



Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning

Vol. 11, No. 1, February 2021, 6-10

ISSN: 1792-1244

Available online at <http://rpltl.eap.gr>

This article is issued under the [Creative Commons License Deed. Attribution 3.0 Unported \(CC BY 3.0\)](#)

Special Issue: Innovations and trends in Early Foreign Language Context

Introduction

Thomai ALEXIOU

Early foreign language education is now normal and not merely a passing trend. Although there is still room for discussion regarding the impact of early language learning on future language success, the benefits of starting young have long been established. An early start by itself, of course, guarantees nothing. Future language success seems to be depended largely on other more essential and practical factors such as continuity and quality of input, huge amounts of exposure, rich linguistic context, a smooth transition from pre-primary to primary and from primary to secondary education and so many others.

All these notwithstanding, systematic studies have provided tangible results and the consensus seems to be that early language education certainly does no harm. On the contrary, it seems to develop the child holistically and therefore is an opportunity in a child's future language development. The linguistic benefits (e.g., enrichment of vocabulary and phrases, pronunciation, language awareness and faster acquisition of oral comprehension skills) -although considerable in many cases- are not the most significant ones. Pedagogical gains including cognitive, socio-cultural and affective/emotional gains have been demonstrated throughout the years, unveiling multifaceted privileges for early starters. Especially when it comes to pre-primary and preschool years (a turning point in a child's life), this pedagogical value deserves special attention, and, thus, a synergy between all stakeholders is vital.

Therefore, it is sensible to present some of the innovations and trends regarding early EFL in the hope of enhancing both the discussion and the quality of education in this field. The volume serves as a testimony of the miracles teachers perform as well as the vision academics share for education and at the same time constitutes a valuable source of contributions made in the field.

The volume covers an array of different parameters and factors that target the holistic development of the child. It is a rich discussion on the dimensions of the Pre-A1 level, child friendly measurement tools, the possibilities technological advances and multimedia offer (such as reading pens, digital board games, cartoons), the essence of interculturalism, non-conventional teaching methodologies and approaches even during the COVID era –all highlighting the huge potential of EFL at preschool and primary age.

This volume is divided into two subparts: Innovations and trends in preschools and innovations and trends in primary schools.

The first 8 papers focus on the preschool context and their implications in EFL.

Thomaï Alexiou and **Maria Stathopoulou** bring the new Companion CEFR into the Early Language Learning (ELL) classroom. This fills a gap in the current literature since they critically review and analyse the Pre-A1 descriptors and they explore ways that they can be translated into teaching methodology and pedagogies, language programmes and curricula for early language learning. The paper ends by concluding that the new Pre-A1 level illustrative descriptors although useful as benchmark can be further enriched with common thematic areas, a threshold of lexis and a clear emphasis on plurilingual competence. The authors propose the idea of integration of language in the curriculum rather than the consideration of it as a separate subject in future studies in pedagogy and language.

Beatriz Cortina-Pérez and **Ana Andúgar** present data from their project in Spain and an analysis from two different perspectives: that of the EFL specialist teacher and the Pre-primary practitioner. There are many similarities. However, EFL specialists appear to prefer communication-oriented strategies and agree with a more language-centred approach while preschool teachers favour child-oriented strategies and a more natural teaching approach, aiming at developing children globally and integrally. They unanimously state that cooperation is the key factor and that there is a need to establish mechanisms to ensure, strengthen and promote this cooperation.

Alexia Giannakopoulou presents a framework for preschool education designed for the needs of change due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She presents the main characteristics of a 'distance learning strategy' in a preschool setting in order to foster continuity of digital teaching and learning. Despite the practical issues that emerged from this distance mode, children remained active in the learning process, teachers and peers maintained their rapport while it appears that this process helped the teachers bond with the children's families.

Thomaï Alexiou presents Pic-lex, a new picture-based vocabulary size test, in both English and Greek, for very young learners up to primary age. This game-like measurement test sketches the vocabulary profile of young learners and relates the scores to CEFR bands. Preliminary studies have shown evidence of good reliability and validity. The paper sheds light on the importance of vocabulary size assessment

in the early years while Pic-lex aims to improve the process of vocabulary testing in young learners and help to provide a model of vocabulary learning. This can in turn work as a tool for monitoring children's progress and designing interventions where needed.

Alternative means of materials are the focus of the next 2 papers. **Natassa Kokla** examines the effect of the cartoon series 'Peppa Pig' on preschoolers' EFL formulaic language acquisition. Results reveal that preschoolers can benefit considerably from merely watching 'Peppa Pig', and explicit instruction can lead to significant formulaic gains. More specifically, the 4-year-old control group doubled and the 5-year-old control group almost tripled their scores compared to pre-tests. The effects appear age-related and older learners generally scored higher than younger ones.

Athanasios Karasimos investigates the potential of using board games with preschoolers in EFL pedagogy. He proposes that every genre can be used to teach a specific language skill (e.g., speaking via board game streaming presentation or developing thematic vocabulary) in CLIL and early language contexts. The author argues that the pedagogical benefits of the approach (such as developing cooperation skills and solidarity, sharing responsibilities and following rules) are also cultivated through the use of board games in the language classroom.

Marina Tzakosta, Chysavgi Dertzekou & Georgia Panteloglou present a framework for teaching the morphology of Greek through the children's story 'Aki-aros-itsa'. The results demonstrated that intervention can facilitate the assimilation of derivational rules and principles. The authors conclude that children's stories provide a natural and efficient way of teaching the morphology of Greek L1. They also emphasise the significance of explicit and focused teaching instruction in the teaching material for the acquisition of the morphological elements, vocabulary and general enrichment of Greek.

Further technological intervention is considered by **Eleni Korosidou** and **Eleni Griva** who adopt a multimodal approach to foreign language (FL) teaching to preschoolers. The implementation of their educational framework showed that digital narratives and multimodal activities provided children with plenty of opportunities to interact in a gamified environment and contributed to developing their listening comprehension skills and foreign language vocabulary. Play-based digital learning activities did keep children's interest and attention high while sustaining positive attitudes towards foreign language learning.

The second group of papers involves learners in primary settings. **Daniela Elsner** and **Astrid Jurecka** show evidence of how technological tools and, more specifically, digital reading pens proved to be useful in a primary foreign language classroom in Germany. They show that digital reading pens are suitable tools for vocabulary learning as they provide students with a reliable "language model". Reading pens may particularly be suitable in homework practice or self-directed study inside or outside the classroom. The authors propose that reading pens may have a positive

effect on students' motivation and autonomy as well as increase in the practice time outside the classroom.

Thomas Zapounidis explores the relationship of chess to CLIL and its benefits for primary EFL contexts. The innovative incorporation of chess in the mainstream syllabus of a primary school in Greece (as it is the case with a number of countries) is well argued in the paper. Multiple benefits of chess on young learners are presented and the proposal of teaching chess in a foreign language in accordance to the CLIL methodology is discussed.

Chloe Mills and **James Milton** attempt to validate Pic-lex in its first pilot version. The picture-based receptive vocabulary test for children speaking English appears reliable and valid and a high correlation was found between Pic-lex and other test scores. In this pilot version, a ceiling effect was noted as well as an effect on frequency scores and the authors offer suggestions for further development of the test. They conclude that the test can have positive implications for vocabulary interventions in several contexts.

Intercultural competence is a virtue discussed in the last two papers. **Ioannis Karras** argues the significance of raising intercultural awareness in teaching young learners in EFL classes. He discusses the impact of intercultural awareness on both teachers' and learners' social identity, as well the multiple implications in foreign language pedagogy. The author advocates the development of an intercultural dimension and sensitivity in school curricula and materials. A list of practical suggestions for EFL teachers who want to develop intercultural awareness is offered so as to integrate an intercultural approach in their young learners' classrooms.

Isaak Papadopoulos and **Joanna Kang Shin** present an educational project that aims to develop young foreign language learners' persuasive strategies using intercultural folktales from South-Eastern Europe. Children in the project made use of their linguistic repertoires in order to communicate effectively and incorporate the desired strategies while the use of folk tales helped them to develop empathy. The authors suggest the promotion of such educational practices in order to raise sensitivity towards cultural diversity.

This volume would not have been possible without the help of academics and good friends who participated in the reviewing process. I would like to express my gratitude to the following colleagues who served as reviewers and helped this volume with their insightful comments:

James Milton, Professor, Swansea University, Wales, UK
Christina Gitsaki, Professor, Zayed University, Dubai, UAE
George K. Mikros, Professor, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar
Bessie Mitsikopoulou, Professor, Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
Danijela Prošić-Santovac, Associate Professor, Novisad University, Serbia
Julie Spinthourakis, Professor, University of Patras, Greece

I warmly acknowledge the help of Prof. Nicos Sifakis, Chief Editor of the Journal whose help was vital in this process and I thank him for his valuable support throughout this effort.

I am also indebted to my colleague, Dr. Vasilis Zorbas who acted as a copyeditor in this volume and he offered very constructive comments.

Aristotle in his work mentioned that it is not clear what the character of education is. He said that 'We need to ask ourselves what virtues are we aiming for in education. Does our education aim to teach a man the useful things in life, the ones leading to virtue or the unnecessary ones?' Languages are far from unnecessary and they are useful indeed. We hope in this volume we will find elements towards cultivating the children's virtues as well.

Thomaï Alexiou (thalexiou@enl.auth.gr) is an Associate Professor at the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. Her expertise is in early foreign language learning and teaching and material development for young and very young learners. She has published widely in the area of SLA pedagogy while she has authored/coauthored books and online resources in the areas of CLIL (CLIL-Prime Erasmus+ programme), dyslexia (DysTEFL2-Erasmus+ programme) and EFL for young learners (PEAP Project). She has recently developed Pic-Lex (2020), a receptive vocabulary size test for young learners.
