial, as it helps teachers understand their interactions with students, and appreciate the diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom (Dimitrov, Haque, 2016).

The facilitation competencies encompass intercultural teaching skills that enable teachers to recognise and respond to learners' needs, communication styles and different linguistic abilities to promote an inclusive and effective learning environment. Teachers need to be able to deal with cultural misunderstandings and conflicts, and apply culturally sensitive communication strategies to ensure that all students feel valued and understood. Facilitation competencies improve the teacher-student relationship and contribute to better academic and social outcomes for students (Dimitrov, Haque, 2016).

The third category, curriculum design competencies, allows teachers to reflect on their course planning. Educators need to be flexible and innovative in their teaching approaches to meet the diverse needs of their learners, using a variety of teaching methods and materials that cater to different learning styles and cultural backgrounds, incorporating multicultural perspectives and resources into the curriculum to help students reflect on their own experiences in their education, increase their engagement and motivation, etc. Adaptive teachers can create a learning environment that is both inclusive and dynamic (Dimitrov, Haque, 2016).

4. Research context

The BIP project titled "Integrating English into the Primary Curriculum" which provided the context for this study, took place for the first time in the 2022/2023 academic year in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The second edition was held in Innsbruck, Austria, in 2023/2024, and the third edition took place in Warsaw, Poland, in 2024/2025.

The main objectives of the project were: (1) to engage pre-service primary education language teachers in practices that strengthen international and intercultural dimensions in teacher education, (2) to increase pre-service teachers' knowledge and skills in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in early language contexts in a variety of European educational contexts, and (3) to create an international teacher education programme that focuses on CLIL in early teacher education.

The project comprised a virtual and a face-to-face component involving three European universities, namely the University of Ljubljana, the University College of Teacher Education Tyrol, and the University of Warsaw. All three universities offer students CLIL courses worth 4 ECTS (Ljubljana), 3 ECTS (Tyrol) and 6 ECTS (Warsaw). Before the start of the programme, most students had attended these courses at their home universities.

During the virtual part of the programme, which lasted three months, students in international groups engaged in a virtual exchange to expand their knowledge of CLIL and different forms of its implementation, focusing on lesson planning and the development of materials. At the end of this phase, they created four lesson plans for Grades 1-4. Following the virtual exchange, participants met for a week-long mobility where they implemented their lesson plans in primary schools, received feedback from peers and teachers, and participated in cross-cultural presentations to enhance international collaboration and intercultural communication.

5. Research methodology

The overarching aim of the study was to explore the students' intercultural teaching competencies, using Dimitrov and Haque's (2016) model. The research questions guiding the study were: (1) In what ways did the participants develop their foundational competencies, especially their cultural and disciplinary identities? (2) In what ways did the participants develop their facilitation competencies, especially their skills of teaching diverse audiences? (3) In what ways did the participants develop their curriculum design competencies, in particular with respect to learning activities that allow students to explore cultural differences?

5.1. Research participants

The study participants were three cohorts of pre-service primary school teachers, who will teach all subjects of the primary curriculum, including English as a FL. During their studies, the focus is on acquiring teaching skills across all curriculum areas. Most participants were Year 3 and 4 students. The participants came from the three universities mentioned above. A total of 107 students participated in the programme in 2022/2023, 2023/2024 and 2024/2025. Of these, 9 participants were male (8.4%) and 98 were female (91.6%). The groups were made up of individuals of different nationalities: 32 Austrians, 29 Slovenes, 26 Poles, 4 Germans, 4 Italians, 2 Kurds, 2

Indonesians, 2 Chinese, 1 Kyrgyz, 1 Turk, 1 Algerian, 1 Filipino, 1 Uzbek and 1 Ugandan. The students worked together in international groups of 3-4 members. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 26 years. The number and the nationality of the participants in the three editions of the programme are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1. Number of the study participants in three editions of the programme (own study)

Year	University of Warsaw	University of Ljubljana	University College of Teacher Education Tyrol	Total
2022/2023	11	7	5	23
2023/2024	12	9	22	43
2024/2025	15	13	13	41
Total	38	29	40	107

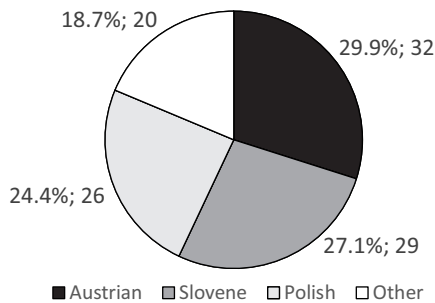

Figure 1. Nationality of the study participants (own study)

5.2. Research instruments

The study used a mixed methodology approach and drew on multiple data sources. These included programme evaluation surveys after each programme edition, CLIL lesson plans and feedback comments provided by the teacher educators and student teachers, as well as classroom performance assessments completed by the teacher educators and student teachers who observed the lessons. The evaluation survey consisted of 22 questions, of which 7 were closed-ended and 15 were open-ended.

The survey asked about the participants' perceptions of their intercultural teaching competence development, i.e., awareness of their cultural and disciplinary identities and their ability to implement them in the classroom. The interview data consisted of six focus group interviews conducted

by researchers from each participating country (Slovenia, Austria and Poland). The interviews were semi-structured, conducted in the national languages, or in English, depending on the language background of the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed and coded according to a developed framework. In addition, the researchers analysed 82 CLIL lesson plans and the provided feedback, as well as the participants' reflections on their teaching performances. Data collection took place during the three editions of the programme in the winter semesters of 2022/2023, 2023/2024, and 2024/2025, whereas the focus group interviews took place in the summer semester of 2023/2024. The exact research procedures implemented for each edition of the programme are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Research instruments (own study)

	Programme evaluation surveys	Focus group interviews	Peer/ teacher lesson performance evaluation	Post lesson performance self-reflections	CLIL lesson plans and peer/ teacher feedback
Year 2022/2023	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
Year 2023/2024	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
Year 2024/2025	✓	X	✓	✓	✓

5.3. Data analysis

The surveys were processed and interpreted at the level of descriptive quantitative analysis. As part of the qualitative data analysis, a deductive thematic analysis was carried out according to the model of Haque and Dimitrov (2016). The use of the framework method (Gale et al., 2013) was helpful in creating a structure, due to the number of researchers involved and the variety of data sources collected over a three-year period. Initially, all researchers approached the different data sources individually to identify and code the dimensions of the framework addressed in the data, while in subsequent steps, the researchers compared their findings using the agreed framework and finalised the analysis.

6. Research results

The following section presents the results of the study based on the research questions. The questions are discussed in terms of the themes that emerged

in the qualitative data collected and which were underpinned by the quantitative data.

6.1. Research question 1: In what ways did the participants develop their foundational competencies, especially their cultural and disciplinary identities?

6.1.1. Developing awareness of their own cultural and disciplinary identities as primary teachers taking on the responsibility of early language teaching

Most participants, except for a small group of students in an International MA programme, stated that they rarely work in international groups. Only 7% of all participants had had experience with mobility programmes prior to this one. After participating in the programme, more than half of the participants (54%) said that they would be more willing to do a longer (Erasmus) exchange. The opportunity to discuss the teaching profession from different perspectives was seen to be beneficial, as they felt that primary education students had fewer opportunities for internationalisation compared to students from other faculties. Most of the participants (83.7%) rated the quality of working in international groups as very good (45.9%) or excellent (37.8%). This is also reflected in a comment from a participant in the programme evaluation survey: "I really liked working in the international group as everyone had different strengths and weaknesses with which we could compensate and complete each other and got to know different approaches and ideas from different countries." Another student commented in her self-reflection after the lesson: "Collaborating with an international team broadened my perspective on how to incorporate intercultural elements into lesson planning and teaching" and another observed: "I have learnt that international teamwork isn't always easy, but it's incredibly enriching."

The BIP experience enabled the participants to begin the process of reflecting on their own cultural, linguistic and disciplinary identities, and how these influenced the way they worked together to learn more about teaching English and their CLIL approach in the early primary contexts. In the programme evaluations, nearly 90% of participants rated the cultural information they had gained as the highlight of the programme. In the country presentations, students often provided geographical, cultural and linguistic background information about their national contexts. Many of them presented their own native languages and stated that languages are an important feature of their home culture. One of the interviewed participants highly

appreciated being able to present his own language, Kurdish, which he associated with the opportunity to better express his personality, even though the focus of the programme was on teaching English. One participant observed: "I know that we all are becoming English language teachers but through teaching our own languages, we were able to show our mindsets. This allowed us to show things beyond the CLIL lessons. We were happy to show our identity, our mindsets, but also our own languages." (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

When asked about their experience of learning English in the preliminary survey, all participants indicated that they considered English to be a foreign or an additional language. Most of them have learned several languages, while around 20% of students grew up in a multilingual environment and speak, or have been exposed to, several languages such as Arabic, Turkish, French, Italian or German. Despite these extensive language learning experiences, English language proficiency appeared to be a controversial topic in the student teachers' reflections and evaluations of their BIP experiences. While some student teachers felt confident about their language skills, others were concerned about communicating in English with their peers. In the programme evaluation of two consecutive cohorts of students, some participants shared their views about the apparent low language proficiency of other group members, and indicated that their own language skills were superior to those of other group members. On the other hand, a group of student teachers indicated that they felt anxious about speaking English to their colleagues prior to their BIP experience and they observed the development of their English language communication skills through the BIP experience. As one participant stated:

> "I started to participate more in the conversation in the tutorials or lectures when nobody answered the professor, in the past I was also silent, but after that [BIP] I was more cooperative during the lessons." (Focus group interview, Ljubljana).

In addition, the study revealed that some of the student teachers reported having acquired some language learning strategies that they associated with acquiring useful skills when taking on the new task of working with young learners. In the following extract, a participant from Poland concludes:

> "We spent much time comparing languages and words, especially between Polish and Slovenian. I figured out that when they [the Slovenian students] speak slower, and when I am familiar with the context, I can understand a lot in Slovenian." (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

The following comment gives an insight into the connection she has made between her language learning experience and language teaching:

> "We were told in our language teaching class that context is important. But I could experience it when I wanted to learn something in a language I did not know very well. So, when we teach children, we really need to support them in understanding the context. They do not need to understand every word to comprehend a text." (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

On many occasions, the student teachers reflected on how their own language development could enhance their ability to teach children, while a lower language level could prevent them from providing good language teaching to their pupils. As one student said: "It was just this fear that I wouldn't be able to help children if they didn't understand me." (Focus group interview, Innsbruck). And another noted:

> "For me it was teaching in English, not the idea that I had to teach in English, but that the children would not understand me, and I didn't know what I would do in that case. When I came to the class, I saw that everybody understood, mostly, and that it was possible to communicate in English." (Focus group interview, Ljubljana).

6.1.2. Developing awareness of how contrasting disciplinary approaches impact their teaching and learning

The study showed that the participants began to think critically about their own education system and their role as primary school teachers. They discussed the individualisation and personalisation of their teaching as they noted that some teachers had more freedom and flexibility in deciding how to incorporate English into the curriculum and how to design lessons. One of the students observed in the programme evaluation survey: "I liked and loved the spirit of diversity, inclusion and interculturality at the school, but I am not sure if it is possible to include it into our school system. Observing other schools allowed me to reconsider the strengths and weaknesses of our system and think about my future role as a teacher." Throughout the programme there were many instances where participants referred to their own experiences as learners and teachers, for example, one student noted: "Otherwise I have found that the mindset and approaches [of the observed teachers] were basically the same or similar as in Slovenia because also our teachers and school system is evolving". Another student concluded: "I can teach in a different way [than the

teachers I observed] and still be efficient." (Post lesson performance self-reflection).

The study also showed that throughout the BIP, student teachers began to view their own role in teaching in English as integrating different curriculum areas into English language teaching. They often emphasised that they did not consider themselves as English language teaching specialists, unsure how they could contribute to their pupils' language learning. While some of them welcomed the idea that they could deliver meaningful instruction through integrating more primary content, others had doubts about whether they could meet the expectations of the primary curriculum and English language teaching. One of the student teachers from Slovenia pointed out that she appreciated the opportunities offered by the CLIL approach, which she also expressed in the focus group interviews: "I found the CLIL approach very interesting, especially because you can make cross-curricular links and you can make it easier for your students to learn, especially if you are a primary teacher. I like the emphasis on giving information in different ways." (Focus group interview, Ljubljana).

However, many students were unsure whether they should take responsibility for teaching content and language. They spoke about the perceived demands and the feeling of being restricted by national curricula. They expressed their concerns about meeting expectations, or what is traditionally done in primary school classrooms, such as:

> "I find the CLIL approach difficult and cannot understand the purpose and what I should focus on during the lessons. Am I supposed to be an English teacher or an early education teacher? How can I combine these two roles when my pupils do not know so much English, but I have to teach them certain things. How can they learn if they do not understand me?" (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

6.2. Research question 2: In what ways did the participants develop their facilitation competencies, especially their teaching skills of diverse audiences?

6.2.1. Experiencing working in intercultural groups and teaching in diverse classrooms

When asked to what extent they thought they had developed their intercultural skills during the programme, more than half of the participants (62.1%) stated that they had developed them significantly, with 48.6% indi-

cating that they had developed these skills very much and 13.5% to a great extent. This is also reflected in some of the participants' comments in the programme evaluation: "It definitely had a big impact on my development of intercultural skills through communication and learning about each other's teaching methods." Another noticed:

> "I think getting to work with student teachers presented a great opportunity to develop intercultural skills through first-hand experience. I got to observe different approaches and later communicate with the people I noticed them from. It was helpful to see other people's activities, how they start their lesson planning, and how they interpret the lesson topics."

While the evaluation data confirmed that 81% of student teachers highly valued the opportunity to plan and teach CLIL lessons in international groups (27% of participants rated this as a 5 and 54% rated it as a 4 on a rating scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)), the focus group interviews as well as the observation data showed that participants struggled to adapt to different needs of their colleagues and their pupils. Despite the frequently shared sense of mutual support and understanding, the participants slowly noticed some diversity among themselves and in their approach to teaching. The differences became even more apparent in the second part of the programme as the student teachers worked more closely together and felt under pressure to deliver lessons in the schools. On many occasions, they noticed how the differences affected their work both inside and outside the classroom. They were not always clear about how to resolve the conflicts that arose or negotiate the differences in an atmosphere of safety and trust. In fact, the data revealed numerous examples of student teachers' unwillingness to resolve differences while working on various teaching tasks. The conflicts concerned the preparation of teaching materials, giving feedback to young learners or meeting deadlines. When asked about the reasons for the disagreements, many of the initial responses were judgemental and emotional, and little attempt was made to observe and better understand their colleagues' decisions. One student commented: "I was especially bothered by the lack of cooperation [of other student teachers in the group]. Why should I ask them to do their work? – that was a big problem. We had set deadlines for submission, and they didn't meet them." (Programme evaluation survey).

In many cases, the student teachers chose not to provide further explanation, although discussion of the different opinions could lead to some useful conclusions about CLIL teaching. One of the student teachers noted that she took a very different approach to teaching art than her Austrian colleagues. She saw her role as creating opportunities for meaningful

communication between learners, rather than focusing on the art curriculum. Unfortunately, the student chose not to engage with the difference of opinion, instead choosing not to present her perspective:

> "We had different views on how much attention should be put into the lesson. I did not care so much about the art and for me it was more about communication which was more important. She [a student from Austria] was mad at me for talking to children about art. For me teaching about art was secondary, I cared about communicating with my pupils". (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

It was evident that the participants experienced communication barriers caused by factors beyond the use of appropriate grammatical structures or vocabulary. In some cases, they were able to recognise these and move on, but in many cases, they were unable to overcome them. One student teacher summarised this experience:

> "We didn't really get along because we had different perspectives on the teaching itself. We 'bumped' into each other, we had to get over it, talk it through, point out what was important to whom, so that we could then make a lesson that everybody liked." (Focus group interview, Ljubljana).

While they struggled with communicating with each other, they also thought about how to plan their CLIL lessons with young learners to facilitate communication in different classrooms. This was a major challenge for them, as they were concerned about their young learners' poor language skills and the more cognitively demanding content they were expected to teach. The additional obstacle of teaching children with whom they did not share the same native language was a first for many. One participant observed:

> "We were struggling to teach young children some concepts about different musical instruments. It was very difficult for us because we did not share the same language as our pupils. So, we had to teach our pupils facts about string instruments without speaking the same language. This was difficult." (Post lesson performance self-reflection).

The lesson plans and feedback from teachers showed that participants faced challenges in supporting pupils' communication and understanding when delivering CLIL lessons. Students did not consider the variety of support they could offer to pupils with limited English proficiency, when planning. The most common barriers related to lack of planning of classroom language, differentiation, contextualisation, and lack of language scaffolding.

Only 19 out of 82 lesson plans had more detailed descriptions of the classroom language, with examples of simplified teacher talk. In many comments (47 out of 82), teacher educators indicated limited contextualisation where language was supported by visual aids to explain various topics (diagrams, pictures, or charts). Many feedback comments encouraged students to use more hands-on activities, such as experiments or different forms of demonstration, which would be particularly helpful for pupils with lower language skills. Students also missed opportunities for language scaffolding in lessons, e.g., when young learners were asked to describe the solar system or discuss it in groups. With appropriate vocabulary and structures provided by scaffolding techniques, this activity would have been carried out more effectively.

6.3. Research question 3: In what ways did the participants develop their curriculum design competencies, in particular with respect to learning activities that allow students to explore cultural differences?

6.3.1. Implementing learning activities related to cultural differences

The teacher educators who participated in the programme guided the student teachers to use activities that encourage pupils to think about intercultural differences, and to look at the topic from a perspective other than their own, when creating their lesson plans. It was interesting to observe that the student groups, made up of student teachers from different cultures, had difficulty reflecting their cultural diversity in their lesson planning. Only a few groups (4 out of 82 lesson plans) planned activities that allowed for comparison of the different cultures. These activities included exploring fruits, trees, dances and inventions in different randomly selected countries. Only six groups (7 out of 82 lesson plans) chose to incorporate their own cultural diversity in their lesson plans, through activities designed to encourage pupils to practise perspective taking. These groups asked pupils to compare the characteristics of winter, the countryside, seaside and sea animals, different types of food, Christmas decorations, and traditions in the student teachers' and pupils' countries in seven different lesson plans. Although the students brought materials that represented their own cultural background, they did not discuss the meaning of these materials in depth with the pupils, partly out of concern for the pupils' low language level, and because they did not speak the same first language.

The researchers also found that students perceived intercultural teaching differently. While some of them understood intercultural learning as

learning about traditions and customs, which is very common in FL classes, others wanted to present intercultural topics in a deeper way, which sometimes became an issue they discussed in their groups. In one group they discussed how intercultural teaching could be integrated into the curriculum:

> "We have realised at a certain point that when we plan teaching, we do not agree what teaching culture is. Speaking about the snowman or showing some celebrations is not talking about culture. We need to include more context and show how and why people do certain things in a certain culture." (Focus group interview, Warsaw).

7. Discussion

This paper has explored the development of the intercultural teaching competencies of pre-service primary foreign language teachers participating in the Blended Intensive Programme "Integrating English into Primary Curriculum". The results of the study indicate that the students who were part of the programme developed their intercultural teaching competencies only to a certain extent. The areas in which participants made the most progress were the foundational competencies, including their cultural and disciplinary identities, while facilitation competencies were only partially developed. The least progress was seen in developing curriculum design competencies.

The development of foundational competencies that form the backbone of intercultural competencies has been demonstrated in a variety of data sources. The researchers noticed that students became more attentive and aware of different cultures, languages and their disciplinary identities as primary teachers of a foreign language. The participants valued their involvement in the international programme, as they lack opportunities for intercultural exchange as learners and as teachers working in an intercultural context.

The programme offered students the opportunity to reflect on their own culture, including the school culture and educational system, as well as their role as primary school teachers. They began to recognise the similarities and differences in school systems, foreign language education, teaching approaches and teaching philosophies. As Smolcic (2011) points out, teacher training for diverse classrooms requires not only knowledge of other cultures, but also a critical analysis of one's own culture. This involves not only reflecting on one's own culture in relation to other cultures, but also establishing a relationship between one's own culture and other cultures (Byram, 1997). Skopinskaja (2003) argues that by observing and analysing

different cultures, including their own, students become "less ethnocentric, and more culturally relativist" (p. 54), which is an essential characteristic of primary school teachers working with young students.

We should not overlook an important aspect of the development of the intercultural teaching competencies of pre-service primary education teachers, i.e., the development of their language skills, as they will be teaching English as a FL alongside all other subjects. Their involvement in international programmes is crucial, as it allows them to develop not only their cultural identity but also their disciplinary identity as language teachers for young learners. The participants valued this experience and reported higher levels of confidence when interacting in FL with their peers, during their regular lessons at the university after completing the programme, and consequently with pupils in the classroom. Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2011) argue that teachers who teach young learners need not only have content and methodological knowledge but also need to be proficient in their pupils' L1 and L2. The ELLiE study, similarly, found that early primary FL teachers need a high level of fluency (Enever, 2011). The FL skills of student teachers can also be improved through internationalisation, as many studies have shown (Foster, 2009; Klapper, Rees, 2012; Llanes, Munoz, 2009, to name a few).

The results of the study also showed that the participants struggled with their disciplinary identity as CLIL teachers. Firstly, they had to negotiate their perceptions of CLIL within their international groups. While they had all received instruction in CLIL methodology during their studies at their home university prior to the programme, their views on how to implement CLIL were very different. This is not unusual, as many researchers have pointed out the variety of CLIL models and practices in different educational contexts (e.g., Coyle, Hood, Marsh, 2010; European Commission, 2006; Ruiz de Zarobe, Jiménez Catalán, 2009). In addition, the study participants were unsure how to adapt the language for young learners and keep the content of the subject they were teaching at an appropriate level. They encountered issues with classroom language use and language scaffolding in their lesson planning. The results of our study confirm the findings of Rutgers et al. (2020) who stated that teachers need to be supported in their knowledge of the language requirements in CLIL lessons and that a particular focus should be placed on integrated knowledge of language.

The category of intercultural competencies that was developed least among the study participants was curriculum design competencies. The researchers observed that although students appreciated the intercultural topics in their own learning, they were hesitant to incorporate these topics into their own teaching. Few of the lesson plans analysed contained intercultural

topics or topics that included the student teachers' own culture. This was even more surprising as the participants themselves were representatives of 14 different nationalities, and consequently, interculturality and multilingualism were an integral part of their communication and personal as well as disciplinary identities. Similar results were found in other studies (Dagarin Fojkar, Grahut, Skubic, 2022; Rokita-Jaśkow, Król-Gierat, 2021).

8. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate the development of the intercultural teaching competencies by three cohorts of pre-service primary school language teachers who participated in three editions of the BIP, which focused on the integration of English into the primary curriculum. During the programme, they worked together in international teams that collaborated both virtually and during a week-long mobility. The analysis, supported by Dimitrov and Haque's (2016) framework, was to identify which dimensions of intercultural teaching competencies were strengthened during this experience. The framework also became a much-needed reflection tool for the teacher educators themselves to better design and deliver international learning community programmes for the development of intercultural teaching competencies.

Above all, the study showed the development of foundational intercultural teaching competencies, which were reflected in the students' reflections on different cultures, languages and their disciplinary identities as primary school teachers of a foreign language. In terms of developing facilitation competencies, participants were challenged by the need to interact with both their colleagues and pupils in a way that respects cultural and linguistic diversity. However, this led to many misunderstandings, as students did not always seem to be prepared to respond to diversity and potential conflicts, nor did they have the necessary strategies to manage such conflicts, so these often remained unresolved. This did not bode well for their future teaching practice, as the student teachers were not prepared to model and encourage behaviour that demonstrated tolerance for a variety of communication styles, differing perspectives and perceptions. In terms of curriculum design competencies, the data showed that the student teachers had limited engagement of pupils in the intercultural learning activities in primary schools, even though the students themselves worked in international groups.

In terms of the limitations of the programme, the results of the study have shown that there are potential areas for change in its design, particularly

in terms of facilitation and curriculum design competencies. Due to the short duration of the mobility and limited access to primary schools and classrooms during the exchange (only 1 to 3 days in schools), student teachers had less opportunity to gain hands-on experience with pupils in a specific educational context. Although the duration of the mobility cannot be significantly extended, the facilitation competencies could be better addressed by increasing the presence of school-based mentors, who would provide more contextualised tasks and guide students in meeting the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse pupils. Another area that should be refined in the design of the programme is supporting student teachers in developing activities and utilising a variety of resources to engage young learners in intercultural learning.

The main rationale for this project was to develop the skills of future primary teachers who will take on the responsibility to teach, not only the primary curriculum, but also a foreign language. Our aim was also to build their confidence in working in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Many students indicated that they would consider other international exchange opportunities after participating in the programme. We anticipate that later, when they are working in schools, they will be more willing to create international exchange opportunities for their own pupils in primary schools as well. We strongly believe that future primary education teachers should be given more encouragement to participate in mobility programmes, as this can promote the internationalisation of primary education. The younger the children are when they enter an intercultural and international environment, the more likely they are to continue to express their interest in other cultures.

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Gema Gayete
Universitat Jaume I, Spain
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8171-9858
gayete@uji.es

'Languages are not enemies but friends': Primary school teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom

This investigation is conducted in the primary school context of the Valencian Community (Spain), which is characterised by the presence of three teaching languages: (i) Catalan, as the minority language, (ii) Spanish, as the majority language, and (iii) English, as the main additional language. Regardless of this multilingual curriculum, the L3 (English) of students is taught in isolation without considering their L1s. Therefore, this study aimed at analysing 12 EFL primary school teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguaging practices in the EFL classroom. Moreover, we explored the effect of individual variables on teachers' attitudes, which include teachers' L1(s) and previous training on multilingualism. Practitioners responded to a written questionnaire and took part in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Data were codified and examined using SPSS and NVivo softwares. Findings show that teachers recognised the benefits of translanguaging pedagogies for scaffolding target language learning in the early EFL classroom. Although attitudinal differences were noticed among teachers with different L1s, they were not statistically significant. Hence, our results suggest that these primary school teachers are open to the introduction of more multilingual approaches towards L3 teaching and learning that consider young learners' language backgrounds and previous experience as language learners.

Keywords: translanguaging, attitudes, EFL classroom, primary school teachers, Catalan schools

Słowa kluczowe: translanguaging, postawy, język angielski jako obcy, nauczyciele szkoły podstawowej, katalońskie szkoły

1. Introduction

International research has shown that multilingual learners' needs cannot be met with traditional monolingual models of education (Karpava, Ringblom, Zabrodskaja, 2024; Ohm, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2007). Instead, educational policies should adopt a more multilingual paradigm that promotes a flexible and dynamic relationship between languages (Cenoz, Gorter, 2015). That is why research on translanguaging has recently gained prominence, as this multilingual approach fosters the use of the resources from students' multilingual repertoires (Portolés, Gayete, 2024). Furthermore, as stated by Papadopoulos and Jansen (2024), translanguaging emphasises the role of teachers in employing and valuing students' L1s to facilitate learning and interaction in the classroom.

Special attention should be given to the EFL classroom, representing a context in which students' L1s could be employed to support the learning of English and assist the progress of meaning-making beyond the traditional comparison of linguistic elements (Gkaintartzi, Tsokalidou, 2018). Taking this aspect into consideration, recent studies have analysed EFL teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguaging (Fang, Liu, 2020; Khairunnisa, Iwa Lukmana, 2020; McMillan, Rivers, 2011; Raja, Suparno, Ngadiso, 2022; Yuvayapan, 2019). Most of these investigations have reported teachers' very favourable attitudes to the use of students' L1s in translanguaging practices. However, to the best of our knowledge, only the studies of Gayete (2022) and Guzmán-Alcón (2019) investigated teachers' attitudes towards multilingual education in the educational context of the Valencian Community (Spain), although the scholars did not specifically focus on translanguaging pedagogies, but on other aspects of multilingual education. This is the main reason why the present small-scale study explores Valencian EFL primary school teachers' attitudes towards translanguaging, as well as the impact of teachers' L1s and prior multilingual training on their attitude.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Translanguaging

Translanguaging has its origin in the Welsh bilingual context of education. Williams (1994) coined the term to describe the use of Welsh and English in the same lesson to develop simultaneous competence in both languages. This original meaning of translanguaging has evolved over the last decades. For instance, Canagarajah (2011: 401) defined translanguaging as "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system".

In the context of multilingual education, translanguaging embraces the use of students' multilingual repertoire as a learning strategy (García, Ibarra Johnson, Seltzer, 2017). Cenoz (2019) distinguished two types of translanguaging practices: pedagogical and spontaneous. While pedagogical translanguaging involves the systematic and planned use of students' language repertoires in instruction, spontaneous translanguaging refers to the natural and spontaneous use of these languages inside and outside the classroom.

Previous research has demonstrated some benefits of translanguaging practices, such as an increase in students' motivation, confidence and self-esteem (Creese, Blackledge, 2010; Tsokalidou, Skourtou, 2020), a better cognitive engagement in content learning (Latisha, Young, 2017; Papadopoulos, Jansen, 2024), a development of deep understanding (Duarte, 2020), the promotion of balance between language and content in content subjects instructed through an additional language (Cenoz, Santos, 2020), the building of an equilibrium of power and relationship among languages (Cenoz, 2017), and the development of metalinguistic (Cenoz, Gorter, 2021) and cultural awareness (Papadopoulos, Jansen, 2024), among others. In addition, other authors have recognised the dynamic and flexible language practices found in translanguaging pedagogies as a tool to scaffold language learning (Duarte, 2020; García, Wei, 2014).

2.2. Teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom

Due to the fact that translanguaging represents a current trend in multilingual education and that previous research has reported its benefits, several scholars have explored teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguag-

ing for teaching and learning purposes. Since our study focuses on an EFL programme, we will pay attention to studies that have investigated teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguaging practices in the EFL classroom (Fang, Liu, 2020; Khairunnisa, Lukmana, 2020; McMillan, Rivers, 2011; Raja, Suparno, Ngadiso, 2022; Yuvayapan, 2019).

The investigation carried out by Khairunnisa and Lukmana (2020) analysed 50 primary school EFL teachers' attitudes towards translanguaging in the educational context of Indonesia. Findings extracted from a questionnaire showed that teachers believed that using Indonesian in teaching, as well as other local languages, benefited English language learning, so they were in favour of applying a translanguaging approach in the EFL classroom. Indeed, practitioners recognised that they usually employ translanguaging practices for enhancing students' foreign language learning.

Yuvayapan (2019) also examined 50 EFL teachers' perceptions of translanguaging, but in secondary state and private schools in Turkey. The study employed a questionnaire on teacher beliefs, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to explore teachers' use of students' L1s during their teaching, and whether their beliefs differed from their actual language behaviour. Findings indicated that teachers' views were not in line with their pedagogical practices, since they declared favourable beliefs about translanguaging, but did not normally make use of this multilingual practice, due to external factors such as the expectations of institutions, parents and colleagues.

Also in secondary education, Raja, Suparno and Ngadiso (2022) investigated teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom of two private high schools in Indonesia. Data collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations indicated that, although some teachers did not report positive attitudes towards translanguaging strategies, they employed translanguaging in multiple foreign language learning situations. Similarly, teachers expressed their willingness to implement translanguaging pedagogies in future lessons to improve teaching and learning conditions in the EFL classroom.

At the higher level of education, McMillan and Rivers (2011) explored 29 lecturers' attitudes towards the use of students' L1s to scaffold EFL learning at a Japanese university following a dominant monolingual policy. Teachers filled in an online survey, the findings of which showed that, in spite of the strict monolingual policy of the university, lecturers believed that using students' L1s could improve students' English language learning in a communicative framework.

Last but not least, Fand and Liu (2020), through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, found that EFL and EMI university

teachers from a Chinese university differed in their views on translanguaging and did not make frequent use of this multilingual practice. Nevertheless, instructors acknowledged some of its benefits, such as an increase in students' understanding, the promotion of respect among languages, greater learning of the content-matter, and positive learning outcomes for students with a low English proficiency level.

The findings reported in this section suggest that most EFL teachers from different contexts and levels of education held favourable attitudes towards translanguaging and recognised its advantages in the foreign language classroom. Nonetheless, monolingual laws in education and traditional perspectives held by society were crucial factors challenging the implementation of a more multilingual approach in EFL teaching. Moreover, to our knowledge, no studies exploring EFL teachers' attitudes towards translanguaging have been conducted in the educational context of the Valencian Community, that is the principal setting of this investigation.

3. The study

Taking into consideration existing literature and the main gaps in the research, this paper explores primary school teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguaging practices in the EFL classroom in the Valencian context of education, which is characterised by the presence of three teaching languages (Catalan, Spanish and English). In addition, it investigates the effect of teachers' L1s and previous multilingual training on the attitudes of teachers. Considering these objectives, we formulated two research questions:

RQ1: What are the attitudes of EFL primary school teachers towards the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom?
RQ2: Do teachers' L1(s), or previous training on multilingualism, influence their attitudes?

Based on existing literature, we present the hypothesis that will guide the present study.

Hypothesis: Teachers will declare favourable attitudes towards the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom, although they will report poor use of this multilingual practice. Speaking a particular L1(s) and having previous training on multilingualism will influence teachers' attitudes.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

The sample was composed of 12 EFL teachers from two public primary schools based in La Vall d'Uixó, a town located in the province of Castelló (Valencian Community, Spain). These schools are trilingual since they offer three languages (Catalan, Spanish, and English) as language subjects and languages of instruction through the PEPLI programme.

Teachers' ages ranged from 23 to 52, with an average age of 39.50, and 12.58 their average number of years of teaching experience. Regarding their gender distribution, 83.3% (*n* = 10) of the teachers are female and 16.7% (*n* = 12) are male. In relation to teachers' L1(s), 41.7% (*n* = 5) have Catalan as their L1, 33.3% (*n* = 4) are native speakers of Spanish, and 25% (*n* = 3) share both languages (Catalan and Spanish) as their L1s. Therefore, all teachers are, at least, trilingual since they are competent in both co-official languages (Catalan and Spanish), as well as in English as their professional language.

With regard to teachers' participation in training programmes on multilingualism, 50% (*n* = 6) reported receiving previous multilingual training, whereas the remaining 50% (*n* = 6) of the teachers had not enrolled in this type of course. From the pool of teachers who received multilingual training, 25% (*n* = 3) took part in multilingual preparation courses during their master degrees, 16.7% (*n* = 2) received instruction on multilingualism in their bachelor degrees, and 8.3% (*n* = 1) participated in optional courses offered by the Valencian regional government (*Generalitat Valenciana*).

3.1.2. Instruments

Two instruments were employed to collect data in the present study: an attitude scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

First, we designed an attitude scale questionnaire which was divided into two main parts (see Appendix 1). The first part collected background information about the teacher participants, such as age, gender, L1s, nationality, years of teaching experience, Catalan and English proficiency levels, and prior training on multilingualism. The second part of the questionnaire included 20 statements representing attitudes towards the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom. Teachers were asked to select their degree of agreement with each statement by selecting one of the following options: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree or strongly agree.

The second instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview composed of 4 open-ended questions based on teachers' attitudes towards the use of students' L1s in the EFL classroom, as well as teacher training on translanguaging (see Appendix 2). Semi-structured interviews were performed to complement and reinforce the quantitative data extracted from the questionnaire with a set of qualitative data.

3.1.3. Data collection and analysis

The data collection procedure took place in two main stages. First, teachers filled in the attitude scale questionnaire during an approximate time of 30 minutes. Second, practitioners participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews that were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Quantitative data coming from the questionnaire was examined using the SPSS programme. We assigned numbers to each of the options. The option 'strongly agree' was coded as 5, 'agree' as 4, 'neither agree nor disagree' as 3, 'disagree' as 2, and 'strongly disagree' as 1. The scores were inverted in the negative statements presenting unfavourable attitudes.

We analysed qualitative data extracted from semi-structured interviews through the NVivo programme following an inductive analytical approach. Teachers' responses were classified into categories progressively established according to emerging topics mentioned by teachers. Qualitative data was also quantified. The coding of those categories, which ranges from 1 to 5, 1 representing very negative attitudes and 5 indicating very positive attitudes, was agreed by the authors of the study and other two experienced researchers.

A Shapiro-Wilk normality test showed that our data was normally distributed (>0.05), so parametric tests were carried out. A one-way ANOVA statistical test was run to identify differences in the attitudes of teachers who had different L1s and an independent sample t-test was conducted to explore the effect of multilingual training on attitudes. Significance was considered at the level 0.05.

All ethical principles of academic research were followed in the study.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results and discussion related to RQ1

RQ1 (What are the attitudes of EFL primary school teachers towards the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom?) deals with the examination of

teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguaging strategies in the EFL learning context of primary education.

Overall, the results extracted from the attitude scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews indicated teachers' very favourable attitudes towards the use of translanguaging (*M* = 4.30, *SD* = 0.36). There was a high degree of agreement among the participants towards all the statements (S) representing a multilingual perspective in EFL instruction (S4-S14, S16-S20 on the questionnaire), whereas they expressed a low level of agreement with the statements supporting monolingual views (S1-S3 and S15), as seen in Figure 1 below.

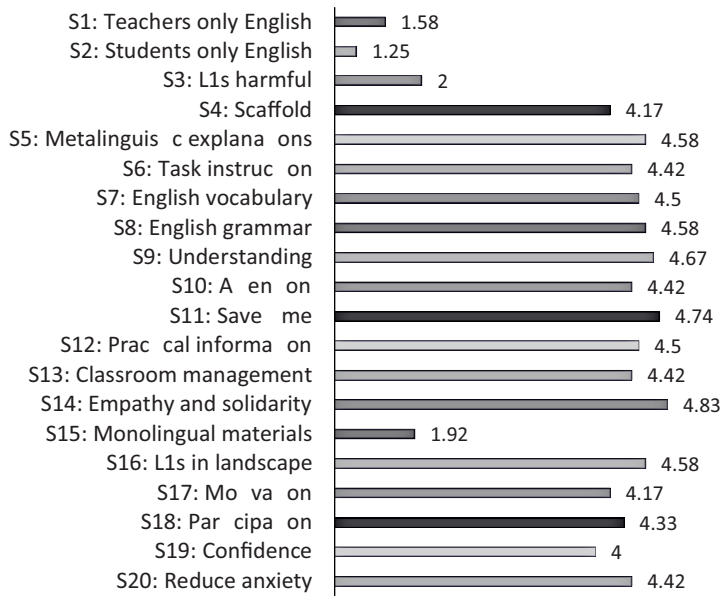

Figure 1. Teachers' degree of agreement with questionnaire statements

Source: own study.

The statements that received the greatest degree of agreement were related to the use of Catalan and Spanish to foster empathy and solidarity (S14: *M* = 4.83, *SD* = 0.39), save quality time (S11: *M* = 4.74, *SD* = 0.45), ensure students' understanding (S9: *M* = 4.67, *SD* = 0.49), explain English grammar (S8: *M* = 4.58, *SD* = 0.67), and provide metalinguistic explanations (S5: *M* = 4.58, *SD* = 0.67). The teachers also considered that the English classroom should promote a multilingual landscape in which students' L1s were not left apart (S16: *M* = 4.58, *SD* = 0.67).

Moreover, teachers acknowledged some other relevant functions of translanguaging, such as scaffolding general target language (TL) learning (S4: *M* = 4.17,

SD = 0.72), providing task instructions (S6: *M* = 4.42, *SD* = 0.79), teaching English vocabulary (S7: *M* = 4.50, *SD* = 0.80), keeping students' attention (S10: *M* = 4.42, *SD* = 0.79), giving practical information to students (S12: *M* = 4.50, *SD* = 0.52), and managing lessons (S13: *M* = 4.42, *SD* = 0.67). Practitioners also recognised several benefits of employing students' multilingual repertoires, such as an increase in students' motivation to learn English (S17: *M* = 4.17, *SD* = 0.83), the promotion of greater student participation (S18: *M* = 4.33, *SD* = 0.78), an improvement in students' confidence (S19: *M* = 4.00, *SD* = 0.74), and a decrease of students' anxiety (S20: *M* = 4.42, *SD* = 0.67).

Thus, in line with preceding studies (Fang, Liu, 2020; Khairunnisa, Lukmana, 2020; McMillan, Rivers, 2011; Yuvayapan, 2019), our findings suggest that teachers were against language isolation in the early EFL classroom and recognised the functions and benefits of using students' L1s (Catalan and Spanish) for fostering an English teaching and learning environment. Some of the beliefs of our teachers about the benefits and functions of translanguaging were also reported in previous research, such as the increase of students' motivation and confidence (Creese, Blackledge, 2010; Tsokalidou, Skourtou, 2020), the development of understanding (Duarte, 2020; Fang, Liu, 2020), and the scaffolding role of the practices involving translanguaging (Cenoz, Gorter, 2021; Duarte, 2020; García, Wei, 2015; Karpava, Ringblom, Zabrodskaja, 2024; Papadopoulos, Jansen, 2024).

Teachers' favourable attitudes were reinforced by the low scores of the statements which follow a monolingual perspective (S1: *M* = 1.58, *SD* = 0.79; S2: *M* = 1.25, *SD* = 0.45; S3: *M* = 2.00, *SD* = 1.21; S15: *M* = 1.92, *SD* = 0.79). According to these statements, there is no room for the use of other languages apart from English, either for communication, or for the elaboration of classroom resources and materials. Hence, contrary to the monolingual policies implemented in Valencian education, teachers considered that a more multilingual perspective should be assumed in the primary EFL classroom which taps into students' language backgrounds and previous experience as language learners, as was also found in the study carried out by McMillan and Rivers (2011).

We also explored teachers' self-reported use of translanguaging (see Figure 2 below). Whereas 41.7% (*n* = 5) of the teachers stated employing students' L1s on a daily basis, 33.3% (*n* = 4) made occasional use of these languages, and 25% (*n* = 3) rarely applied translanguaging practices. Thus, there were more teachers who made a poor or non-existent use (*n* = 7) than a frequent use of translanguaging (*n* = 5), as was also observed in previous research in which practitioners held favourable attitudes towards translanguaging, but did not tend to employ it in their classroom practice (Fang, Liu, 2020; Yuvayapan, 2019).

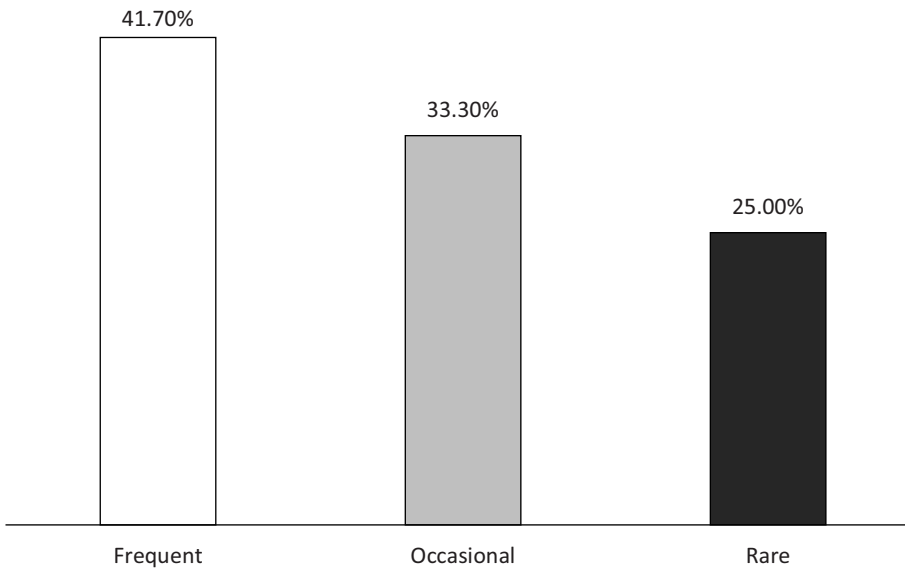

Figure 2. Teachers' self-reported use of translanguaging

Source: own study.

In spite of these findings, the majority of teachers (91.7%, *n* = 11) declared being satisfied and comfortable with the use of translanguaging. As depicted in Figure 3 below, teachers' main goals for the use of Catalan and Spanish were to provide English vocabulary and grammar translations (38.46%), ensure students' understanding (26.93%), scaffold TL learning (15.38%), help in metalinguistic explanations (11.54%), and give task instructions (7.69%). Indeed, 41.66% (*n* = 5) believed that translanguaging was completely necessary for guaranteeing adequate TL learning, whereas 33.33% (*n* = 4) considered it a beneficial and useful teaching resource. Other teachers (16.66%, *n* = 2) claimed that translanguaging practices are inherent to language lessons, since languages reinforce each other and should not be isolated. Some teachers' responses representing these ideas are presented below.

T.6: Using Catalan and Spanish is sometimes necessary and the only way to accomplish specific learning outcomes.

T.1: L1s are a useful resource that should be used and promoted in English lessons. Students find it easier to learn English if they can rely on their languages.

T.9: I love translanguaging. Languages are not enemies but friends and should not be separated into different lessons.

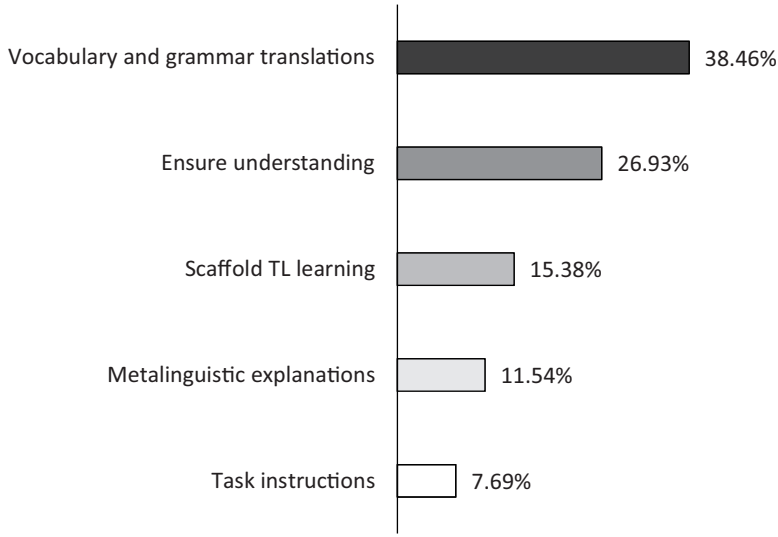

Figure 3. Teachers' goals for the use of students' L1s in the EFL classroom
Source: own study.

We also examined teachers' disposition to participate in training programmes on translanguaging. All teachers expressed their willingness to take part in such courses to implement translanguaging strategies in their future classroom, as also expressed by teachers in the study of Raja, Suparno and Ngadiso (2022). The most frequent reasons given by teachers were that multilingual training is crucial for updating and improving teaching methods by the application of a more multilingual approach (47.06%), and that translanguaging practices are an interesting topic to cover and learn more about (17.65%). Examples of teachers' justifications are shown in the following lines:

T.2: As English teachers, it is always good to learn more, to update our teaching methods and enhance students' language learning.
T.4: I would really like to receive more training on translanguaging since I think it is a very interesting and relevant topic in education.

The idea mentioned by T.2 should be highlighted since the instructor acknowledged translanguaging pedagogies as useful strategies to implement innovative techniques in language teaching, as was also observed in the study by Papadopoulos and Jansen (2024). Therefore, translanguaging may represent an opportunity to improve and refresh teaching methods according to the current needs of multilingual students.

Overall, the findings presented in this section may confirm the part of our hypothesis dealing with RQ1 (*i.e.,* Teachers will declare favourable attitudes towards the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom, although they will report a poor use of this multilingual practice) since, even though teachers held very positive attitudes about using a translanguaging approach for EFL teaching, the number of teachers who reported employing translanguaging practices on a daily basis was lower than the number of instructors who made occasional, or rare use of students' L1s. These results suggest that EFL primary school teachers should be trained on the application of more multilingual and heteroglossic methodologies that involve students' and teachers' whole language repertoires, to enhance young learners' L3 development, since our findings have demonstrated teachers' favourable views and openness to the introduction of translanguaging practices, but a very low degree of actual implementation. They may be encouraged by multilingual training sessions.

4.2. Results and discussion related to RQ2

RQ2 (Do teachers' L1(s) or previous training on multilingualism influence their attitudes?) explores the impact of the L1(s) and prior multilingual training on the attitudes of teachers.

Regarding the effect of teachers' L1s, descriptive analysis showed that instructors who had Catalan as their L1 showed the most favourable attitudes (M = 4.40, SD = 0.28), followed by teachers who shared both Catalan and Spanish as their L1s (M = 4.34, SD = 0.45), and finally, teachers who were native speakers of Spanish (M = 4.15, SD = 0.43), although all attitudes were very positive (see Figure 4 below). However, statistical results extracted from a one-way ANOVA parametric test demonstrated that differences in attitudes were not statistically significant: $F(2.9) = 0.520$, $p = 0.611$. Hence, in our study, having a particular L1 did not affect EFL primary school teachers' attitudes towards the use of translanguaging.

Regardless of the lack of statistical significance, more positive attitudes were found among teachers who had Catalan as their principal L1, or as one of their L1s, than among teachers who only had Spanish as their L1. These results may suggest that teachers having Catalan as one of their core languages may recognise to a higher extent the importance of using students' whole language repertoires for developing competence in English at the primary school level, and in the same vein, promote the use of the minority language (Catalan) in education.

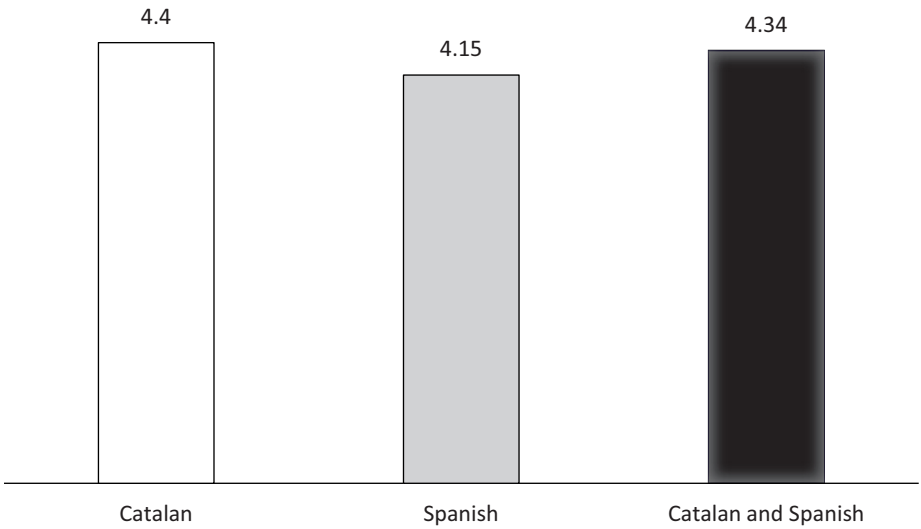

Figure 4. Teachers' attitudes towards translanguaging according to their L1s
Source: own study.

We also explored the impact of previous multilingual training on teachers' attitudes towards translanguaging (see Figure 5 below). Findings revealed that teachers' participation in training courses on multilingual education did not have an effect on their attitudes towards translanguaging, since the scores were practically identical for teachers who received training (M = 4.31, SD = 0.45) and teachers who did not receive it (M = 4.30, SD = 0.29). In fact, an independent sample t-test confirmed the lack of significance in attitude differences: $t(10) = 0.055$, $p = 0.957$. Therefore, in our study, preceding training on multilingualism proved to be a factor not influencing teachers' attitudes.

It is worth mentioning that we did not explore the nature of the multilingual training received by teachers. As reported by practitioners, this form was part of specific subjects from their bachelor and master degrees, or optional courses offered by the Valencian regional government. Nonetheless, we did not go through the contents and objectives of these courses to verify the real validity and quality of the multilingual training. This is the main reason why explicit multilingual training should be provided to teachers, in order to examine the teachers' attitudes before and after receiving multilingual instruction.

Overall, results dealing with RQ2 lead us to reject the part of our hypothesis related to this issue (*i.e.,* Speaking a particular L1(s) and previous training on multilingualism will influence teachers' attitudes) which states

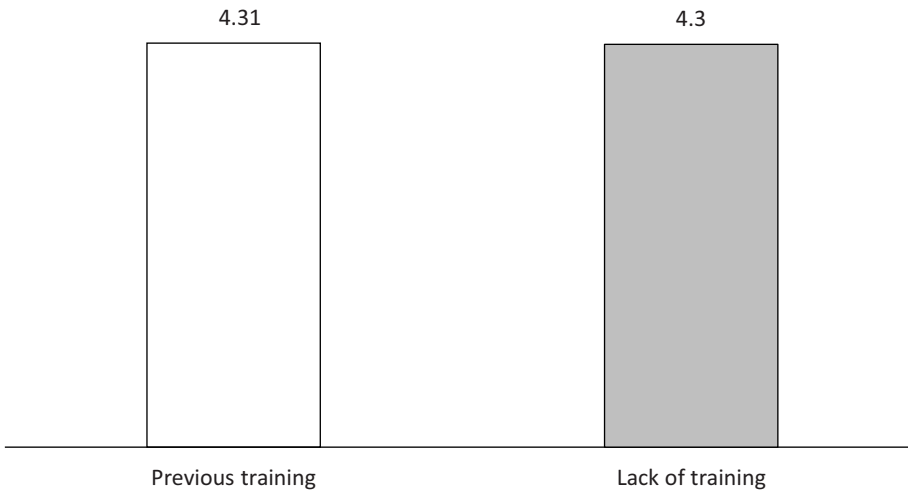

Figure 5. Teachers' attitudes towards translanguaging according to prior training on multilingualism

Source: own study.

that both variables will have an impact on teachers' attitudes. Notwithstanding this lack of statistical significance, attitude differences were identified for teachers being different L1s, with Catalan native speaker teachers the ones that denoted the most favourable attitudes towards translanguaging. Yet, these results leave ground for further research.

5. Concluding remarks

The findings of this paper may contribute to the growing field of research on the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom, although the small-scale nature of the study entails that generalisations should be made cautiously. Following the findings of preceding studies (Fang, Liu, 2020; Khairunnisa, Lukmana, 2020; McMillan, Rivers, 2011; Yuvayapan, 2019), our small-scale investigation shows that EFL primary school teachers in the Valencian educational context are in favour of employing students' multilingual repertoires (Catalan and Spanish) for the teaching and learning of English. Instructors recognised the potential functions and benefits of translanguaging, as well as the relevance of introducing multilingual resources and a multilingual landscape in the foreign language classroom. Despite these favourable attitudes, when facing the classroom reality, most teachers do not apply translanguaging on a frequent basis, but rely on monolingual teaching methods, as was

also found in previous research (Fang, Liu, 2020; Yuvayapan, 2019). Thus, it seems that, as also noticed in Tsokalidou and Skourtou's (2020) investigation, going against the dominant monolingual paradigm in education represents a challenge for teachers. Nonetheless, practitioners in our study feel comfortable with the idea of this multilingual practice and reported their willingness to learn more about the use of translanguaging.

Regarding the effect of the individual variables examined, we found no significant differences in the attitudes of teachers with different L1s and those of instructors who received or did not receive prior multilingual training. However, we noticed more positive attitudes in teachers having Catalan as their L1, or one of their L1s. Hence, our hypothesis (*i.e.,* Teachers will declare favourable attitudes towards the use of translanguaging in the EFL classroom, although they will report a poor use of this multilingual practice. Speaking a particular L1(s) and previous training on multilingualism will influence teachers' attitudes) could be said to have been partially confirmed since, although the teachers' attitudes were positively grounded regardless of their poor implementation of translanguaging, there was no significant influence of their L1s and previous multilingual training on their attitudes.

The findings of our study may lead to several pedagogical implications to be translated into teaching practices and educational policies. In the first place, since translanguaging pedagogies were perceived by teachers as effective teaching and learning resources, educational laws need to promote more flexible and recurrent use of students' L1s in the primary school EFL classroom. Furthermore, the fact that most teachers did not rely on translanguaging on a frequent basis, regardless of their positive attitudes towards this multilingual practice, indicates the need for teacher training on the use of translanguaging strategies in L3 teaching. The introduction of multilingual classroom resources, materials and linguistic landscapes could serve as a potential technique to facilitate the integration of translanguaging pedagogies, and increase young learners' awareness of the relevance of their multilingual repertoires in foreign language learning. Last, we propose alternative ways of exploring translanguaging in EFL lessons, based on the examination of the functions described by students and teachers of their translanguaging practices (see Aoyama, 2020; Sahib, 2019; Sobkowiak, 2022; Yuan, 2024; Yuvayapan, 2019). If specific purposes of translanguaging are explored in detail, we may guarantee a more adequate design and application of multilingual policies and methodologies in the early EFL classroom.

This study has some limitations. First, the number of participants is limited and may not be representative. Some ideas for further research may also be provided. Future investigation should explore attitudes of teachers belonging to different educational levels, such as secondary and

higher education. Other individual variables, such as age or gender, should be further investigated. Last but not least, future studies should provide teacher training on translanguaging, and analyse attitudes before and after receiving this multilingual instruction. Accordingly, this article encourages further research to contribute to the field of translanguaging.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Attitude scale questionnaire.

PART 1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Age:_____ 2. Gender:_____
3. L1(s):_____ 4. Nationality:_____
5. Years of teaching experience:_____
6. Catalan proficiency level (accredited):_____
7. English proficiency level (accredited):_____
8. Have you received training on multilingual education? Yes - No
8.1. Which type of training? _____

PART 2. QUESTIONNAIRE

Select your degree of agreement towards each of the statements by selecting one of the following options (SD: Strongly disagree, D: Disagree, NAND: Neither agree nor disagree, A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree).

	SD	D	NAND	A	SA
1. Teachers should only use English in the English class					
2. Students should only use English in the English class					
3. Using students' L1s (Catalan and Spanish) in the English class may be harmful					
4. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish for scaffolding TL (English) learning					
5. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish in metalinguistic explanations					
6. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish during task instructions					
7. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish for the teaching of English vocabulary					
8. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish for explaining English grammar					
9. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish to ensure students' understanding					
10. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish to keep students' attention					
11. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish to save time					

12. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish while providing practical information to students					
13. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish for classroom management					
14. It is good to use Catalan and Spanish to foster empathy and solidarity					
15. Classroom materials and resources should be only in English					
16. The landscape of the English class should include Catalan and Spanish (ex. posters)					
17. Using students' L1s in the English class increases students' motivation to learn English					
18. Using students' L1s in the English class fosters students' participation					
19. Using students' L1s in the English class increases students' confidence					
20. Using students' L1s in the English class reduces students' anxiety while learning English					

Appendix 2. Semi-structured interviews.

Question 1. Do you use students' L1s to support TL learning? On which occasions?
Question 2. Are you in favour of this multilingual practice or do you feel guilty while using students' L1s? Why?
Question 3. Do you think that the use of students' L1s should be limited or forbidden in the English classroom? Why?
Question 4. Would you like to receive training on the use of translanguaging practices in the EFL classroom? Why?

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Dominika Chrobak
University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9993-6188
dominika.chrobak@uken.krakow.pl

The impact of strategy training on strategy use and reading in L3 Spanish: The results of a ten-month study of 11-year-old learners

In today's competitive and globalized world, in which plurilingualism is the norm, many students learn not just one, but two foreign languages in the primary school. One of the ways to facilitate L3 learning is to enable learners to refer to their prior experience, and show them how they can use prior language knowledge (usually the mother tongue and English) to their advantage. The aim of this paper is to present the results of a pre-test post-test study investigating what impact a programme of strategy training had on 11-year-old learners' reading strategy use and reading ability in L3 Spanish. The intervention included cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies. The data was collected by means of think aloud protocols, strategy questionnaires and reading tests. The results of the study suggest that after the training learners still employed a limited number of strategies, which may be attributed to their developing metalinguistic awareness. Yet, strategy training positively impacted the overall reading test performance of high- and average-achieving students, but not those who were low achieving.

Keywords: L3 learning, transfer of training, learning strategies, reading comprehension

Słowa kluczowe: przyswajanie J3, trening strategii, strategie uczenia się, czytanie ze zrozumieniem

1. Introduction

There are more and more students who begin learning an L3 at an early age. To ensure that the process is as effective as possible, it is crucial to identify possible solutions that can support young learners in the process of acquiring a new language. One promising approach is to encourage students to use their whole linguistic repertoire to learn a new foreign language. By drawing on one's knowledge and skills, it is possible to establish connections between languages (Erler, Finkbeiner, 2007). Transferring strategies from learning L2 onto L3 learning is not only effective, but it also raises students' awareness of linguistic diversity (Mokhtari, Sheorey, 2002) and interconnectedness, leading to the improvement in overall learner competence.

In learning a consecutive language, the process does not necessarily have to start from scratch. Prior experience in language learning, referred to as multilingual competence (Cenoz, Gorter, 2011), can be a resource that students may draw on in learning another foreign language. Learners can use their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and language structures from previously learned languages to make connections and facilitate comprehension in the new language. This process of transfer of knowledge enables learners to recognize patterns, deduce meanings, and apply strategies that have been effective in past learning experiences. By building on these existing competences, teachers can encourage students to develop a more interconnected linguistic repertoire, boosting their confidence in language learning overall.

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a study related to the impact of reading strategy training on the L3 reading ability of 11-year-old learners. It was carried out over the period of a school year among three primary school learners. The study was conducted in L3 (Spanish), which was an additional foreign language introduced to students at age 11, subsequent to English.

2. Literature overview

There is an abundant body of research related to learning strategies, including L3 learning, yet it typically addresses adults (e.g., Oxford, 2011, 2017; Griffiths, 2018; Pawlak, Kiermasz, 2018). As far as young learners are concerned, the prevailing number of studies are related to CLIL contexts, in which there is an intensive amount of exposure to language (e.g., Xanthou, 2011; de Zarobe, Zenotz, 2017; Milla, Gutiérrez-Mangado, 2019). These studies emphasize the role of metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies

in prompting comprehension and language transfer across L1, L2, and L3. For instance, Milla and Gutiérrez-Mangado (2019) explore how bilingual children use prior linguistic knowledge to facilitate reading in the L3, observing a reliance on, for example, translation strategies. Interestingly, gender, proficiency and age factors were also taken into consideration when analyzing the language learning strategies employed by primary school learners. The results of the study show that the first two factors had no significant influence on the choice of strategies. In the case of age, a minimal difference was observed between grades five and six of primary education (students aged 10-12) in terms of strategy use. Similarly, de Zarobe and Zenotz (2017) observe that CLIL enhanced young learners' strategic reading abilities, by means of specifically chosen texts, and explicit strategy instruction, enabling a cross-linguistic comparison. Although the study was conducted over a period of only 7 weeks, the experimental group showed a marked improvement in their reading competence, in comparison to the control group. The positive effect of strategy instruction was maintained over a period of 2 years. In another study, Xanthou (2011) highlights how vocabulary knowledge impacts reading comprehension in the L3, particularly in explicit strategy instruction. Providing young learners with targeted training in reading strategies—such as summarizing, predicting, and using graphic organizers—significantly improved their ability to decode and comprehend L3 texts. These findings suggest that young learners benefit from structured and interactive strategy instruction, which not only improves their reading skills but also fosters broader cognitive development and metalinguistic awareness.

The importance of strategy instruction cannot be underestimated in L3 learning. Its main benefits include managing and optimizing students' cognitive resources, contributing to more effective language acquisition (e.g., Pressley, 2000; Veenman, et al., 2006; Zhang, 2008). Studies (e.g., Oxford, 2017) have shown that training in the use of certain strategies, such as planning and evaluating one's learning, has a positive impact on learners' autonomy and self-regulation. Apart from this, strategy training creates favourable conditions for students to transfer knowledge and skills from the L1 and L2 to L3 (Cenoz, Gorter, 2014). Effective strategy implementation may positively influence learners' motivation and language retention, which play a significant role in the process of acquiring additional languages (Griffiths, 2018; Kummin, Rahman, 2010). Taking into account the benefits that strategy training brings, its implementation in foreign language classes should be systematic and integral, ensuring that learners are equipped with the tools to enhance their language acquisition, autonomy and transfer of skills across languages.

The framework that further supports the development of linguistic multicompetence in respect of reading is FREPA (Candelier, et al., 2012). The Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures was designed to support education that is aimed at fostering intercultural and multilingual competences among learners. The key features of FREPA are directly connected to reading strategies. For instance, the framework stresses the importance of prior linguistic and cultural knowledge in acquiring additional languages. Teachers can use FREPA to encourage young learners to make use of their multilingual repertoire, such as recognizing cognates, or comparing grammatical patterns in the L1, L2 and L3. These strategies are particularly important in reading in the target language. Another important aspect is related to developing metalinguistic awareness, which translates into understanding how the languages function. Reading strategies such as decoding unfamiliar words, recognizing text structure, and identifying language-specific features are strongly connected with this competence. For instance, teaching learners to notice similarities and differences in syntax, word formation, or punctuation between the L3 and previously learned languages can make reading more accessible. Last but not least, FREPA promotes the development of attitudes such as valuing linguistic diversity and motivation for learning. Young learners' confidence in L3 reading is often influenced by their perception of multilingualism. FREPA encourages teachers to portray L3 learning as an extension of the abilities that students already possess. By integrating FREPA's pluralistic framework into the teaching of reading strategies for L3 acquisition, educators can create a favourable learning environment that aligns with both theoretical aspects and practical outcomes in multilingual education.

To sum up, most studies on L3 language learning strategies were conducted in a CLIL setting, where exposure to the target language is quite intensive and students are, in most cases, already bilingual. To our knowledge, no other study was conducted among children in a formal setting where there is limited exposure to a foreign language.

3. The study

The present study aims at exploring reading strategies employed by 11-year-old learners while learning L3 Spanish. It is part of a larger project that focuses on learning strategies used by upper primary school learners in the process of learning L3. Since participants were beginner learners of Spanish, strategy training was conducted in one particular language skill - reading. The reason for concentrating only on this was the fact that it is a receptive skill

and is developed from the early stages of novel language learning. Through reading, students broaden their knowledge, not only about the world but also about the language and its grammar, structures, and lexis. This skill also provides them with meaningful input, which is especially important for the beginner learners of a language (Chodkiewicz, 2016).

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What was the impact of explicit reading strategy instruction on the strategy use and L3 reading performance of 11-year-old learners after the 10- month intervention?
2. What were the reading strategies employed by 11-year-old learners before and after the introduction of explicit reading strategy training?

In the study, a pre-test and post-test study design was used. In order to address the first question, the strategies that students employed in the pre- and post-test were compared. The data was collected by means of questionnaires that students were asked to fill in after they completed the reading tests.

The second research question was aimed at shedding more light on the type of strategies students employed before and after the intervention. The strategies that were employed before the strategy instruction were collected on the basis of the questionnaire, whereas the strategies that were used after the strategy instruction were recorded by means of think aloud protocols. The strategies identified in their questionnaires and think aloud protocols were categorized with reference to Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies.

3.1. Participants

There were 3 students who took part in the present study. They were private primary school students aged 11. They had learnt English for 6 years, and Spanish for 3 months. Their level of English oscillated between A2 and B1, whereas their level of proficiency in Spanish was A1. They attended Spanish classes two times a week. The criterion that was taken into account when selecting the participants of the study were the results on an English language test at the end of the school year, which enabled the researcher to classify students as low-performing, average-performing and high-performing.

3.2. The research tools

There were two basic tools that were employed in the present study: a questionnaire and think aloud protocols. The first tool was the questionnaire which was aimed at gathering the quantitative data regarding the use of reading strategies. It was administered in Polish, for practical reasons, as the students had not reached a level of proficiency in Spanish that would allow them to fully understand each question. The reading strategies questionnaire contained 16 questions. Students were supposed to state how many times they employed a given strategy. The strategies were divided into three categories: before, during and after the reading process. This research tool was based on Kucharczyk's questionnaire (2018: 380-381), regarding reading comprehension in French among students aged 15. It was, however, modified to fit the context of a Spanish class.

The second research tool was a think aloud protocol, which enabled the researcher to gather qualitative data. After the post-test, participants were asked to describe their use of reading strategies while they were completing the tests. Their answers were recorded and transcribed. The strategies were then classified with the use of Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies. These strategies are divided into direct strategies (involving the language directly) and indirect strategies (supporting language learning without direct interaction with the language).

3.3. The procedure

The study started in September 2020. Its first stage consisted of a reading test accompanied by the questionnaire. It was conducted before the strategy training and was aimed at identifying the strategies students employed while they were completing a reading task. What followed was a 10-month reading strategy training embedded into the students' Spanish classes. Figure 1 presents the plan of the strategy training course, i.e. the types of strategies that the students were exposed to between the language tests.

The strategies that were included in the study were divided into two broad categories: those that can be used before reading a text and those that can be employed while reading it. The reasons for such a division were inspired by the questionnaire prepared by Kucharczyk (2018). In his research instrument, the organization of strategies into before- and while-reading enabled students to reflect on their use of strategies in a logical order.

Reading strategies
Test 1
1) Careful analysis of the reading instruction. 2) The use of translanguaging (references to Polish, English and other languages)
1) Identifying the main topic of the text. 2) Identifying the type of text.
1) Paying attention to the relationships between different parts of the text. 2) Paying attention to the context to understand the meaning of unknown vocabulary items.
Test 2
1) Re-reading parts of the text 2) Guessing 3) Underlining key words
1) Paying attention to particular parts of the text 2) Evaluation of the text
Revising the use of strategies
Test 3

Figure 1. The plan of the strategy training (own study)

Each stage of the strategy instruction was followed by a test and think aloud protocols conducted among the three students. Their answers were recorded and transcribed. Then, the strategies employed by the learners were underlined and classified according to Oxford's taxonomy (1990) of learning strategies.

As far as the strategy training is concerned, Chamot's model (2005) was followed. It consists of six steps:

a) The preparation stage involves the teacher identifying the strategies learners already use before the training. Through student self-reports, the teacher can find out whether learners can transfer reading strategies from their L2 to their L3, and create a plan for future strategy development.
b) The presentation stage, during which the teacher introduces and explains the use of the new strategy. Students are then asked to share their experiences with this strategy and discuss how they are going to apply it to the new task.
c) During the practice stage, students use the newly introduced strategy in practical tasks. In the beginning, the practice is guided by the teacher, and later, students are encouraged to use the strategy on their own.
d) The evaluation stage allows students to assess the effectiveness of the strategy they have used.

e) Expansion activities enable learners to transfer the strategy they have mastered to a new task.
f) In the assessment stage, the teacher evaluates to what extent the new strategy has impacted students' overall performance.

The reason for choosing Chamot's model (2005) was the fact that it is recursive – whenever any phase needs revision, the teacher or instructor can easily repeat it.

4. The results

The data provided in Table 1 presents the number and types of strategies reported by the high-performing (HP), average-performing (AP), and low-performing (LP) students before and after the ten month- intervention of strategy instruction, according to the questionnaires.

Table 1. The use of reading strategies by high-performing (HP), average-performing (AP) and low-performing (LP) students in pre-test and post-test strategy questionnaire (own study)

Strategy	Students	Pre-test	Post-test
TRANSLANGUAGING	HP	5	7
	AP	4	9
	LP	2	3
RE-READING	HP	2	5
	AP	3	4
	LP	1	1
UNERLINING KEY WORDS	HP	1	1
	AP	1	0
	LP	0	0
GUESSING	HP	2	5
	AP	3	5
	LP	0	1
IDENTIFYING THE MAIN TOPIC	HP	1	1
	AP	1	0
	LP	0	0
IDENTIFYING THE TYPE OF TEXT	HP	0	1
	AP	0	1
	LP	0	0

Table 1 – cont.

Strategy	Students	Pre-test	Post-test
ANALYSIS OF THE INSTRUCTION	HP	1	1
	AP	1	1
	LP	0	1
PAYING ATTENTION	HP	4	4
	AP	2	6
	LP	3	3
EVALUATION	HP	3	4
	AP	2	3
	LP	3	1
LACK OF UNDERSTANDING	HP	2	1
	AP	2	1
	LP	4	3
DOUBT	HP	3	6
	AP	2	4
	LP	2	3

The pre- and post-test strategy questionnaire results showed a general increase in the use of strategies across all the students, with the most notable improvements observed among average-performing learner. While the high-performing student showed enhanced improvement, the low-performing student exhibited lower gains in strategy use. The employment of certain strategies, such as translanguaging**,** guessing, and re-reading, significantly increased, whereas other strategies like underlining key words and identifying the main topic remained underutilized.

Translanguaging emerged as the most popular strategy across the students, with the high-performing student increasing their usage from 5 to 7, the average-performing student from 4 to 9, and the low-performing student from 2 to 3. In a think-aloud protocol, the AP student said: "The word looks like 'comunicación' in Spanish. I think it means 'communication,' so I'll read the sentence once again to check it". This indicates that student used their linguistic repertoire effectively to guess the meaning of the word, in this particular example based on the recognition of a cognate.

Re-reading showed notable improvement in the high-performing student (from 2 to 5), slight improvement for the average-performing student (from 3 to 4), but no change for the low-performing student (remaining at 1). In a think-aloud protocol, the AP student said: "I need to go back and read it again to guess what is meant by 'amarillo.'" This reflects an intentional use of re-reading to clarify ambiguities and foster comprehension of the text.

The use of guessing improved notably for the high-performing student (2 to 5) and the average-performing student (3 to 5) and showed slight increase for the low-performing student (0 to 1). In a think-aloud protocol, the AP student said: "I don't know this word 'viento', but I think that maybe it means something related to weather. It sounds like something connected to the weather." This demonstrates that students were able to guess meanings using contextual cues and background knowledge.

Paying attention is another strategy employed by the learners. The high-performing student showed an enormous increase in using this strategy (from 2 to 6). As far as the average-performing and the low-performing students are concerned, no notable gains were reported. In a think-aloud protocol the AP student said: "I need to focus here—the text is describing the steps for something, so I need to read it more carefully." This indicates that the average-performing student benefitted from strategy instruction in terms of improving the ability to focus on important part(s) of the text.

Doubt usage increased notably for the high-performing student (3 to 6) and the average-performing student (2 to 4), demonstrating a growing ability for a more evaluative approach to text analysis. In a think-aloud protocol, the AP student said: "I wonder if they are making an assumption here."

What was interesting to observe were the strategies that had a limited impact on the learners. An example includes underlining key words, which is the strategy that remained unchanged for the high-performing student and declined for the remaining students. Identifying the main topic and identifying the type of text are the strategies that showed minimal improvement among the participants, indicating a need for more targeted instruction to promote their use.

The findings underscore the importance of explicit strategy instruction in promoting the use of reading strategies, particularly with the average-performing student, who demonstrated the most consistent improvement

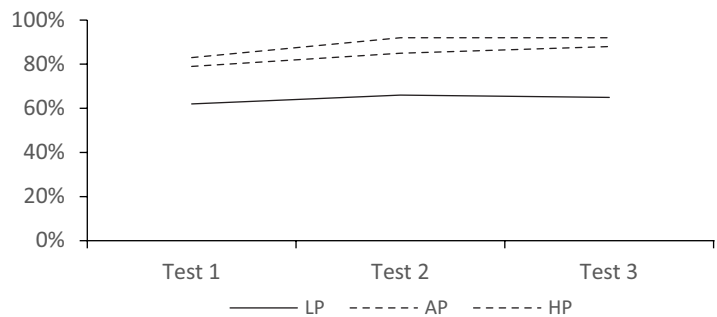

Figure 2. The results achieved by high-performing (HP), average-performing (AP) and low-performing (LP) students in 3 reading tests (own study)

in their use. The high-performing student showed continuous increase in strategy use, suggesting that strategy instruction strengthened already effective approaches in their strategy use. In contrast, the low-performing student showed limited but meaningful improvements, particularly in the use of basic strategies such as translanguaging and guessing**.**

Figure 2 presents the results achieved by the high-performing (HP), average-performing (AP), and low-performing (LP) students across the three reading tests.

The high-performing student achieved high scores in the reading tests, beginning at 83% in Test 1 and increasing to 92% in both Test 2 and Test 3, demonstrating consistent high-level performance. The average-performing student showed marked improvement over the three tests, starting at 79% in Test 1, rising to 85% in Test 2, and later to 88% in Test 3, reflecting continuous progress. The low-performing student displayed modest gains, improving slightly from 62% in Test 1 to 66% in Test 2 but then decreasing to 65% in Test 3, indicating limited progress.

5. Discussion

5.1. The impact of explicit reading strategy instruction on the strategy use and L3 reading performance of the primary school learners after a period of 10 months

The data indicates that explicit reading strategy instruction had a positive impact on the L3 reading performance of the primary school learners over a period of 10 months. However, the extent of improvement varied depending on the participant.

The high-performing student showed consistent improvement during the tests, increasing their score from Test 1 to by Test 2, and maintaining that level in Test 3. This suggests that explicit strategy instruction helped to enhance their reading skills. The average-performing student demonstrated the most notable progress, improving from 79% in Test 1 and reaching 88% in Test 3. These results highlight the effectiveness of strategy training in improving their reading abilities and suggest they were able to apply the strategies effectively. The low-performing (LP) student showed slight improvements, increasing from Test 1 to Test 2, but decreasing in Test 3. While progress was limited, it indicates that the strategy instruction had marginal impact on the learner, possibly due to the fact that he needed more time and practice with the use of strategies.

The findings align with studies by Xanthou (2011) and Milla and Gutiérrez-Mangado (2019), which highlight the role of explicit strategy instruction in improving reading performance in additional language learning contexts. Xanthou (2011) emphasized that strategy instruction enhances metacognitive awareness and enables learners to process texts more effectively, which may explain the notable improvements observed in the average-performing learner in the current study. In the case of the low-performing learner, whose progress was not so marked, Milla and Gutiérrez-Mangado's (2019) observation that language achievement can influence the effectiveness of strategy instruction may be relevant. For this reason, less proficient learners should receive more support in the process of learning the target language. All in all, the findings appear to reinforce the importance of explicit reading strategy instruction as a beneficial tool for improving L3 reading skills, particularly for learners of differing proficiencies.

The results demonstrated that explicit reading strategy instruction notably enhanced the use of certain strategies for all of the three students. These strategies were translanguaging**,** re-reading**,** and guessing. The most substantial gains were observed among the average-performing learner, indicating that this student benefitted the most from structured and explicit instruction. The reason for this might be the fact that the student had enough background knowledge to engage with strategy instruction effectively, but they may have lacked the metacognitive awareness that was observed with the high-performing learner. The high-performing student improved his use of strategies, gaining broader knowledge relating to the use of learning strategies, while the low-performing student showed modest but noticeable improvement.

Explicit instruction appeared to enhance metacognitive awareness, enabling the learners to understand how to use the strategies effectively. For example, translanguaging turned out to be a particularly important tool for the learners, who were able to draw on their linguistic repertoire to foster comprehension in their third language (L3). The use of re-reading and guessing strategies also improved, reflecting the learners' growing ability to monitor comprehension. However, strategies such as underlining key words and identifying the main topic remained underutilized, suggesting that some strategies may require additional practice or adaptation to the learners' needs. This aspect might be related to the fact that strategy training was a relatively new approach for the learners, and they may need more time, practice, and explicit guidance to integrate these strategies effectively into their learning processes.

5.2. The reading strategies employed by the 11-year-old learners before and after the introduction of explicit reading strategy training

The pre-test questionnaire data revealed that the most commonly employed strategies were translanguaging**,** paying attention**,** and evaluation among all the students. However, their usage was still rather limited. For instance, the high-performing student occasionally used translanguaging to deal with new vocabulary, but the average-performing and low-performing students relied less frequently on this strategy. Re-reading and guessing were used to a limited extent, particularly by the low-performing student, who tended to struggle with comprehension problems. Strategies requiring higher-order thinking, such as identifying the type of text or analyzing instruction**,** were rarely used. This might be attributed to the fact that students aged 11 are still developing their metalinguistic awareness, and the use of such strategies requires a more developed cognitive maturity.

The post-test results revealed a notable shift in strategy use, with learners employing a wider range of strategies. Key changes included the increased use of translanguaging, a greater reliance on guessing and the adoption of re-reading to deal with comprehension issues. Despite these improvements, strategies such as underlining key words and identifying the main topic saw minimal gains, suggesting possible problems with their use, or limited utility during the tests.

The results align with the study by de Zarobe and Zenotz (2017), which emphasized the value of integrating explicit strategy instruction during language classes, particularly in CLIL contexts. However, there is a significant difference between the context of that study and the present study, which focused on learners in a formal, limited-exposure setting, revealing that even with only 2 hours of Spanish classes a week, structured strategy instruction can lead to meaningful improvements.

6. Limitations of the study

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of only three students (one from each performance level—HP, AP, and LP) limits the generalizability of the findings. While a detailed analysis provides an insight into individual use of learning strategies, broader trends in strategy adoption across larger and more diverse learner populations remain unexplored. Second, the reliance on a questionnaire as the primary data collection tool poses certain challenges, particularly given the participants' age and still devel-

oping metacognitive awareness. Eleven-year-old learners may struggle to accurately reflect on their strategy use. This could lead to inconsistencies in their responses, potentially affecting the validity of the findings. Future research would benefit from incorporating other methods, such as interviews or observational data, to complement the questionnaires in the initial stages of the research and provide a more comprehensive picture of strategy use. Additionally, the limited duration of the study leaves the questions related to the long-term effect of the strategy instruction and the transferability of the strategies unanswered. Addressing these limitations in future studies would provide broader understanding of the role of strategy instruction in L3 learning and its applicability in other educational contexts.

7. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that explicit strategy instruction had a positive influence on the use of reading strategies among the primary school learners, especially the average-performing learner. These findings highlight the potential for frameworks like FREPA to guide strategy-based interventions that enhance multilingual competence and metalinguistic awareness. Future research should explore the long-term effect of these strategies on various linguistic contexts.

The study has important implications for other L3 teachers. The key in L3 learning should be the need to emphasize the similarities between languages, an approach that can serve as a foundation for learners at the initial stages of L3 acquisition. By highlighting similarities between the languages in such aspects as vocabulary or grammar, educators can help students in improving their linguistic repertoire and treat it as a resource, rather than obstacle in the process of learning a new language. For example, drawing attention to cognates in L1, L2, and L3 impacts not only students' overall motivation, but, above all, their comprehension. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of multilingualism as a resource in achieving educational success.

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Annett Kaminski
University of Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8669-8635
a.kaminski@rptu.de

Introducing pre-schoolers and first graders to English: Pre-service teachers' insights

This study focuses on the teaching of English as a foreign language to very young learners aged between five and seven years. In particular, it investigates which aspects pre-service teachers identify as challenging before and after their classroom experience as part of their teaching-based master's dissertation. Applying thematic analysis, three different types of data for three pre-service teachers are examined: Firstly, their brainstorming notes written down before they started teaching, secondly their reflections on their teaching as expressed in their master's dissertation and thirdly their thoughts as articulated in follow-up interviews. Findings of this small-scale study suggest that reflection on extended classroom practice can help pre-service teachers to gain a better understanding of their learners' specific needs and to adapt their lessons accordingly.

Keywords: pre-primary and primary EFL, teacher education, reflective practice

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie języka angielskiego jako obcego na poziomie przedszkolnym i szkoły podstawowej, kształcenie nauczycieli, refleksyjna praktyka

1. Introduction

According to the latest Eurydice report that covers 39 education systems in 37 European countries, 86.1% of primary school children are taught a foreign language (FL), with the vast majority of children learning English in pre- and primary school in Europe (Eurydice, 2023). Foreign language learners have also become younger, as about 66% of education systems in Europe have lowered the starting age at which FL learning is compulsory (Eurydice, 2023). There is an increasing number of countries where children start learning their first FL below the age of six to eight years, such as Belgium, Luxembourg, Poland, Greece, Cyprus and Malta (Eurydice, 2023). Outside of Europe, a similar picture has emerged (Shin, Savi**ć**, Machida, 2021; Copland, Garton, Barnett, 2024). This trend has implications for teacher education.

In Germany where this study was carried out, the nature and start of FL teaching at primary level varies in different regions. At the time of data collection, there were three federal states where FL learning started in Grade 1, among them Rhineland-Palatinate (RP), which is the focus of this paper. Here, FL sessions amount to 50 minutes a week, held by either a specialist primary EFL teacher or a generalist primary teacher. In pre-primary settings, however, FL learning is currently not compulsory in Germany. Childcare provision varies from one region to the next, but generally there are kindergartens for children aged between 1 to 6 years of age, with the last year dedicated to developing school preparedness through pre-school activities. Although pre-school curricula do not exist, there are recommendations for developing literacy and numeracy skills, for fostering artistic, musical, fine and gross motor skills as well as for introducing children to science, ethics and religion. With regard to literacy, FLs and intercultural awareness are mentioned in the guidelines in RP (Ministerium für Bildung Rheinland-Pfalz, 2018). As part of their educational programme, early years practitioners, who complete a childcare course at specialised colleges, may therefore decide to introduce four- or five-year-old children to English. Pre-service primary school teachers (PTs) receive their teacher education at university, separate from early years specialists. However, they are often encouraged to spend some time in a kindergarten in order to gain some insights into what children learn before they enter school aged five to six.

There is still insufficient knowledge about the teaching of English to children before formal schooling (Alexiou, 2020; Mourão, Ellis, 2020). Yet, early FL programmes are sometimes implemented before well-designed teacher education programmes can be established, causing considerable challenges for the education system (Ellis, 2019). This paper aims to address

this issue of teacher education by examining PTs' views on challenging aspects of teaching five- to seven-year-old FL learners before and after their teaching experience, in order to identify how teacher educators can equip PTs with the necessary skills to manage these.

2. Literature review: Very young FL learners and teacher education

Very young FL learners in pre-school or at the beginning of primary school share a number of characteristics: They are not familiar with formal schooling, or in the case of first graders, they might not be fully accustomed to it. Although often very interested in the written word, they have not yet developed proficient reading and writing skills in their first language (L1). Traditional language teacher education, however, with its focus on the written word is unlikely to sufficiently prepare language teachers to cater for the specific needs of pre-school children or children at the beginning of primary school (Mourão, Ellis, 2020). Time and time again, it has been pointed out that teachers working with very young FL learners need to have the expertise to organize activities that are age-appropriate, tap into children's inclination for pretend play and allow for holistic learning (Halliwell, 1992; Cameron, 2001; Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek, 2006; Enever, 2016; Read, 2016; Alexiou, 2020). An essential teacher knowledge base (TKB) for FL teachers working in early L2 settings should therefore include early childhood teacher competences (Pérez, Robles, Soto, 2022: 46), with sound knowledge of childhood development forming one element of general pedagogical knowledge. In the following, key aspects of child development will be highlighted in order to illustrate their impact on the learning and teaching of a FL.

2.1. Teaching very young FL learners

Within the domain of early years education, Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories on cognitive and social development as well as the role of imaginary play have been influential to this day (Macblain, 2020). Even if Piaget's theory of cognitive development with its four clearly defined stages and age ranges may seem somewhat "rigid" and "deterministic" nowadays (Pinter, 2017: 9), the fact that children in the same age band share similar behaviour and abilities is generally acknowledged within the domain of child development research (e.g., Keenan, Evans, Crowley, 2016). Very young English learners aged between five and seven years are mostly in the pre-operational stage

of cognitive development, which is characterized by symbolic thinking, egocentrism and pretend play, with the latter being regarded as a major source for learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (Piaget, Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). These characteristics distinguish five- to seven-year-olds from slightly older primary-school learners of eight to ten years, who are in the process of developing logical reasoning and adult-like thinking.

With regard to FL learning, this means that teachers cannot expect pre-schoolers or first graders to analyse language yet (Pinter, 2017). Therefore, teachers cannot fall back on the written word or a teaching style that uses analysis of grammatical features for learners to understand underlying structures - simply applying a "watered-down secondary syllabus" (Cameron, 2001: xiii). However, these very young learners can utilize implicit learning similar to L1 acquisition, memorizing individual words as well as prefabricated and unanalysed chunks, and using their procedural knowledge to reproduce them (Nikolov, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023). Learners can also be encouraged to discover patterns, such as noticing the ending –s for plural forms (Brewster, Ellis, Girard, 2002). Teachers, on the other hand, can address children's attraction to imaginary play and dressing up by using stories and make-believe activities to develop their listening and speaking skills (Halliwell, 1992).

Another issue that is relevant for teaching purposes is children's ability to concentrate over longer stretches of time and to follow instructions. With the start of pre-school, children are increasingly able to stay focused for longer (Keenan, Evans, Crowley, 2016), and so may listen intently for extended periods of time during story read-alouds (Mourão, Ellis, 2020). However, there is a great change in ability to ignore off-task information between six to 10 years of age (Keenan, Evans, Crowley, 2016), and therefore children at the lower end of this age range may get distracted, lose interest in school assignments or find it difficult to follow multi-step instructions, which teachers need to consider when designing activities (e.g., Shin, Savić, Machida, 2021).

For teaching, children's social-emotional as well as physical behaviour are also relevant. When planning pair or group work, for example, it helps to know that five-year-olds may not be able to see someone else's point of view, due to their egocentric world view (Piaget, 1959). When planning artwork activities, on the other hand, teachers must remember that pre-primary children are still developing fine-motor skills, and may need support and extra time for cutting with scissors or colouring-in and drawing, and that in general, five-year-olds are more likely to be physically very active and unwilling to sit down for a longer stretch of time (Shin, Savić, Machida, 2021).

2.2. Early years FL programmes

Publications on early years FL programmes highlight at least three aspects that are instrumental for ensuring successful FL learning in early childhood.

Firstly, young children's characteristic developmental traits mean that a formal setting reminiscent of traditional (secondary) FL classrooms does not provide an age-appropriate learning environment, which has implications not only for the design of activities or teaching material but also for the physical set-up of the learning environment, which should include toys, games, stories and picturebooks, for example (Halliwell, 1992; Brewster, Ellis, Girard, 2002; Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek, 2006; Mourão, 2014). The success of pre-school FL programmes, which also implies children's positive wellbeing, seems to be linked to the pedagogical approach. While children have been found to show considerable levels of stress in "lesson-like" sessions "in an unfamiliar room, with unfamiliar teachers, in an unfamiliar language" (Thieme, et al., 2022: 339), this was not the case when a play-based approach was used with games, songs and stories (Thieme, et al., 2022). However, when it comes to the incorporation of play, there is an increasing tendency to restrict it to very structured activities led by the teacher who uses play for "consolidating pre-established academic learning outcomes" (Waddington, 2023:13) rather than providing opportunities for child-initiated play in English learning areas equipped with materials such as picturebooks and games (Mourão, 2014).

Secondly, strict language policies lower participation and motivation levels in children and ultimately have a negative impact on children's wellbeing (Thieme, et al., 2022). In a similar way, overuse of rote memorization and overfocus on nativelike pronunciation has been linked to FL anxiety in pre-school EFL learners (Kiaer, Morgan-Brown, Choi, 2021). A flexible language policy that allows for switching to children's L1 to make full use of all available semiotic resources, alongside age-appropriate, meaning-focused, multi-sensory and hands-on activities in an informal context, seem to be essential ingredients for ensuring children's positive wellbeing and their participation (Kirsch, Seele, 2020; Kiaer, Morgan-Brown, Choi, 2021).

Thirdly, the rate of progress in FL learning is linked to age, which means that younger learners take longer and educators need to adjust their expectations of how quickly pre-school children can improve their FL language skills. More time is needed for experiencing, understanding and retrieving FL samples in a meaningful and engaging way (Nikolov, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023).

2.3. Teacher education for early years FLT

Ideally, educators who teach English to very young children acquire the combined skills of an early years' practitioner, who has a sound understanding of children of this age group, and of a language teacher, who is a confident English speaker with knowledge of how a FL is acquired. These combined skills are needed to harness young children's age-specific abilities and behavioural traits for language learning, while always having the whole child in mind (Blondin, et al., 1998; Enever, 2016; Read, 2016; Rokita-Jaśkow, Ellis, 2019; Mourão, Ellis, 2020; Pérez, Robles, Soto, 2022; Nikolov, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023). Of course, within early EFL settings, some teachers of English may have trained as early years' practitioners for pre-school while others studied EFL, maybe with the prospect of teaching upper-primary or secondary school children. For each of these two distinct professional pathways, often described as non-specialist or specialist teacher respectively, various challenges have been identified.

A degree programme in early years, for example, may not provide sufficient language training for educators to competently and confidently use the FL (Pérez, Robles, Soto, 2022). On the other hand, educators with a background in EFL teaching, though more proficient users of the FL, may lack the necessary understanding of young children's abilities, characteristic behaviour and specific needs (Rokita-Jaśkow, Ellis, 2019). FL teachers are often "trained to use a board and to plan their lessons around the written word" (Mourão, Ellis, 2020: 10), and may therefore be overly concerned with linguistic competence while ignoring other key development areas, such as personal, social and emotional development, problem solving, reasoning and numeracy, knowledge and understanding of the world, as well as physical and creative development. Building a culture of cooperation between specialist EFL teachers and non-specialist EFL early years practitioners has been proposed as a promising solution to this problem (Alexiou, 2020).

Moreover, if teacher education programmes (TEP) do not allow PTs to gain extensive teaching experience, they will lack the opportunity to develop basic teaching routines or skills to manage unforeseen situations (Griffiths, 2023). Degree schemes need to prepare PTs for real classroom situations that are both dynamic and complex. By synthesizing what is sometimes seen as opposites, namely the theory and the practice of teaching FLs through reflection and extended classroom experience, PTs are more likely to acquire the necessary skills to handle critical incidents (Ur, 2019; Griffiths, 2023).

3. The study

3.1. Research aims and questions

This paper sets out to explore the following questions:

1. What aspects do PTs identify as challenging in the teaching of English to pre-primary or primary learners in Grade 1 before and after their teaching-based dissertation?
2. In which way do PTs' expectations differ from their reflections on actual classroom experience?

3.2. Context

In Rhineland-Palatinate, pre-service teachers who complete their pre-service teacher education programme (TEP) in order to teach children aged between five and ten years of age, start taking pedagogic classes with a focus on this age range in their third year of the bachelor phase, after two years of studying two major subjects, such as German and arts, and also attending general pedagogic courses. In the third and final year of the bachelor phase, PTs who did not study English as their major subject attend one language and one phonetics class respectively. On successful completion of the bachelor phase, PTs enter the master phase, which spans two semesters at university and comprises classes on didactics in the various subject areas, including EFL. As part of the EFL module in the master phase, which is offered to both generalist as well as specialist EFL students, PTs take one lecture on teaching English to young learners (TEYL) and one seminar with a special focus on either using children's literature, or cultural aspects in TEYL. Both are taught in 90-minute weekly sessions over one semester, which is 14 weeks long. Pre-service teachers learn about L1 and L2 acquisition, about young learners' characteristics and the importance of a holistic and multi-sensory learning environment. They get to know various teaching methods and techniques, such as Total Physical Response, and are introduced to good practice principles, such as the use of age-appropriate materials and activities, including stories, songs and games. In their seminar, a simulation exercise is used to encourage pre-service teachers to apply their knowledge about TEYL. In groups, they design a whole unit of about five sessions around a topic of their choice. They search for and create their own teaching material and then teach a mini demo lesson to their peers, which is followed by feedback from their fellow students, as well as their teacher educator. The teaching of this demo lesson is a requirement to register for the exam.

Some PTs decide to write their master dissertation on early EFL, which is teaching-based and involves spending a period of four to five weeks in a primary school, or a pre-school setting. Pre-service teachers observe a learner group before they plan and teach a unit that comprises 10 English sessions, for example around a picturebook, or songs. In line with recommendations for Practitioner Research, they keep a teaching diary, a record of learners' progress and, if possible, also record classroom discourse in order to reflect on their experience (Burns, 2010; Farrell, 2018). Pre-service teachers are also encouraged to take notes on discussions with the class teacher, who observes their lessons and provides feedback for reflection. The idea is to make PTs aware of the use of several data sources for data-led reflection – covering written and spoken, as well as individual and collaborative accounts of reflection (Walsh, Mann, 2015). As part of the supervision process, PTs complete a brainstorming activity before their teaching and talk about their insights afterwards.

3.3. Participants

This study focuses on three PTs on the primary TEP who decided either to work in a pre-school or a primary EFL setting. Since pre-service teachers tend to be allocated to slightly older learners in primary school and rarely choose to teach in a pre-primary context, there is little data on this age group. All three PTs conducted their EFL teaching between spring 2020 and autumn 2022, with two of them being affected by the pandemic - hence the small class size for two of the groups and lower number of lessons (Table 1). One PT worked at pre-school level, the other two in a Grade 1 group. Learners were between five to seven years old. The PTs used a variety of activities to offer a holistic learning experience to their learners. Two PTs focused on songs and incorporated artwork and games. One PT designed an EFL unit around a picturebook, including a drama activity, a science experiment and artwork.

Table 1. Pre-service teachers, their learners, teaching material (own study)

	PT1	PT2	PT3
EFL context	Pre-school	Year 1	Year 1
No of sessions	10	10	5
Age of learners (yrs)	5-6	6-7	6-7
No of YLs (male/female)	4 (4/0)	21 (9/12)	4 (2/2)
Time of teaching	April-May 2021	Nov.-Dec. 2022	May 2020

Table 1 – cont.

	PT1	PT2	PT3
YLs' prior EFL experience	none	none	7 months, 50 mins/ week
Main material	songs	songs	picturebook
Activities	Imaginary journey to London Talking to class mascot Singing Games	Singing Artwork Making music Games	Shared read-aloud Artwork Science experiment Drama

3.4. Instruments

Pre-service teachers' brainstorming documents, their written reflections as well as full transcripts of their audio-recorded follow-up interviews were analysed using guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2022). In particular, these three types of data were screened for remarks on critical or unexpected incidents. Extracts from all three sources of data were collected in one document. Then, these extracts were searched for similar wording in PTs' comments across the different data sources in order to generate themes.

3.5. Procedures

Three different types of data were analysed for every PT to allow for triangulation: their brainstorming notes before teaching, their written reflections on their teaching practice and audio-recordings of follow-up interviews. Neither the brainstorming document nor the follow-up interviews were part of the assessment and were used to counterbalance any potential bias in the written reflections from the PTs' master dissertations.

As part of the brainstorming activity, PTs were prompted to write down what experience they expected to gain, which aspects they felt prepared or ill-prepared for, their thoughts on keeping a teaching diary, and which challenges they expected with regard to teaching and academic writing (Appendix). Not included in this analysis are any problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic that they anticipated. For the second data source, PTs' written reflections taken from their master's dissertation provided data on PTs' analysis of their own teaching. These reflections were based on the teaching diary that PTs kept and on the analyses of their learners' work,

as well as of recorded classroom discourse – normally three to four short stretches of approximately 10 minutes. The third type of data, follow-up interviews, which lasted between 18 to 24 minutes, were collected during the feedback session after completion and assessment of their master's dissertation, about five months after the teaching experience. They offered an opportunity for each PT to revisit and elaborate on their initial thoughts from the brainstorming exercise and to discuss their insights with the researcher – continuing the process of reflection through a collaborative and dialogic approach (Walsh, Mann, 2015). Non-directive in nature, interviewer guidance was minimal in order to counteract asymmetrical power distribution, and to elicit extended answers that would provide a rich data source (Mishler, 1986; Dörnyei, 2007).

3.6. Findings

Based on the first data source, three themes could be generated (Table 2). In their brainstorming documents, all three PTs referred to aspects of lesson planning, which were closely linked to anticipating learner behaviour. They expressed concern that their lesson plan might not be adequate in terms of time allocated to activities (PT1) or of arranging content (PT3) due to a lack of understanding of what their young learners can or cannot do (PT1). There was also some insecurity about how to respond if their lesson did not work according to plan (PT2). All of them also referred to real classroom experience and adequate response, noting that they fell ill-prepared in that respect and hoped to "experience teaching first-hand" (PT3), to learn how to respond flexibly in unexpected situations (PT1), and how to deal with young learners who show frustration (PT2). Two pre-service teachers (PT1 and PT3) also mentioned their research skills and their role as a teacher as potential areas for improvement.

Table 2. Brainstorming before teaching (own study)

Themes	Examples of PTs' brainstorming notes, my translation
Lesson planning & anticipating YL behaviour	I am hoping to learn from my mistakes with lesson planning […] the challenge might be that my lesson plan is either too short or too long and I cannot anticipate what children can do. PT1 I hope to learn more about what is important for lesson planning […] What do I do if my lesson does not go according to plan? […] it might be a challenge if the lesson does not go as I anticipated. PT2

Table 2 – cont.

Themes	Examples of PTs' brainstorming notes, my translation
	Hopefully, I can gain more experience of how to design lessons and adapt them throughout a unit […] There was no proper preparation with regard to planning lessons, arranging content and adjusting to learners. PT3
Real classroom experience & adequate response	My hope is to learn how to respond spontaneously and flexibly in unexpected situations […] What do I do if a child has a medical emergency? […] What do I do if I suspect that the child is being abused? PT1 I hope to learn how I can deal with YLs' frustration. And how to optimize my teaching […] It might be a challenge when children are distracted by a learner acting like a clown. PT2 I am looking forward to the opportunity to try out teaching techniques […] and in general, I hope for more practical experience, meaning experiencing teaching first-hand […] PT3
Reflection & analysis of own teaching	Using a diary, you can be honest, since nobody else will read it, and when you write it down immediately after teaching, you can keep something that you might forget otherwise […] The challenge will be: How do I articulate my insights in an academic way? PT1 I can get to know myself in the role of a teacher and I can learn to reflect on my teaching […] The teaching diary can help to collect thoughts in a structured way and […] to identify strengths and weaknesses […]. PT3

On the basis of the second type of data, PTs' written reflections, three themes could be generated (Table 3), two of which had already been identified in the brainstorming documents and will be highlighted in the following. With regard to lesson planning and anticipating learner behaviour, PTs' comments indicate that they either expected too little or too much, about which they often expressed surprise. On the one hand, PTs did not expect YLs to be able to recognize English (PT1), to imitate the teacher so quickly (PT2), or to make observations about language and the world (PT3). On the other hand, PTs seemed to think that their learners should be able to do more, for example when YLs were expected to coordinate several things at the same time, to follow several instructions (PT2 & PT3) and to finish tasks quickly (PT3). Repeatedly, PTs explain that the problems with anticipating YL behaviour caused time management issues: They had to adjust their lesson plans by rephrasing instructions, or breaking an activity down into smaller units, and they also had to allocate more time for a certain activity.

The written reflections also refer to real classroom experience and finding an adequate response. PTs' comments show that they had to deal with situations that needed an instant response, which they found challenging. Pre-service teachers' observations indicate that through these critical incidents they understood the importance of physical activity for their YLs (PT1), YLs' use of their L1 as a default function (PT2), their inclination to imitate the teacher (PT3), and the need for repetition, as well as visualisation (PT2 & PT3).

Table 3. Post-teaching written reflections (own study)

Themes	Examples from PTs' master's dissertations, my translation
Lesson planning & anticipating YL behaviour	Based on the transcriptions, one can note that the children could identify what was said as English […] PT1 They could remember the words really well because the second time they heard the song, they could sing along. PT2 They tried to say the lines of the dialogue […] but one could see that they had enough to do with listening and miming actions. PT2 It was surprising to hear such an explanation from a first grader […] (refers to experiment with balloon) PT3 As the first group was singing, it was the next groups' turn, but they were overwhelmed and did not know any more what they had to do. PT3/singing in canon In the following artwork session, time management was a problem again. It took 10 minutes for the children to get their box and glue. PT3
Real classroom experience & adequate response	In the first lessons, it became obvious that the learners had the urge to move about, and I tried to adjust to that in the following sessions. PT1 Some children mixed up the word 'name' and used the German pronunciation for it. […] This difficulty could only be solved through repeating everything a few times. PT2 Once he had picked a picture, one could notice that he had problems saying it in English. In order to avoid frustration, I invited him to get help from a friend. PT2 In contrast to my observations, I noticed when listening to the recordings that learners […] increasingly imitated me and spoke English unprompted. PT3

Table 3 – cont.

Themes	Examples from PTs' master's dissertations, my translation
	In hindsight, it would have been better to show the experiment a second time […] and to add a drawing on the board. PT3
YLs response to multimodal features	Leaving the room after class, one child was chanting the lines rhythmically. PT1 The recordings showed that some children started singing in certain situations during class. PT2 One teacher said that learners had talked about the balloon flying through the room […] PT3

The third source of data, the transcriptions of the follow-up interviews, reveal that PTs again referred to lesson planning and anticipating YL behaviour, real classroom experience and adequate response alongside references to their own reflection process and suggestions for pre-service teacher education.

In the follow-up interviews, PTs placed more emphasis on the adjustments they had made in order to address their YLs' needs (Table 4). For example, with regard to lesson planning and anticipating YL behaviour, PTs stressed that they incorporated more physical activities (PT1), or that they addressed YLs' shorter concentration span by keeping activities shorter (PT1), or by giving them more time or extra support (PT2). The problems with lesson planning that PTs experienced is attributed to a lack of planning whole units during previous internships (PT3).

Regarding real classroom experience, PTs explained how they stopped an activity when their pre-schoolers showed dislike (PT1) and how they had to become stricter in response to misbehaviour (PT2). Feeling ill-prepared for classroom management, especially in a situation when the children and their classroom rituals were unknown, was an observation shared by PT3, whose learners were from different Year groups during emergency teaching in 2020.

Pre-service teachers also commented on reflecting on their own teaching. Alongside the diary, which was acknowledged as helpful, PT1 stressed the importance of sharing observations and thoughts about teaching with colleagues. There were suggestions for notetaking during a busy day at school (PT2) and the realisation that their TEP had not provided the opportunity to learn about how to conduct research in a school setting (PT3).

Table 4. Follow-up interviews (own study)

Theme	Examples of PTs' interview contributions, my translation
Lesson planning & anticipating YL behaviour	After the first or second lesson, I wrote in my teaching diary that I used too few activities where learners can move about […] and I could improve my lesson plans and use more physical activities. PT1 When I noticed, okay, the children cannot concentrate for 30 minutes, I cut down activities to 25 minutes and I used more physical activity […] I adjusted that in line with the previous lesson. PT1 They couldn't pronounce it and after repeating it a few times, I left it at that because I did not want them to lose motivation […] and then I tried again on another day. PT2 […] what helped me a lot was using gestures and facial expressions […] PT2 about YLs asking for word meanings It was never about teaching a whole unit on one topic […] which content to do first and how to go from there […] PT3/ commenting on previous internships
Real classroom experience & adequate response	[…] once, when a game did not work and the children did not enjoy it, I stopped the activity […] and the early years practitioner who was sitting in the back […] gave me positive feedback for that. PT1 […] in one lesson, the teacher left the room […] and then one or two children tried to be louder […] when they did not listen, I had to be stricter […] PT2 […] seminars at uni prepared me for activities […] around picturebooks […] but not classroom management […] especially when you did not know the children and didn't know which rituals they were used to […] PT3
Reflection & analysis of own teaching	What I found even more helpful than the teaching diary was actually talking to the teachers who were sitting in the back because they saw things I had not noticed. PT1 […] I couldn't sit down and write down everything after each lesson, so I quickly took a few notes on my mobile phone […] and in the evening a bit more, and thought about what had happened and why. PT2 What I noticed was […] that I had not had any experience with doing research as part of my previous university programme […] PT3

4. Discussion

This study examined firstly what aspects PTs identified as challenging when teaching English to pre-primary learners or first graders before and after their teaching experience, and secondly how far PTs' views changed through reflecting on their own teaching practice. The analysis of three types of data suggests that PTs share a concern for lesson planning, which they link to the ability of anticipating learners' behaviour. PTs also identify a lack of classroom experience as challenging for how to respond appropriately in school settings, and demonstrate an awareness of reflection as a means to improve their own teaching practice.

4.1. Perceived challenges before and after teaching practice

Pre-service teachers' brainstorming data, their written reflections and their contributions in the follow-up interviews indicate that they consider themselves insufficiently prepared for lesson planning, anticipating learner behaviour and managing unexpected situations in classrooms. These findings echo criticism of teacher education in the past (Blondin, et al., 1998; Enever, 2016), but they also confirm results of a recent study that examined TEPs for pre-school, which show that classroom management and lesson planning were found to be least represented alongside knowledge of context, albeit in a different European context (Pérez, Robles, Soto, 2022). While a focus on classroom management during pre-service teacher education would provide PTs with some strategies for handling critical situations, solid knowledge of context would perhaps lead to a better understanding of learners and hence make it easier for PTs to anticipate learner behaviour.

Learner behaviour that PTs found difficult to anticipate correctly, such as when using multi-tasking, listening over an extended period of time without being physically active, or with little visual support, refer to big milestones in child development, and, in particular, developmental changes that occur around the age of six to seven. This indicates that although PTs are taught about child development as part of their university education, they still lack a deeper understanding of these developmental differences and their impact on teaching. This may have to do with the fact that traditional pre-service teacher education tends to treat primary school children as one group that shares similar characteristics, rather than distinguishing more clearly between younger and older primary-school EFL learners, and highlighting developmental changes (Piaget, Inhelder, 1969; Keenan, Evans, Crowley, 2016), with the implications this has for choosing age-appropriate activities. A good

knowledge of child development that includes the pre-school years enables primary school teachers to better understand their learners in Grade 1, who might be as young as five years at the beginning of a school year, might develop more slowly in certain areas (Macblain, 2020), and might therefore need a play-based approach with a more flexible language policy (Thieme, et al., 2022; Kiaer, Morgan-Brown, Choi, 2021; Alexiou, 2020; Kirsch, Seele, 2020; Mourão, Ellis, 2020). Moreover, the lack of this awareness about age-related differences also indicates that simply exploring these concepts theoretically is not sufficient for PTs to really understand them, which stresses the necessity of preparing PTs for the challenges of real classrooms by incorporating extended teaching practice, and encouraging a reflective approach (Ur, 2019).

4.2. Differences between PTs' expectations before and reflections after teaching practice

Regarding PTs' expectations and their reflections on actual classroom experience, a shift in focus can be noted. Before their teaching-based master's dissertation, PTs seemed to largely focus on themselves. In their brainstorming documents, for example, they emphasized their insecurity about lesson planning, about anticipating learner behaviour and about responding quickly to unexpected situations, which they ascribed to a perceived lack of practical experience. After their time with EFL learners at pre-school and Grade 1, however, PTs acknowledged their learners' specific needs, such as their need to be physically active, their shorter concentration span, and their increased need for visualisation. On the basis of this deeper understanding of their learners' needs, PTs also articulated strategies that they had used to adapt their teaching. This suggests that master's dissertations that incorporate extended teaching practice can foster PTs' understanding of the specific age-specific characteristics, which is a necessary pre-requisite in order to create a holistic learning environment that ensures young children's wellbeing in early EFL programmes (Halliwell, 1992; Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek, 2006; Rokita-Jaśkow, Ellis, 2019; Thieme, et al., 2022; Nikolov, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023; Waddington, 2023). At the same time, it becomes apparent that simulation practice at university, although helpful, does have its limitations and cannot provide PTs with the opportunity to gain a better understanding of real learners, or to fully prepare for real classroom settings (Griffiths, 2023).

After their teaching experience, PTs in this study also seemed more focused on practical issues with reflective practice. In the follow-up interviews,

they explained how keeping a teaching diary and sharing thoughts with colleagues helped them with the reflection process, which practical challenges they experienced when trying to take notes in the hectic environment of pre- or primary school, and how they solved these issues. This indicates that teaching-based dissertations may also support pre-service teachers' reflective skills, which in turn can initiate a deeper understanding of learning and teaching processes in pre-school EFL, or at the beginning of primary school, and raise awareness for the complexities of teaching very young children – a pre-requisite in order to establish work relationships between EFL teachers and early years practitioners (Alexiou, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The analysis of PTs' brainstorming documents before their teaching experience, and of their reflections, as well as follow-up interviews afterwards, suggests that pre-service teacher education that is based on studying TEYL methodology and on limited simulation practice does not prepare PTs sufficiently for real-life teaching with five- to six-year-olds. Pre-service teachers' brainstorming documents demonstrate that PTs were acutely aware of their lack of practical teaching experience, and the implications this might have on their ability to plan lessons, to anticipate YLs' behaviour and to respond to unexpected situations. The reflections that PTs' shared in their master's dissertations and in follow-up interviews indicate that the task of planning and teaching a whole EFL unit of multiple sessions around one topic was an experience that provided them with the opportunity to gain deeper insights. They showed their growing ability to identify specific needs that they had observed in their EFL learners, and to adapt their lesson planning accordingly.

Findings from this study tentatively suggest that firstly, simulation practice, which PTs' referred to as helpful, needs to be more extensively used in pre-service teacher education. Secondly, PTs need to be given the opportunity to teach whole units rather than just individual lessons in real classroom settings. Thirdly, PTs also need to be introduced to analysing their own teaching at an earlier stage, so that they can improve their reflective skills over time, before they begin their teaching-based dissertation.

It is important to stress that this is a small sample of pre-service teachers in one particular teacher education context, and hence more research from other TEPs would be needed to see if similar issues are raised in different educational contexts. Furthermore, this study raises new questions, such as how pre-service teachers' reflective practices change over a longer period

of time, maybe covering pre-service and in-service work experience, and how teacher educators could guide PTs to refine as well as harness their reflection process for teaching and research purposes.

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Appendix

Prompts for brainstorming (my translation)

1. Which valuable insights do you hope to gain for your future work as primary-school teacher?
2. Name aspects of teaching that your degree programme at university prepared you for and aspects you feel ill prepared for.
3. Talk about your thoughts about keeping a teaching diary.
4. Which challenges do you expect with respect to teaching and which with respect to writing-up your master dissertation?
5. Which COVID-related problems or opportunities do you expect in school?

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Mojca Žefran
University of Primorska, Slovenia
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6406-492X
mojca.zefran@pef.upr.si

Silva Bratož
University of Primorska, Slovenia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7039-7280
silva.bratoz@upr.si

Sonja Rutar
University of Primorska, Slovenia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0451-6210
sonja.rutar@pef.upr.si

Evaluation of a Multilingual Kindergarten Model in Slovenia: Insights from teachers, parents and children

This paper presents an in-depth evaluation of a Multilingual Kindergarten Model (MU-KI Koper) developed in Slovenia aimed at integrating pluralistic approaches to language learning into early childhood education. The model activities were carried out over a period of nine months. The data were collected through focus group discussions with parents and in-service preschool teachers engaged in the implementation of the model, an online questionnaire for parents and through semi-structured interviews with the children (aged 5-6) involved in the model implementation. We explored the efficacy of the model by focusing on the following categories: the suitability and perception of effectiveness of the activities in meeting the needs of the pre-school

curriculum in the area of developing multilingual competences, the children's response to the programme, and the parents' expectations and their feedback on meeting their expectations regarding the implementation of the model. The findings reveal that the Multilingual Kindergarten Model effectively supports children's cognitive, linguistic and affective development through age- and developmentally-appropriate activities, while fostering early language awareness, positive attitudes towards languages and cultural curiosity.

Keywords: pluralistic approaches, multilingual kindergarten model, quality of early childhood education, plurilingual competences, inclusion

Słowa kluczowe: podejścia pluralistyczne, wielojęzyczny model przedszkola, jakość wczesnej edukacji, kompetencje różnojęzyczne, inkluzywność

1. Introduction

As in many other countries in Europe and around the world, the education system in Slovenia is expected to provide the conditions for effectively dealing with increasing cultural and linguistic diversity at all levels of instruction, including the pre-school level. This points to the need for developing multilingual pedagogies and equipping teachers to teach in environments that are characterized by high levels of diversity. Promoting the idea of a multilingual lens in education, Cummins (2017) emphasizes that teaching from a multilingual perspective combines how educators shape their own identities with the methods they use in their instruction.

At the EU level, multilingualism is considered a key and critical competence for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2019) which should be included in curricula design (Council of Europe, 2001). Multilingual and multicultural practices are also supported by Slovenian education policy (Krek, Metljak, 2011) and the preschool curriculum, which stresses the importance of acknowledging and recognising the differences between children owing to their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Ministry of Education and Sport,1999).

A multilingual perspective is also reflected in the pluralistic approaches to language teaching which involve educational strategies that encourage the recognition and appreciation of linguistic diversity, while at the same time fostering cultural awareness. Rather than focusing exclusively on 'foreign' or 'second' languages, they acknowledge and value all varieties of language, including native languages, dialects, sign languages, and regional languages. This approach aligns with the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic

Approaches to Languages and Cultures (FREPA), which promotes the idea that language learners should be exposed to and appreciate a variety of languages and cultures, including their home languages, regional languages, and languages of migration (Candelier, et al., 2010).

Several projects and initiatives have been carried out in the past twenty years aimed at promoting language diversity, plurilingual competences, and intercultural education. The 'language awakening' initiative (Candelier, Kervran, 2018; Darquennes, 2017; Finkbeiner, White, 2017) aims to promote the appreciation of language diversity in the classroom and encourages learners to think about language as a system. As Darquennes (2017) points out, the aim of language awakening is not language learning as such but, above all, raising awareness of linguistic diversity by helping learners understand the role of language diversity both in their own lives and in society as a whole. Another concept which partly overlaps with plurilingualism is translanguaging, which expands the idea of plurilingualism by emphasizing how individuals use and experience it. This includes how they construct their identities as bi-/multilinguals and incorporates a socio-political perspective (García, Otheguy, 2020).

Recent studies have looked into developing plurilingualism and translanguaging in early education settings from different perspectives. While some have focused on children and how they make use of their multilingual repertoire (Kirsch, 2018), others have looked into the effects of incorporating translanguaging practices with very young learners (Papadopoulos, Jansen, 2024). A few studies have explored multilingual practices in young learner settings from the perspective of educators, analysing strategies used by teachers which include languaging and translanguaging (Protassova, 2018), educating teachers to develop their own multilingual strategies (Correia Ibrahim, 2023), or focusing on a translanguaging pedagogy (Tsokalidou, Skourtou, 2020), while Ragnarsdóttir (2023) has showcased the perspective of parents and family language policy.

Although various initiatives and projects have aimed to promote language diversity at school and university levels in Slovenia, early childhood education and care (ECEC) remains a relatively underexplored area (Žefran, et al., 2024). This study seeks to bridge this gap by addressing the integration of pluralistic approaches into ECEC with the evaluation of a multilingual kindergarten model developed in Slovenia. The study is aimed at evaluating the efficacy of the model by assessing the suitability and effectiveness of activities in developing multilingual competences within the preschool curriculum, analysing parents' expectations before and feedback after the model's implementation, and exploring children's responses to the programme.

2. The Slovenian Context: Linguistic and ECEC Landscape

Throughout its history, Slovenia has been characterised by the coexistence of different languages. The Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (1991) recognises Slovenian as the official language, while Italian and Hungarian receive official recognition in the municipalities where respective minority populations reside. However, as a result of Europe-wide migrations, the linguistic diversity within the country has increased significantly, thus transforming Slovenia into an increasingly multilingual landscape. In response to the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in Slovenian kindergartens and schools, several policies at the national level have been issued, such as: the Strategy for the Integration of Migrant Children, Pupils and Students into the Education System in the Republic of Slovenia (2007), Guidelines for the Integration of Migrant Children into Kindergartens and Schools (2012), and Guidelines for the Integration of Children, Pupils and Students from Other Linguistic and Cultural Backgrounds into the Slovenian Education System (2024).

The Slovenian Resolution on the national programme for language policy 2021-2025 (Republic of Slovenia, 2021) prioritizes the Slovenian language, but also underscores the significance of acquiring proficiency in additional languages, including 'the languages of the Italian and Hungarian national communities and the Roma community, languages of members of various minority ethnic communities, languages of immigrant communities and foreign languages' (ibid.: 8). Its main aim is to cultivate a community of independent speakers possessing advanced linguistic proficiency in Slovenian, complemented by substantial knowledge of additional languages. In the context of incorporating various languages across all levels of education, the objective of the Slovenian language policy (ibid.) is to foster the use and learning of different languages, in addition to promoting research on foreign languages, providing ongoing expert support to the development of pedagogical practices associated with foreign language instruction, and providing systematic professional development for instructors and educators in order to create an educational context that fosters and promotes multilingualism. The significance of promoting linguistic awareness and multilingualism is also emphasized in the Slovenian Kindergarten curriculum (Ministry of Education and Sport, 1999) and its supplement (2002) by encouraging activities that introduce children to different languages and cultural expressions, advocating for the inclusion of stories, songs, and greetings in various languages to cultivate a positive attitude toward linguistic diversity, as well as recommending that teachers incorporate words from minority and neighbouring languages in daily routines, thereby creating an inclusive

environment that reflects Slovenia's linguistic and cultural diversity. According to the Kindergarten Act (2005), children in Slovenia can be enrolled in organised pre-school education from the age of 11 months until they start school, and are divided into two age groups: the first (1-3 years) and the second (3- 6 years). The curriculum is standardized and includes the following key areas: movement, language, art, society, nature, and mathematics. In public kindergartens, the educational process is primarily conducted in the Slovene language. However, in regions where Italian and Hungarian minorities reside, the educational process is also conducted in the respective minority language, following two models of bilingual education (Novak-Lukanovič, Limon, 2012). The first model allows children in Slovene Istria to attend kindergartens and schools with either Slovene or Italian as the language of instruction, with the other language taught as one of the subjects (ibid.). The second model is implemented in Prekmurje, where education occurs in both Slovene and Hungarian, with both as languages of instruction at all levels, and also both languages as subjects (ibid.). Additionally, multilingual learning and teaching, based on universal human and children's rights, are recognised as fundamental principles for ensuring an inclusive educational process (Rutar, 2014).

At the moment, Slovenia is in the process of revising the kindergarten curriculum, which foresees a new subsection on multilingualism and multiculturalism, and the identification of strategies for supporting the mother tongue development of children for whom Slovene is a second language, and to provide additional support for learning Slovene as the language of instruction in kindergarten. The updated curriculum will also specify the free use of Slovene sign language, as well as the free use of Italian and Hungarian sign languages in municipalities where these languages are also official (Cotič Pajntar, Marjanovič Umek, Zore, 2022: 20).

Kindergartens also provide comprehensive care and education through a full-day programme that integrates various domains of activities and childcare. This is also in line with the OECD's view that care and education are interrelated concepts in high-quality kindergartens (OECD 2001: 14; 2006). In Slovenia, the concepts of care and education are understood and defined as follows: (1) character development, which involves the acquisition of values, self-care, care for others, and the development of interpersonal relationships, and (2) education, which encompasses the acquisition of knowledge, skills and the subsequent development of abilities (Ministry of Education and Sport, 1999). At the same time, it is the organisational and contextual unity and integrity of pre-school education that enables kindergartens in Slovenia to engage in research and development activities in the field of pre-school education, in addition to their primary educational responsibilities.

3. The Ra-Ra multilingual kindergarten model

In 2023, a Research and Development Unit for Early Childhood Education (Ra-Ra) was established at the Faculty of Education of the University of Primorska (UP). This unit operates in an organizational partnership with the public preschool institution Koper Kindergarten and the Municipality of Koper. Ra-Ra represents the beginning of collaborative research and development activities involving children, parents, professionals, researchers from the UP Faculty of Education and the management of the Koper Kindergarten, as well as the local community (the Municipality of Koper).

The success of the Ra-Ra unit can be attributed to the coherent and integrated efforts of three key stakeholders: the local environment (the Municipality of Koper), early childhood education as an organized activity (Koper Kindergarten) and the university environment (the Faculty of Education of the University of Primorska). Collectively, these stakeholders are committed to the advancement of early childhood education through research, with the ultimate purpose of ensuring the quality of education for all children.

The initial research and development activities of the Ra-Ra were focused on creating a Multilingual Kindergarten Model (Mu-Ki Koper). This model was designed to facilitate the development of both Slovene and Italian as languages of instruction, with Italian also serving as the language of the environment. Additionally, the model aims to foster the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and plurilingual competences. The model prioritizes learners by valuing their linguistic and cultural practices, placing them at the centre of the educational process, and granting them some agency in their language use. This aligns with the objectives of multilingual and translanguaging pedagogies (García, Flores, 2012; García, Otheguy, 2020), which acknowledge the diverse linguistic resources present in educational settings.

The framework of the model is based on the original concept of three pillars (Figure 1). The first and fundamental pillar is Slovenian as the first language, where the teacher and the assistant teacher speak Slovenian and communication takes place in Slovenian in all curricular activities. In the core pillar, however, Slovene can also be a second language, where the teachers can make an important contribution to the successful integration of immigrant preschool children through scaffolding strategies and language sensitivity.

The second pillar is represented by Italian as the language of the environment, following the principle of “one teacher, one language”. This means that the additional teacher speaks only Italian and communication with the children is in Italian throughout all activities and daily routines. Italian is introduced gradually, with careful consideration of the children’s age and

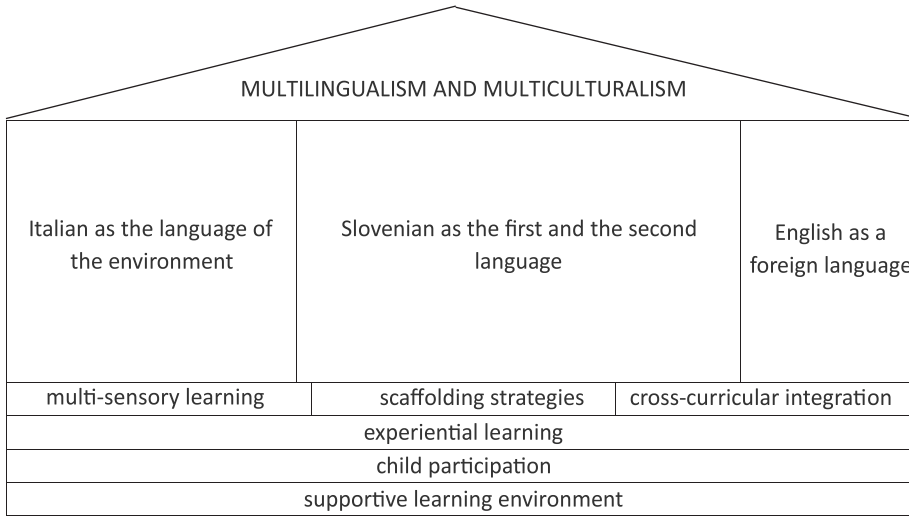

Figure 1. Multilingual kindergarten model (Mu-Ki Koper) (Rutar, Žefran, Bratož, 2024: 89)

Source: present study.

developmental stages, and by systematically employing appropriate scaffolding strategies.

The third pillar is English as a foreign language and multilingualism, which involves activities carried out throughout the year, twice to three times a week for one to two hours. The activities in which the students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Primorska are actively involved are grounded in the principles of early learning and foreign language acquisition. These principles emphasize multisensory and experiential learning, the importance of a supportive learning environment and active participation of children, as well as cross-curricular teaching and pluralistic approaches to language learning. The activities follow the DivCon model (Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Context) (Bratož, Sila, 2022), which integrates six dimensions: the journey metaphor, linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, progression from concrete to symbolic understanding, effective language teaching approaches, and children's participation. The model uses the journey metaphor to guide children on an imaginative "travel" through different countries, where they experience languages and cultures through multi-sensory activities such as singing, movement, tasting, and art. During these 'travels', English serves as a lingua franca, with other languages introduced through songs, rhymes, and interaction with a puppet character (Jegulja Klepetulja, Chatty Betty) to build linguistic awareness by comparing sounds and words across languages. Cultural diversity is explored through activities like singing,

dancing, and storytelling on themes such as food, clothing, and music. The model progresses from concrete to symbolic learning: children start with tangible items, like a passport, and gradually learn abstract concepts (country, language, anthem, etc.) through visual aids like maps and videos. Activities draw on effective teaching methods for young learners, such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and TPR (Total Physical Response). The model also prioritizes children's participation, allowing them to actively shape activities by creating new rhymes, selecting destinations, and designing new "travel" experiences, fostering a sense of inclusion and agency in learning.

4. Method

While several initiatives and projects that have tried to promote language diversity can be observed at school and university level in Slovenia, the area of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is still largely unexplored (Žefran, et al., 2024). The present study therefore addresses the integration of pluralistic approaches into ECEC by presenting the evaluation of a multilingual kindergarten model developed in Slovenia. The study presented in this paper is aimed at evaluating the efficacy of the multilingual kindergarten model by focusing on the following research questions:

RQ1 – To what extent were the activities suitable and effective in meeting the needs of the pre-school curriculum in the area of developing multilingual competences in teachers' and parents' view?
RQ2 – What were the parents' expectations before implementation of the model and their feedback on the meeting of their expectations after the implementation of the model?
RQ3 – What was the children's response to the programme?

The Mu-Ki model was implemented over a 10-month period, from September 2023 to June 2024. Data were collected through multiple methods: (1) a focus group discussion with three in-service preschool teachers involved in implementing the multilingual kindergarten model, (2) focus groups of parents (N=19) and an online questionnaire (Appendix 1) (N=16) for parents of children participating in the model, and (3) semi-structured interviews (Appendix 2) with children aged 5-6 (N=19) who were part of the implementation. The teachers also observed the children's responses to the activities in the programme throughout its implementation and made notes to record the responses. The focus group discussion with teachers took place in March

2024, the focus groups with parents were conducted in September 2023, the online questionnaire was distributed to parents in May 2024, and the interviews with the children were conducted at the end of May 2024. Triangulation of the data sources was employed, with the objective of providing a more comprehensive perspective of the problem under investigation. This approach was utilised as a methodological strategy to ensure the quality of scientific knowledge in qualitative research (Vogrinc, 2008).

The decision to also analyse the parents' perspective was based on the fact that parental involvement is an integrative part of the Ra-Ra research approach. They are informed and included in the development of pedagogical strategies and approaches. According to the Kindergarten Curriculum (1999), cooperation with parents is one of the main principles of the state preschool pedagogy. Parents have the right to participate in the planning, development and implementation of educational programmes. Accordingly, their voices and perspectives are crucial in the development of the pedagogical approaches and consequently the multilingual model.

The data from the online questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using descriptive statistics, whereas the data from the focus groups and the interviews was transcribed and coded in terms of content areas (Štemberger, 2021) and later analyzed. The codes identified during the analysis of the teacher focus groups were: suitability of the activities in terms of their alignment with the curriculum, cognitive skills development, social skills development, emotional/affective development, and language skills development.

5. Results

5.1. The suitability and effectiveness of the activities from the teachers' and parents' perspective

Analysis of the teachers' answers from the focus groups revealed four areas that point to the suitability of the activities for children aged 5-6: cognitive skills development, social skills development, emotional/affective development, and language skills development. All the teachers also pointed out that the activities were aligned with the Slovenian kindergarten curriculum in the area of developing multilingual competences.

With respect to developing cognitive skills, the participating teachers stressed that the activities were especially effective in supporting children to develop attention focus. As Teacher 2 commented: *"They need to focus, because I sometimes rephrase my questions and they know they need to really*

pay attention to what I'm saying". All three teachers also mentioned fostering problem-solving skills and the gaining of general knowledge, especially learning about other cultures. The teachers also reported very clear benefits of the activities for enhancing children's social skills. Children were observed to be "*solving conflicts that arise when they play together*" (Teacher 3) and Teacher 1 reported: "*At the beginning they didn't know how to solve problems, how to negotiate, now there is more and more of this."*

The teachers also saw positive examples of emotional/affective development, especially in terms of building self-confidence and feeling safe. In addition, positive emotional responses were noticed in cases when children's active participation was strongly encouraged. For example, Teacher 1 commented that "*they [children] developed confidence, knowing that they provided some information, like 'they found out something', 'they brought something', 'they contributed' "*. Finally, the focus group discussion also revealed that the activities planned were suitable for developing language skills with a focus on listening comprehension. Children reacted positively to the linguistic activities in Italian and English as they were observed trying to "*guess the meaning from context*" when participating in every-day kindergarten activities, such as the morning circle or movement activities. The three teachers also noticed that the children spontaneously developed language awareness as they played and experimented with the new language. For example, they used the words *'shwitzen-mitzen'* for Wiener Schnitzel, *'windia'* for 'winter', and *'chimnik'* for chimney (a blend with the Slovenian word for chimney 'dimnik').

Finally, the effectiveness of the activities was also evaluated from the parents' perspective. The qualitative part of the questionnaire was aimed at obtaining their feedback on the activities aimed at developing language awareness. Their observations confirm the suitability and effectiveness of the activities in the programme. First of all, the children were also observed expressing a strong interest in languages at home, for example, by asking the parents for the meaning of words from other languages. Next, the parents reported that their children were able to recognize different languages in different contexts, such as in the media, listening to other people converse, listening to other children in the playground. One of the parents commented that their child *"tried to speak to another child in English when she heard them speak another language".* Several parents also mentioned that their children also regularly repeated songs, words, and phrases in other languages at home. For example, one of the parents commented that their child regularly used the Italian communicative patterns *"Mamma, siamo pronti?"* and "*Tutto bene?"* which they were exposed to during the programme in kindergarten. The children were also observed enjoying and understanding cartoons in Italian and English.

Both the parents and the teachers also reported that the children learnt a lot about the countries they 'travelled to' during the activities and showed a great deal of understanding of abstract concepts. One of the teachers commented: *"The children surprised us with their curiosity; we prepared a topic for them and often it was not enough, they kept asking questions so we searched for the answers together and we ended up talking about things they normally learn in primary school." (Teacher 1)*

5.2. The parents' expectations and feedback before and after implementation of the model

Data on the parents' expectations toward the implementation of the model were collected through focus groups with parents before the implementation and through an online questionnaire after the implementation of the model.

Before implementation of the model, the parents expressed their expectations about the impact of the activities carried out during the educational process. They expected benefits in four areas of development: *development of cognitive skills* and *focus development*, *acquisition of general knowledge* and *development of problem-solving skills*. They also expected to see the *development of social skills*, especially conflict-solving; *emotional/affective development* with a focus on enhancing self-confidence, a feeling of safety and being loved; and *the development of language skills,* i.e. the development of speaking skills and a 'talent' for languages.

After the implementation of the model, we used an online questionnaire to get the parents' feedback on the extent to which their expectations regarding the implementation of the model had been met. In terms of cognitive skills development, the respondents reported a high level of knowledge acquisition (60%), improvement in concentration (46.6%), the ability to work independently and complete tasks (60%), increased language awareness (73.3%) and an understanding of the concept of nation and country (66.7%).

In the area of social skills and emotional/affective development, the parents' feedback revealed that their children expressed a strong willingness to go to kindergarten (66.7%) as well as positive attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity (80%).

Regarding the development of language skills, parents reported that their children displayed a keen desire to learn languages (66.7%) but also curiosity and enthusiasm about language (73.3%). They also noted that their children demonstrated a commendable grasp of other languages and a rapid acquisition of language skills (60%), which they found surprising.

Additionally, parents observed an emerging interest in arts and culture in their children (53.3%). They perceived that the knowledge and skills acquired would be an asset in their children's future education and language learning (46.6%).

5.3. The children's response to the programme

The results of the interviews with the children indicate that they responded positively to the program both in the cognitive and linguistic, as well as the affective domain. In addition, their positive reactions were also observed from the perspective of the learning process.

From the cognitive perspective, the children demonstrated a clear grasp of abstract concepts such as 'country' and 'language.' Almost all the children were able to accurately identify multiple countries and articulate the languages spoken in each, indicating a solid understanding of these complex ideas. During the interviews, the children explained that we need a passport to travel to other countries and they talked about various things associated to different countries (e.g.: *"Mozart comes from Austria, he is a famous composer. And they eat Mozartkugel and Sacher cake in Austria."; "Pisa is in Italy.", "Paddington is from Great Britain. And they also have a king. Not a queen anymore."*). Furthermore, the children showed progress in the linguistic domain. When prompted to share interesting words in other languages, nearly all the children were able to provide at least one foreign word. Common responses included greetings like '*buon giorno', 'hello'*, and basic counting in Italian and English. Words that captured their interest included *'bumblebee', 'jellyfish', 'hola', 'benissimo', and 'bok'*. In the interviews, we also observed how the children were developing their language awareness. All of them stated that their Italian teacher spoke Italian and most of them commented that they were able to understand her. Some of them also mentioned the languages their parents are able to speak (English, Croatian, Italian, Spanish). The parents also stated that their children were able to recognize other languages if they heard them in the street, or on TV, and that they were curious about the meaning of words they heard. Additionally, most children showed a genuine interest in learning new languages, with a preference for Italian, English, and Spanish.

In the affective domain, the results indicated that the children exhibited strong enthusiasm for learning about different countries. They also expressed desires to travel to various destinations. When asked whether they would like to travel to other countries, they did not only name the countries, but also gave reasons why they would like to visit them: I would like to go *"to*

Spain and visit Sagrada Familia", "to Asia where I can travel with an underground train", "to Austria, where I could eat some good food like Sacher cake and steak", "to Africa where I can see the camels", "to Italy because it's my favourite country". The positive emotional engagement was further evident in their enjoyment of interactions with visiting students. Several children pointed out that their favourite part of the activities was when the preschool teacher education students carried out the 'language train' activities with them. They particularly liked the games, songs, and creative activities.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The findings demonstrate that the activities within the Multilingual Kindergarten Model were age-appropriate and that the model effectively supports children's development across cognitive, linguistic and affective domains. Teachers confirmed that the activities aligned well with the Slovenian Kindergarten Curriculum, with a focus on fostering cognitive skills, such as focus, problem-solving, and cultural awareness. Cognitively, children demonstrated significant changes in the way they learn – increased focus, the development of metacognitive skills for learning and self-management. They also showed a strong understanding of abstract concepts such as 'country' and 'language', showing knowledge about different countries and their cultural associations. Both parents and teachers observed that children's curiosity often exceeded their expectations, leading to discussions on topics typically covered in primary school.

In the linguistic domain, the results show that, in addition to language development, both parents and teachers perceived an overall change in the children's attitudes towards language, the development of a desire to learn other languages, positive attitudes and openness towards other people. They were able to recall and use words from different languages. Their ability to recognise languages in various contexts and their enthusiasm for learning new languages further highlighted the programme's effectiveness in fostering early language awareness and positive attitudes towards other languages. This resonates with several studies which have reported children's overtly positive attitudes towards foreign languages, such as Bratož et al. (2024), Enever (2011) and Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2019). Furthermore, according to the parents' and the teachers' observations, children's social skills improved as they became better at resolving conflicts and negotiating with peers which, as Yang, Peh and Ng (2021) argue, is the result of a child-focused approach. Their emotional growth was evident, with children gaining self-confidence and feeling secure in their learning environment. Moreover,

the children exhibited strong enthusiasm for travelling and learning about other countries. Their enjoyment of the activities, especially those involving interactions with the students from the Faculty of Education, confirms the programme's success in creating a positive and engaging learning environment.

It is crucial to emphasize that the effectiveness of the model depends on its linguistic and pedagogical or didactic conceptualisation. As Bruner (1990) already highlighted, careful consideration of linguistic and pedagogical considerations is vital in designing effective educational experiences. A well-conceived pedagogical framework guarantees the procedural quality of a supportive learning environment, the implementation of meaningful learning strategies (such as child participation and experiential learning), and appropriate educational interactions (including scaffolding strategies, multi-sensory learning, cross-curricular integration). Additionally, the model's success relies on strong partnerships with parents, collaborative professional development for preschool teachers, university researchers and university students from the UP Faculty of Education, as well as active involvement from the management of the Koper Kindergarten and the local community.

The model was implemented over the course of one school year, and the evaluation results indicate that language awareness, positive attitudes towards languages and interest in language learning can be effectively nurtured at a very early age through appropriate approaches. Furthermore, we believe that the knowledge, skills, and attitudes the children acquired through this model may also contribute to reducing anxiety related to learning additional or foreign languages in the future (Žefran, 2015). However, we need to acknowledge certain limitations of our study, as the effectiveness of the model was assessed through the analysis of participants' perceptions, without validated measurement tools that would provide more objectively measurable outcomes. Therefore, it is challenging to accurately measure the programme's impact on specific linguistic, cognitive, and affective skills. Future studies should incorporate objective, validated tools to measure effectiveness, providing a more generalizable evaluation of the programme's impact on language awareness and learning.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Online questionnaire for the parents

1. This year, the activities in your child's kindergarten group were also carried out in Italian. Did you notice any language skills or attitudes towards the language? How was this reflected at home?
2. This year, some extra activities in your child's kindergarten group also involved English and other languages. Did your child show any responses to the languages? How was this reflected at home?
3. The activities were based on the context of travel, where children travelled by train to different countries and learnt about different cultures and languages. What was your child's reaction to the travel metaphor at home?
4. Have you noticed an increased language awareness in your child? Please indicate your observations below. The child:
   - mentions words in different languages
   - shows curiosity about languages (e.g. wanting to know how to say something in a foreign language).
   - compares different languages (e.g. words, phrases, pronunciation).
   - boasts that he/she can say something (a word etc.) in different languages.
   - sings songs in different languages.
   - notices if people around him/her speak a different language.
   - recognises languages he/she hears.
   - when playing, he/she includes words or phrases from different languages.
   - Other:
5. Have you noticed an increased awareness of other cultures in your child? If YES, please write down how this is expressed. Can you give an example?
6. Have you noticed an increased interest in kindergarten activities in your child at home? If YES, is (was) your child willing to actively participate in the activities or projects on his/her own? How has this been reflected?
7. Some of the activities were aimed at developing understanding of concepts at a symbolic level (e.g. the concept of country, cities, language, culture, etc.). Have you noticed progress in this area with your child? If YES, please give an example.
8. Have you noticed progress in other areas with your child? (Multiple answers are possible)
   - Improved problem-solving skills
   - Increased general knowledge
   - Increased tolerance towards others
   - Increased creativity
   - Improved emotional maturity
   - Increased self-confidence
   - Improved communication skills
   - Increased resourcefulness in new situations
   - Improved concentration
   - Other:
9. Have others (relatives, friends, acquaintances) noticed any progress in your child? Have they commented on anything?

10. Do you think your expectations have been met? Please explain.
11. Have you been involved in the kindergarten activities yourself? In what way?
12. What has surprised you most positively?
13. Given that we are introducing a new multilingual kindergarten model, what (in your opinion) are the biggest challenges?
14. Do you have any suggestions for the future?

Source: present study.

Appendix 2: Interviews with the children

We talked to the children with the help of their suitcases containing objects from their 'travels' and first asked them about what they had in their suitcases and where the items were from.
Other questions involved:
Which countries did you travel to?
Have you ever travelled (by train)?
What did you learn when you travelled by train (in kindergarten)?
Where did you go? What language(s) do they speak there?
What did you enjoy most?
Where do you want to travel?
Which languages would you like to speak?
Do you know any interesting words in other languages?
Which language does your [*Italian*] teacher speak? Do you understand her?
Are you also able to say anything in Italian? What about English?

Source: present study.

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Magdalena Olpińska-Szkiełko
University of Warsaw, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8888-9777
m.olpinska@uw.edu.pl

Mateusz Patera
University of Warsaw, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2996-3885
mateusz.patera@uw.edu.pl

Shared reading for enhancing receptive vocabulary in early second language education: A study of preschool children in a Polish-German bilingual program

This paper focuses on the practice of shared reading of picture storybooks and its impact on the development of children's second language (L2) skills, particularly receptive vocabulary. It presents findings from an empirical study conducted in a bilingual Polish-German kindergarten in Poznan, Poland, between 2017 and 2018. The primary objective of this study was to investigate to what extent learning processes occur during shared reading experiences in German as the second language and to identify the factors influencing learning outcomes. The study explored three variables: the duration of a child's participation in the bilingual program, the congruence between visual illustrations and words forming the accompanying text, and the family's linguistic background and language policy. The findings confirm that the impact of shared reading on fostering L2 development increases with the duration of a child's participation in the bilingual program, indirectly highlighting the program's effectiveness. Furthermore,

children relied not only on illustrations, but also on verbal forms, to derive meaning, underscoring the importance of linguistic context in L2 learning. The family language factor had minimal influence on learning outcomes, indicating that shared reading benefits children regardless of the extent of German usage at home.

Keywords: shared reading, second language acquisition, bilingual education, picture books

Słowa kluczowe: wspólne czytanie, przyswajanie drugiego języka, edukacja dwujęzyczna, książki obrazkowe

1. Introduction

Many researchers are convinced that shared reading of picture storybooks in children's first language has a profoundly positive impact, not only on their linguistic and cognitive development, but also on their emotional, social, and aesthetic-literary development (Blewitt, et al., 2009; Kümmerling-Meibauer et al., 2015; Torr, 2020; Steiner et al., 2021; Rodriguez, Payler, 2021). In the area of language, shared reading appears to particularly enhance children's lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic competencies (Blewitt, 2015; Blewitt et al., 2009; Flack et al., 2018; Horst, 2015; Reese, 2015; Stark, 2015). Children exposed to shared reading in their mother tongue acquire a more substantial receptive and productive vocabulary and develop better listening comprehension and narrative skills, which are crucial foundations for successful development of literacy (Reese, 2015; Steiner et al., 2021; Rodriguez, Payler, 2021). Additionally, shared reading promotes children's visual learning, their understanding of emotions, and their comprehension of social and moral values. Moreover, it introduces children to the area of literary fiction and narration (Kümmerling-Meibauer et al., 2015; Flack et al., 2018).

The present study aims to investigate whether the positive effects of shared reading on first language development can also apply to second language acquisition. Specifically, it explores whether shared reading can induce learning processes in learners within the context of early second language (L2) education. In particular, we seek to determine whether shared reading of picture storybooks in German as a second language can contribute to the development of learners' receptive vocabulary. In this study, the term *early second language acquisition* refers to preschool language learning. This paper presents research results from a study conducted at the bilingual German-Polish *Malta* Kindergarten in Poznan between April 2017 and June 2018[1]. Data from 31 children, aged three to six, were collected and analysed

[1] For this study see also Olpińska-Szkiełko (2019) and Olpińska-Szkiełko and Patera (2024).

using pre- and post-tests to assess their receptive vocabulary for six picture storybooks. The tests were based on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, German edition (Lenhard et al., 2015).

The paper begins with a brief discussion on the significance of picture books for children's development and for second language learning. It then presents the research objectives, methods, study procedure, and participant characteristics. Following this, the results of the study are provided, along with a discussion of the findings. Finally, the article concludes with the implications of the study and suggestions for future research directions.

2. On the significance of picture books and shared reading for child development

Picture storybooks are intricate "aesthetic products" distinguished by "the meaningful and unique interaction of words and images" (Kümmerling-Meibauer et al., 2015: 1). They are books that convey information through a combination of text and image, with illustrations in picture book narratives playing a non-subordinate role (Ellis, Brewster, 2014). On the contrary, they shape the story just as much as the words (Mourão, 2016). They also offer an interpretation (or explanation) of the story and can occasionally even provide an extension of the narrative (Kümmerling-Meibauer et al., 2015).

Picture storybooks are specifically designed for preschool-age children and are, therefore, well-aligned with the needs and developmental stage of children in this age group (Stark, 2015). They play a significant role in children's learning processes due to their narrative features, which have the capacity to emotionally engage children. These narratives typically revolve around heroes with whom children can identify, and describe conflicts or complications that the heroes must bravely and skilfully navigate. Additionally, picture storybooks can expand children's knowledge of the world, promote their social skills, and encourage both verbal and nonverbal actions. As a result, children can retain a significant amount of linguistic information from a picture book, encompassing both the linguistic form and the meaning of the wording. In this way, picture storybooks distinctly facilitate the linguistic and cognitive development of children (Kümmerling-Meibauer et al., 2015; Kümmerling-Meibauer, Meibauer, 2015; Stark, 2015; Blewitt, Langan, 2016).

The activity of shared reading by children and adults exerts profoundly positive impact on child development because it is embedded in a very specific communicative and social situation. It elicits from adults a range of

verbal and nonverbal behaviours that directly support the child's learning processes. Children benefit from shared reading when adults engage them with questions, offer brief explanations, especially when employing generic terms and generalised phrases while referring to corresponding images (Rohlfing et al., 2015; Ganea, Canfield, 2015; Moschovaki, Meadows, 2015; Evans et al., 2011; Blewitt, Langan, 2016; Sezer et al., 2021). Research findings indicate that picture books can, in fact, contribute more significantly to child development than free play, as "pictures – rather than objects – elicit a higher proportion of generic and labelling phrases from mothers and [...] children" (Rohlfing et al., 2015: 102).

3. On the significance of picture books and shared reading for second language learning

The same reasons that underpin the significance of shared reading in the first language for child development can also be crucial in the process of early second language learning. Since the acquisition of the first language and the acquisition of additional languages during the preschool years, occurring within the sensitive period for language acquisition, proceed in a comparable manner (Wode, 2000, 2004, 2014), it can be assumed that the shared reading of picture storybooks in the second language could support the learning process in a manner analogous to that observed in the first language.

To facilitate second language learning in a kindergarten setting, the creation of a rich language learning environment is essential (Vollmer, 2005; Bach, 2005). In this context, picture storybooks serve as indispensable didactic materials. Firstly, they are visually appealing, rendering the learning process enticing and enjoyable – as pleasure in learning is considered a necessary foundation for successful learning outcomes (Boon, Dain, 2015). Secondly, picture storybooks are authentic texts that children can assimilate as integral components of communicative interactions (Dakowska, 2001; Butzkamm, 2002; Lancaster, Flewitt 2015; Ellis, Brewster 2014; Mourão, 2016). Thirdly, they are particularly well-suited for early second language instruction, as shared reading with an adult is a familiar and beloved activity for most children. Fourthly, shared reading offers children, as mentioned above, a good opportunity to acquire new vocabulary and to practise both grammatical and pragmatic language forms. This is because picture storybooks possess two crucial features that make them particularly valuable for this process: the context and the repetition (Blewitt, 2015; Horst, 2015; Ganea, Canfield 2015; Blewitt et al., 2009; Rodriguez, Payler, 2021).

Typically, a child will have a picture book story read to them multiple times, as children enjoy hearing the same story repeatedly. This repetition is crucial because, as Horst (2015) demonstrates, children retain a word more effectively when they encounter it multiple times within the same context, especially in the initial phase of word acquisition, i.e. shortly after their initial encounter with the new word. Horst (2015) shows in her study that children who heard a new word three times within a single story retained it better than children who encountered the same word three times but in three different stories – that is, in three distinct contexts. Furthermore, children who heard a story three times retained significantly more new words than children who heard three different stories only once, even though the examined words occurred equally in both groups. However, it must be considered that in the later stages of word acquisition, using a word in various contexts becomes an indispensable prerequisite for its permanent retention (Horst, 2015; Blewitt, 2015).

Naturally, when considering shared reading in the context of second language learning, the question arises as to the suitability of picture storybooks intended for native speakers of a language at a particular age, as opposed to those learning the language as a second language (Ellis, Brewster, 2014). However, it should not be automatically assumed that the intricate linguistic structure of a picture book inevitably exceeds the processing capabilities of a second language learner. Picture storybooks are particularly beneficial to language learning processes in children because, during shared reading, the child demonstrates an active interest in understanding the meaning of new words and expressions, which motivates them to engage in a more comprehensive analysis of these linguistic elements, encompassing their structure, components, meaning, and usage (Meibauer, 2015). This applies equally to second language learners (cf. Ellis, Brewster, 2014).

As Stark (2015) observed in her analysis of 19 selected picture books for children aged one to five, picture books exhibit a well-defined progression in terms of both the quantity and complexity of linguistic expression, thereby rendering them particularly adaptable to the linguistic and cognitive abilities of children across different age groups. This kind of progression is better suited to the needs of second language learners compared to most early second (foreign) language didactic materials (textbooks), which typically adhere to a rigid lexical and grammatical progression (Olpińska-Szkiełko, 2015).

4. Research aims

The present study explores the role of shared reading of picture storybooks in fostering the development of second language (L2) skills among children in a bilingual Polish-German kindergarten in Poznan, Poland. The primary aim of this research was to investigate whether the practice of reading picture storybooks in German as a second language, influences the development of children's receptive vocabulary. Additionally, the study sought to identify key factors that may mediate or enhance the impact of shared reading on the development of children's lexical competence in their L2.

Selecting appropriate measurement and assessment methods for the second language competencies of children under the age of six is a challenging task, as test instructions for children can often prove to be more challenging than the tasks themselves (Edmondson, House, 1993; Westphal, 1998). Furthermore, bilingual development in kindergarten cannot be considered a completed acquisition process (Wode, 2014). Consequently, in bilingualism research, it is postulated that assessing the performance of children in bilingual programs should not occur prematurely: "In fact, if children start on their first foreign language in a bilingual pre-school and if this language is continued to be taught during the primary grades, then the children can be expected to have developed an impressive command of the first foreign language by the end of grade 4 of primary" (Wode, 1998: 6; cf. also Morgen, 1997; Björklund, 1994; Genesee, 1987). Therefore, in our study, we deliberately refrained from using explicit competency tests and chose a methodology based on the German-language edition of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Lenhard et al., 2015; see Appendix 1). This test is designed to assess the extent of receptive vocabulary in the participants' first language from the age of three and was adapted to align with the specific requirements of our study.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design and Procedure

The decision to select a shared reading activity using picture storybooks for this study was based on several factors. Firstly, shared reading is a routine activity at the *Malta* Kindergarten, making it a familiar practice in the educational setting. Additionally, it is popular among the children, making it a preferred and engaging activity.

In the initial phase of the study, six picture books were selected based on the following criteria:

Cognitive criteria: The books were thematically and conceptually well-suited to the cognitive developmental stage of preschool-aged children.

Linguistic criteria: Given that this study focused on learners of German as a second language, the linguistic structures within the picture storybooks needed to be adjusted to match the evolving language abilities of the children. Hence, the linguistic structures were somewhat simpler than those recommended for native speakers of the corresponding age group but simultaneously presented an appropriate challenge to the children's language processing abilities (cf. Ellis, Brewster, 2014).

Content criteria: The picture books narrated engaging stories to emotionally involve the children, and featured characters they were able to identify with. Ellis and Brewster (2014) recommend covering a wide range of topics found in children's books, including stories about animals, magic and fantasy, as well as social issues, such as tolerance and equality. Accordingly, the selection of books in our study was intended to cover a broad spectrum of topics.

Aesthetic criteria: Since the explanation and interpretation of (word) meanings during shared reading occurred exclusively through the second language (contextualization) and with the aid of nonverbal signals, the picture storybooks incorporated appropriate illustrations.

In the second phase of the study, words were selected from the chosen stories (see Appendix 2) with the intention that these words would be unfamiliar to the children. The selection process involved consultation with caregivers and educators from the *Malta* Kindergarten. The selected words were then categorised into three groups:

Category 1: Concrete nouns that were clearly identifiable through illustrations in a given picture storybook (e.g., *Blume* [flower]).

Category 2: Concrete nouns, verbs, and adjectives that were relatively clearly discernible in the illustrations of a given picture storybook (e.g., *hüpfen* [to hop]).

Category 3: Abstract nouns, verbs, and adjectives that were not easily or unequivocally recognizable in the picture book illustrations (e.g., *schimpfen* [to scold]).

This systematic categorization of selected words was undertaken to ensure a controlled introduction of new vocabulary to the participants while taking into consideration the visual context provided by the illustrations.

Next, picture tables from the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Lenhard et al., 2015, see Appendix 1) were chosen that accurately and clearly illustrated the identified test words.

In the third phase of the study, pre-tests were administered, followed by shared reading sessions, which occurred at least three times a week for each book. Subsequently, post-tests were conducted and analysed. Both the tests and the shared reading sessions were facilitated by the educators from the *Malta* Kindergarten who were responsible for the care of the children.

To achieve the research aims of the study, three research questions were posed:

RQ1: Do the learning outcomes resulting from shared reading depend on the duration of children's participation in the bilingual program?
RQ2: Do the learning outcomes resulting from shared reading depend on the category of the analysed word?
RQ3: Are the learning outcomes from shared reading influenced by the children's linguistic family situations and their families' language policies, particularly by the use of German as one of the family languages[2]?

It was assumed that the answer to all three research questions would be affirmative. Accordingly, three hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The longer a child participates in the bilingual program (independent variable), the more positively shared reading will impact the development of their lexical competence in the second language (dependent variable).
H2: The more easily a word can be identified in the picture book illustrations (independent variable), the easier it will be recognized and retained by the children (dependent variable).
H3: Children whose families use German as one of their family languages (independent variable) benefit more from shared reading in this language (dependent variable) than children who exclusively learn German in the bilingual program in kindergarten.

5.2. Participants

The *Malta* Kindergarten in Poznań is a bilingual institution with German and Polish as its languages of communication. The educational principle of the *Malta* Kindergarten regarding language development is the balanced use of both languages. Approximately 50% of daily activities conducted in Ger-

[2] For the division into subgroups by the family language factor, see Table 1 in section *Participants*

man and Polish, following the approach of *early partial immersion* (Genesee, 1987; Cummins, 2009; Baker, 2011; Steinlen, 2021). All children's activities in the kindergarten, including shared reading, take place in both German and Polish. Shared reading of picture storybooks is a daily activity at the *Malta Kindergarten*, making it both familiar and highly regarded by the children, as reported by the educators.

Throughout the study period, approximately 30 children, aged between two and a half and six, were enrolled at *Malta* Kindergarten. For the majority of them (see Table 1), German was a language that they acquired exclusively in the kindergarten (PL, PL/EN) or from one parent in mixed German-Polish families (PL/DE). However, there were also a few children for whom German was the mother tongue of both parents (DE). In some families, the Non-Native Bilingualism model was employed, where German was used as the family's language of communication by one or both parents as their second or foreign language (NNB). In addition, some Polish-speaking families had resided in a German-speaking country for an extended period (more than one year) (PL+, NNB+).

Table 1. The population structure of study participants based on family language situation and policy. Developed by the authors based on the collected data

Family Language Factor	Frequency	Percent [%]
PL	15	48.39
DE	5	16.13
NNB	3	9.68
PL/DE	3	9.68
NNB+	2	6.45
PL+	2	6.45
PL/EN	1	3.23
Total	31	100.0

Key:
PL – Polish spoken at home
DE – German spoken at home
NNB – Polish and German spoken at home, following a non-native bilingualism model
PL/DE – Polish and German spoken at home, in a mixed family setting
NNB+ – Polish and German spoken at home, following a non-native bilingualism model, after an extended stay in a German-speaking country
PL+ – Polish spoken at home, after an extended stay in a German-speaking country
PL/EN – Polish and English spoken at home, in a mixed family setting.

The participants of the study were recruited in December 2016. At that time, a meeting was held with the parents of the children, during which

the research objectives of the study and its procedure were explained to them. All parents consented to their children's participation in the study.

The analysis was conducted based on data from 31 participants (16 females, 15 males) aged three to six years (M = 4.11; SD = 0.898). The participants' kindergarten experience ranged from 1 to 33 months (M = 13.067; SD = 8.473).

5.3. Findings

During the testing procedures, which included both pre-tests and post-tests, a total of 1,423 research units (words) were collected. In our study, the dependent variable was the improvement of receptive L2 vocabulary, represented by binary values (0 and 1).

Out of the 1,423 units, 749 units (words) were excluded from the analysis. We excluded cases where a child achieved a positive result in both the pre-test and post-test (1/1), as we assumed this indicated that the child had already known the specific word before the shared reading sessions and did not learn it through our shared reading procedure (see Table 3 for reference).

The analysis included three categories of pre-test/post-test ratings[3]:

0/1 (n = 217; 32.2%) – this rating was considered a success of the shared reading procedure, as we assumed that the child had learned the new word[4],

0/0 and 1/0 (n = 457; 67.8%) – these ratings were considered failures of the shared reading procedure, as we assumed that the negative result in the post-test meant the child had not learned the new word.

The structure of the analysed data is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Structure of the analysed data. A value of 0 indicates an incorrect answer provided by the participant, while 1 represents a correct answer. Developed by the authors based on the collected data

Assessment pre/post	Frequency	Percent [%]
0/0	342	50.7
0/1	217	32.2
1/0	115	17.1
Total	674	100.0

[3] A value of 0 indicates an incorrect answer provided by the participant, while 1 represents a correct answer.

[4] Randomly selected post-test answers may include correct responses, which do not necessarily indicate success on the part of the respondents. In our study, we are unable to eliminate such cases, and we lack the means to estimate the extent of randomly selected correct answers. Consequently, we included all samples in our analysis.

The study participants attended the *Malta* Kindergarten for an average of slightly over 13 months (min = 1; max = 33; M = 13.067; SD = 8.473). Chart 1 presents the results achieved by the children in relation to the average number of months in the bilingual program, broken down by gender and in total. It is worth noting that there was no significant difference in performance between girls and boys, as test results were generally similar in both groups.

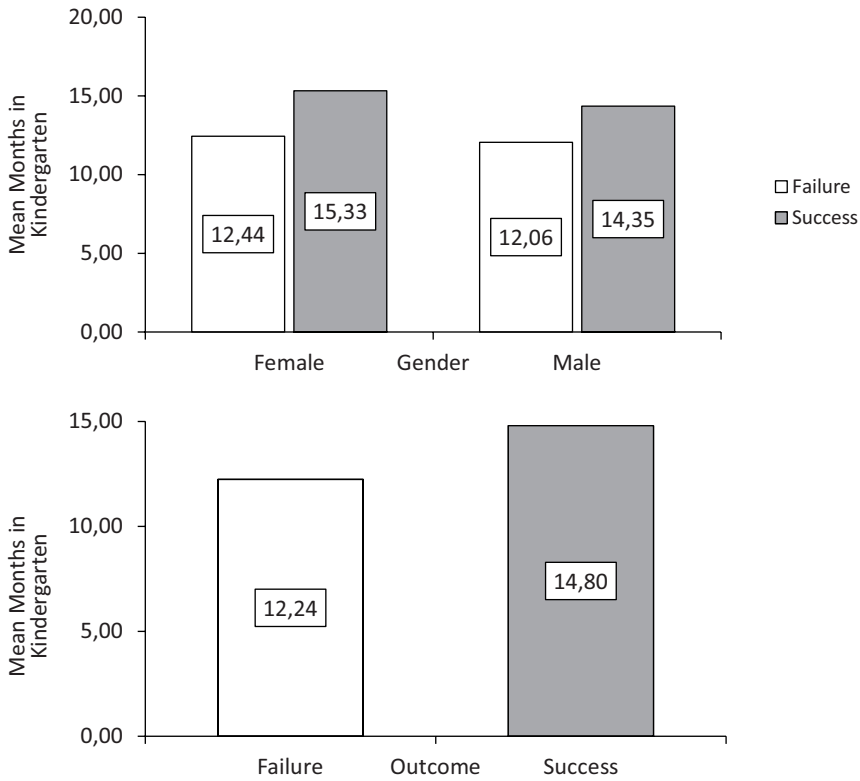

Chart 1. Participants' duration of kindergarten attendance (mean number of months) and associated learning outcomes. Developed by the authors based on the collected data

With regard to H1, a Spearman's rho correlation was computed between the achieved learning outcomes (dependent variable) and the number of months in the bilingual program (correlation coefficient = 0.123; p = 0.001). For ratings 0/0 and 1/0, the average number of months a child spent in the bilingual program was 12.24 months. For the 0/1 rating, the average number of months in the bilingual program was 14.80 months. The

results indicate that as the number of months in the bilingual program increases, the success rate rises. This correlation between the variables is statistically significant. A non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test ($p < 0.001$) was conducted, confirming the positive verification of H1: The increasing number of months in the bilingual program (independent variable) positively influences the outcome in the development of receptive L2 vocabulary (dependent variable) among the study participants.

Concerning the validation of H2, which pertains to the influence of word category on the success of children's L2 lexical competence development, the results are presented in Chart 2.

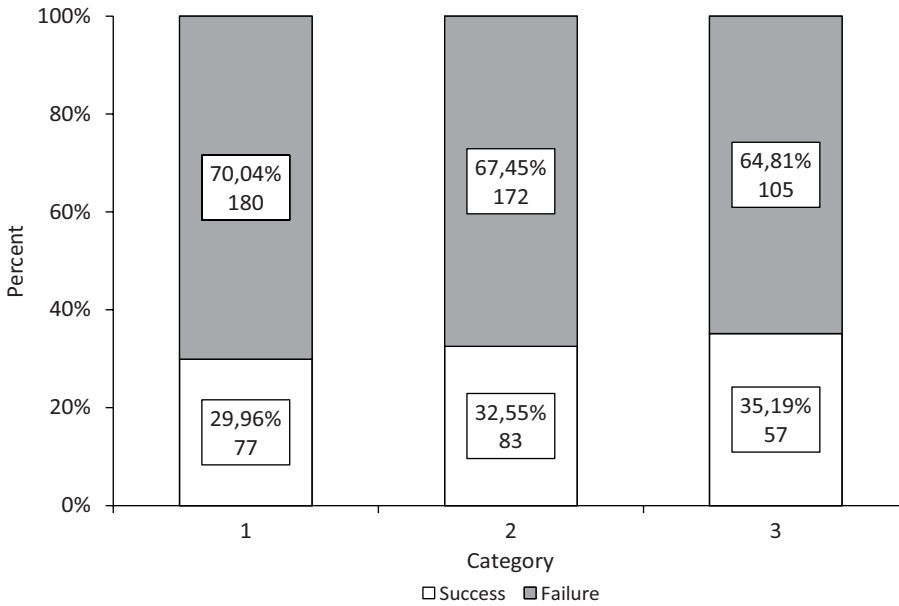

Chart 2. Learning outcomes based on test word categories. Developed by the authors based on the collected data

Cramer's test indicated a weak association between word category and learning scores (Cramer's V = 0.043; p = 0.531). The Chi-Square statistical test revealed no significant statistical relationship between word category and learning outcomes (Chi-Square = 1.266; p = 0.531). Based on the analysis, H2 could not be substantiated, suggesting that irrespective of word category, the vocabulary learning outcomes among the study participants exhibit similar values.

The third variable that we considered in our study was the family language factor, which includes the language situation and language policy within the families of the respondents.

First, a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test ($p < 0.001$) was conducted, which confirmed H3: The family language factor (independent variable) has an impact on the vocabulary learning outcomes (dependent variable) among the participants. Subsequently, Cramer's test was employed to assess the extent to which the family language factor influences the learning effect. It revealed a statistically significant, yet weak association between the family language factor and learning outcomes (Cramer's $V = 0.212$; $p < 0.001$).

Detailed percentage and numerical data are presented in Chart 3.

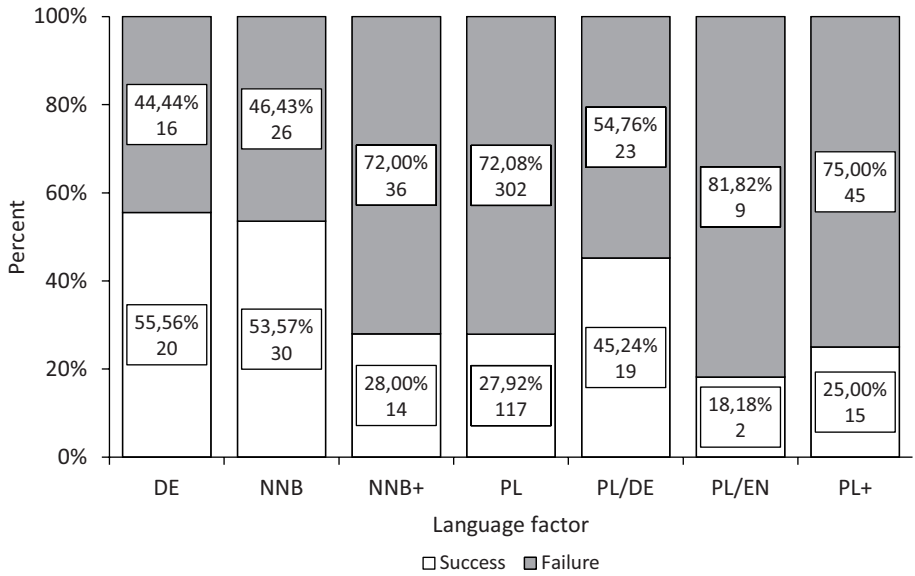

Chart 3. Learning outcomes broken down into subgroups by the family language factor. Developed by the authors based on the collected data

When examining the success rate in relation to family language factors, the most favourable success-to-failure ratio was observed in the DE subgroup (44.44% - failure, 55.56% - success), the NNB subgroup (46.43% - failure, 53.57% - success), and the PL/DE subgroup (54.76% - failure, 45.24% - success). The least favourable success-to-failure ratio was found in the PL/EN subgroup (81.82% - failure, 18.18% - success). In the remaining subgroups, the ratios were as follows: both the PL and NNB+ subgroups had approximately 72.00% failure and 28.00% success, while the PL+ subgroup exhibited 75.00% failure and 25.00% success.

6. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the impact of shared reading on fostering L2 development increases with the duration of a child's participation in the bilingual program (H1), thereby demonstrating the effectiveness of early second language education, in this case, in the form of early partial immersion. This finding aligns with numerous publications documenting the success of language immersion programs, such as Baker (2011), Bielicka (2017), Genesee (1987), Kersten (2013), and Steinlen (2021).

With respect to H2, Chart 2 illustrates a remarkably consistent ratio of success to failure across test words within all three categories, without any statistically significant variations. This suggests that words from all three categories were equally easy (or equally challenging, as each category had more failures than successes) to learn, regardless of whether a word's meaning could be inferred from the book's illustrations or, rather, from the verbal context. This implies that in the study children learned new words in the second language during shared reading through both visual aids (pictures in the books) and the verbal context. Among the results obtained, this finding stands out as a pivotal confirmation of the study's foundational assumption: shared reading can be considered an effective approach to fostering the development of lexical competence in a second language for children (cf. Ellis, Brewster, 2014; Mourão, 2016; Waddington, 2020). Additionally, the results of the data analysis for H3, which reveals a weak relationship between the family language factor and the success-failure ratio of the participants, supports this assumption. Despite the higher success rates in the DE, NNB, and PL/DE subgroups compared to the PL, PL+, NNB+, and PL/EN subgroups, the findings suggest that children in the latter subgroups still benefited in their L2 vocabulary learning from shared reading. While the learning effect is somewhat lower in these subgroups, it is still present.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the baseline knowledge of vocabulary varied significantly across participant subgroups.The data presented in Table 3 show differences among the subgroups in terms of the ratio of words that were already known to the children prior to the shared reading phase (test result 1/1, data excluded from the analysis) compared to those that were unknown to the children (test results 0/0, 1/0, and 0/1, data included).

The data shows that, in the PL subgroup, the children knew about half as many words from the picture storybooks as those they did not know prior to the shared reading phase (195 known vs. 419 unknown). In contrast, in the DE subgroup, the children knew approximately three times as many words as those they did not know before the shared reading phase

Table 3. Composition of the analysed sample: data included and excluded from the analysis. Key: see Table 1.A value of 0 indicates an incorrect answer provided by the participant, while 1 represents a correct answer. Developed by the authors based on the collected data

Family Language Factor	Data excluded Frequency (1/1)	Data included Frequency (0/0, 0/1, 1/0)	Data excluded Percent [%] (1/1)	Data included Percent [%] (0/0, 0/1, 1/0)
PL	195	419	31.8	68.2
NNB	176	56	75.9	24.1
PL/DE	117	42	73.6	26.4
DE	108	36	75.0	25.0
NNB+	76	50	60.3	39.7
PL+	75	60	55.6	44.4
PL/EN	2	11	15.4	84.6
Total	749	674		

(108 known vs. 36 unknown). A similar ratio was observed in the NNB and PL/DE subgroups. The superior learning outcomes observed in the three latter participant subgroups can potentially be attributed to the children's higher overall language proficiency. It is reasonable to assume that shared reading has a more significant impact on children's learning processes when their proficiency in the second language more closely approaches that of their first language. Consequently, the comparable results obtained in the DE, PL/DE, and NNB subgroups may also reflect the effectiveness of the non-native bilingualism strategy for family-based bilingual upbringing.

However, the weak correlation between family language factors and children's learning outcomes confirms the assumption that shared reading stimulates learning processes, even in children who acquire a second language solely within educational settings. This, in turn, leads to the conclusion that shared reading of picture storybooks in a second language is an effective strategy for developing lexical competence, even at lower levels of proficiency. This finding has important implications for early second language learning, particularly in contexts like Poland, where children typically learn a second language in traditional educational settings rather than bilingual programs, where language proficiency is generally higher. Nonetheless, our study demonstrates that shared reading can be effective even in groups with less advanced language skills compared to bilingual programs, highlighting its potential as a valuable tool for language development in various educational environments.

6.1. Limitation of the study and directions for further research

All caregivers and educators from the *Malta* Kindergarten involved in the project explicitly affirmed that shared reading of picture storybooks in German was evidently greatly enjoyed by all their pupils. They were convinced that all children, regardless of their test results, had benefited from the shared reading, both in terms of their linguistic and non-linguistic development, including social, emotional, and cognitive aspects. However, it appeared that some picture storybooks had resonated more with the children than others. The underlying reasons for this preference – whether related to the books themselves, their narratives and illustrations, or other factors independent of the books – could not be determined during the course of the study. Likewise, it was not possible to ascertain the extent to which a child's affinity for a specific picture storybook, or lack thereof, influenced the learning outcomes.

To comprehensively investigate the impact of shared reading on children's second language learning, it is unquestionably necessary to conduct further detailed and in-depth research. It would also be of interest to researchers in future projects to determine the extent to which affective strategies employed by adults during shared reading of picture storybooks, including their intonation, dramatization, and personal engagement (Moschovaki & Meadows 2015; Steiner et al. 2021; Rodriguez Leon & Payler 2021; Sezer et al. 2021), influence children's learning outcomes.

Undoubtedly, a valuable addition to the presented study would be guidelines for teachers and educators on how to didacticize the shared reading process in a second language. However, addressing this issue would go beyond the scope of this study and would likely require a separate publication. The proposals presented by M.A. Stewart and B. Muszyńska (https://www.merlot.org/merlot/viewSite.htm?id=9167081), as well as those available on the website Storybooks Canada (https://www.storybookscanada.ca), can serve as inspiration.

7. Conclusions

Several important conclusions can be drawn from the study regarding the impact of shared reading on children's second language (L2) learning. Out of the three research hypotheses proposed in this study, two were positively verified, while one was not substantiated by the data. From the perspective of research on early second language learning in an educational context, all three results hold significant implications. Firstly, the findings indirectly con-

firm the effectiveness of bilingual programs in promoting second language development. Specifically, the study demonstrated that the number of newly acquired L2 words through shared reading increases with the length of time a child spends in a bilingual program. This suggests that sustained exposure to the second language in a bilingual environment leads to greater linguistic benefits, highlighting the importance of longer participation in such programs for optimal L2 development. Secondly, the study revealed a weak correlation between the family language factor and learning outcomes. This finding indicates that children who are exposed to German exclusively in the kindergarten setting, without significant exposure to the language at home, can still benefit from shared reading in a manner comparable to children who also learn German at home. This result underscores the value of shared reading as a powerful learning tool in a kindergarten setting. An unexpected outcome of the study was the realization that the success in learning new words through shared reading was not influenced by the category of the new word. The children in the study demonstrated the ability to learn new words across different categories by using both visual illustrations in picture storybooks (associated with more concrete word categories, 1 and 2) and the linguistic context (related to the abstract word category, 3) to infer meanings. This finding emphasizes the role of multimodal learning, where children integrate both visual and verbal cues to comprehend and internalize new vocabulary, suggesting that shared reading is a versatile and effective method for expanding children's second language lexical competence.

Picture storybooks employed in the study

Der kleine Hase, der nicht einschlafen konnte, by Beth Shoshan and Sarah Arnold (2009), Bath: Parragon Books.

Die kranke Ameise, by Zdeněk Miler (2005), Leipzig: leiv Leipziger Kinderbuchverlag.

Heule Eule, by Paul Frienster and Philippe Goosens (2015), Zürich: Nord-Süd-Verlag.

Ich hab dich lieb, Mama, by Jillian Harker and Kristina Stephenson (2005) Köln: Parragon Verlag.

Lillebi - Entdecke mit Lillebi die Welt der Zahlen, by Louis Weber (2010), Hamburg: Pil (Germany).

Unterwegs auf dem Bauernhof, by Sabine Cuno and Monika Neubacher-Fesser (2004), Ravensburg: Ravensburger Buchverlag.

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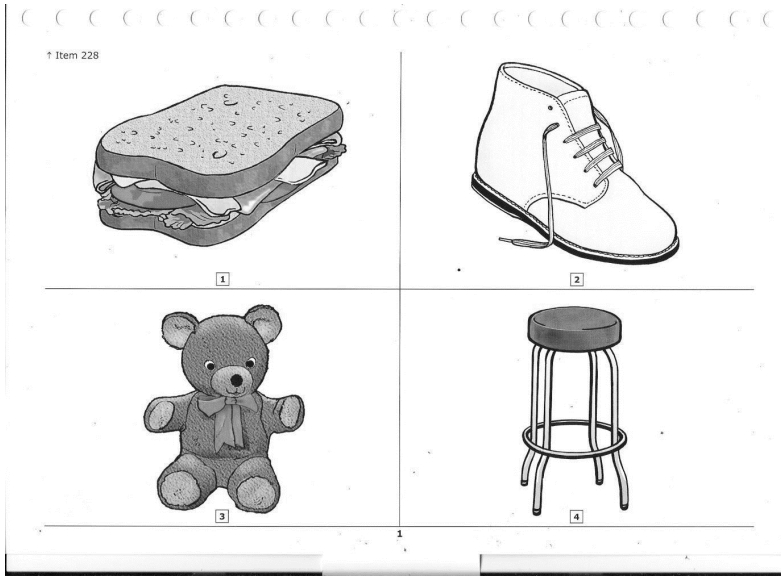
APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Picture table from the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test*, *German edition* (Lenhard et al. 2015)



Appendix 2: Test sheet for *Heule Eule* by Paul Frienster and Philippe Goosens (2015), Zürich: Nord-Süd-Verlag. Developed by the authors.

Word-Nr.	Folio-Nr.							Comments
1	7	heulen [*to howl*]	**1**	2	3	4	F	
2	12	Spinnennetz [*spider web*]	1	**2**	3	4	F	
3	13	Nest [*nest*]	1	2	**3**	4	F	
4	14	bunt [*colorful*]	1	**2**	3	4	F	
5	27	schenken [*to give (as a gift)]*	1	2	3	**4**	F	
6	28	Busch [*bush*]	**1**	2	3	4	F	
7	40	Stachel [*thorn*]	1	2	**3**	4	F	
8	56	Eichhörnchen [*squirrel*]	1	2	**3**	4	F	
9	60	erschrecken/erschrocken [*to scare/be scared*]	1	2	**3**	4	F	
10	63	Blume [*flower*]	**1**	2	3	4	F	
11	82	hüpfen [*to hop*]	1	2	**3**	4	F	
12	114	Nuss [*nut*]	1	**2**	3	4	F	
13	152	fallen [*to fall*]	1	2	**3**	4	F	

14	165	Kette [*necklace*]	**1**	2	3	4	F	
15	216	schimpfen [*to scold*]	1	2	3	**4**	F	
16	224	umarmen [*to hug]*	1	2	**3**	4	F	
Number of errors:								

neofilolog

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Agata Wolanin
University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8513-2154
agata.wolanin@uken.krakow.pl

Marianne Nikolov & Stela Letica Krevelj (eds.)

Early Foreign Language Learning and Teaching: Evidence Versus Wishful Thinking

Bristol/Jackson: Multilingual Matters, 2024, pp. 360

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,

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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Mirna Erk
University of Osijek, Croatia
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2256-167X
merk@foozos.hr

Joanna Rokita-Jaśkow

The Ecology of Pre-primary Foreign Language Learning

Bristol/Jackson: Multilingual Matters, 2025, pp. 178

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

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 Bronfennbrener'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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Werona Król-Gierat
University of the National Education Commission, Krakow, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6522-2550
werona.krol-gierat@uken.krakow.pl

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-Kasztelanic (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 preprimary 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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