

Editorial

In today's global and mobile world, foreign language competence has become one of the key competences for individuals wanting to lead successful professional and private lives. How can one travel, do business, read fiction or non-fiction, compare political perspectives on specific national and world issues, or evaluate research results if one is monolingual? How can one appreciate one's own language and culture without any other to make a comparison?

To become proficient in a foreign language takes time and resources; a generally accepted and verified "recipe" how to master a language has yet to be discovered. However, many policy and decision makers, as well as a number of researchers, believe that children should start learning foreign languages from very early age onwards. Many countries throughout the world have moved initial foreign language teaching from secondary to primary school or even to the pre-school level. Research findings have contributed to the current view that an earlier start is better in the long run if key characteristics of young language learners have been taken into account. Children may progress successfully in the foreign language if the teachers are aware that children have a strong intuitive grasp of foreign language structures, are open to the phonological system, are less anxious, have more time to become proficient in the new language, and learn best where the focus is on the content and not on the language itself. However, the real accelerator for European countries was definitely the Barcelona M+2 recommendation, issued by the European Council in 2002, to teach at least two foreign languages from a very early age onwards and thus ensure that all Europeans are equipped to use three languages, i.e. their mother tongue plus two more languages.

Lowering the starting age of foreign language learning and teaching has become a part of many language policy documents, e.g., the Action Plan for the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity (2003), and other documentations of the European Commission, which strongly recommend the teaching of modern languages to young children. This serves not only to develop their proficiency in languages but also to help them acquire a wider sense of belonging, citizenship and community, and to develop a clearer understanding of their opportunities, rights and responsibilities as mobile citizens of a multi-lingual Europe.

This issue of Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal is therefore one more contribution towards building a complete picture of what it takes to learn, teach and assess foreign languages to young foreign language learners in an efficient and more successful way. The articles attempt to provide answers to

many current and topical questions. For example, what may be the impact of more and more educational policies referring to language learning at the primary level? Can teachers count on the fact that their pupils are steadily motivated to learn foreign languages? How should teachers to young foreign language learners be trained and what are the current practices? To what extent are national assessment instruments intended to measure language proficiency of young foreign language learners valid? What support is needed to enable children to become ready to engage in oral interaction tasks and produce answers and questions?

The first article, *Current Policy Issues in Early Foreign Language Learning*, written by Janet Enever, focuses on the development of policy in relation to language learning at the early primary level of schooling. It offers an introductory discussion of the growth of education policy in Europe and identifies the extent to which the histories of national language policies are being re-shaped by the rise of numerical data and comparison within a newly-formed European education space. The author summarizes most important measures related to early language learning and illustrates the scale of “soft” policy mechanisms available as tools in an on-going process of shaping, adapting and refining policy in response to the continuously shifting language priorities that arise particularly during periods of economic instability. The author discusses the impact of recommendations, reports and indicators developed since the publication of the Lisbon Strategy in European school contexts in the light of a transnational, longitudinal study of early language learning in Europe.

It is of vital importance to assure the quality of early foreign language instruction. The second article, *Teacher Development in Slovenia for Teaching Foreign Languages at the Primary Level*, by two Slovene researchers, Mateja Dagarin Fojkar and Mihaela Brumen, deals with teachers and their professional development as key elements in reaching this goal. Most of the contemporary studies report that there is a global gap between the supply of qualified teachers of foreign languages to young learners and the demand for them. Therefore, the authors discuss some of the models for the initial and in-service training of teachers of foreign languages to young learners across the world, and then focus on a more in-depth presentation and analysis of the training of teachers of foreign languages at the primary level in Slovenia. The results of the comparison of the existing national programmes for teacher development to young foreign language learners in Slovenia highlights important achievements but also a number of issues that need to be re-assessed and researched in further detail. The authors provide the reader with clear suggestions and recommendations for improving teacher training programmes for young foreign language learners.

The next article, *Attitudes and Motivation in Early Foreign Language Learning*, by Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović, addresses young foreign language learners' attitudes and motivations. The writer has based her review paper on many of her own research surveys and other key European studies. The author highlights the importance of both data elicitation techniques and triangulation. Research findings are presented through overviews of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies conducted in different European settings. The writer concludes that young foreign language learners' attitudes and motivations are not stable learner characteristics but change over time, creating layers of complexity that require further research.

The fourth article *A Validation Study of the National Assessment Instruments for Young English Language Learners in Norway and Slovenia* by Karmen Pižorn and Eli Moe is a validation study of two national large-scale tests measuring the language proficiency of 11/12-year-old English learners in Norway and Slovenia. The authors of the paper employed the EALTA guidelines for good practice to validate the tests and, where feasible, to formulate major recommendations for improvement of both assessment instruments. The results of the validation study show that both national tests in English seem to fulfil most of the EALTA guidelines for good practice, although a few issues related to the test construct and test design procedures need to be re-assessed and some changes may be required.

Next is a text on using picture books in the classroom and how to make them meaningful and useful to students. *Constructing Meaning in Interaction through Picture Books*, written by Réka Lugossy, is a qualitative study describing and analysing young language learners' spontaneous comments while sharing picture books during EFL sessions. It also explores teachers' responses to learners' comments, and considers reasons teachers may choose to ignore children's talk in their first language. Data were collected from young Hungarian learners (ages 5–12) and their teachers, through qualitative processes. The main findings give insights into the role of classroom talk in negotiating meaning in the foreign language and in developing literacy.

In teaching young foreign language learners, it is important to be aware of less and more skilled readers. The text entitled *Reading Ability, Reading Fluency and Orthographic Skills: The Case of L1 Slovene English as a Foreign Language Students*, by Florina Erbeli and Karmen Pižorn, is a study examining the difference between less-skilled and skilled L1 Slovene English as Foreign Language (EFL) students in foreign language (L2) fluency and L2 orthographic skills; 93 less-skilled Grade 7 L1 Slovene students and 102 skilled Grade 7 L1 Slovene students participated in the study. The results showed that skilled readers

performed better in all fluency and orthographic skills tasks, This outcome implies that less-skilled readers need to be greatly exposed to L2 language and be ensured necessary opportunities in- or outside the classroom in L2 learning.

Developing and researching speaking skills of young foreign language learners is a much more difficult task than it seems. Magdalena Szpotowicz focuses in her article *Researching Oral Production Skills of Young Learners* on the development of young learners' ability to communicate in a foreign language. An empirical study was carried out to determine whether, after four years of learning English as a compulsory school subject, children are ready to engage in oral interaction in a semi-controlled task and produce answers and questions in English. A convenience sample of ten-year-old children was selected from 180 participants in ELLiE in Poland. Six learners from one class of each of seven schools were selected on the basis of teachers' reports to ensure equal proportions of learners with low, medium and high ability. The results of the Year Four oral test showed that almost all the participating children could respond to questions but only half were able to ask questions. The results suggest that ten-year-old children are already developing their interactive skills and could benefit from more interaction-focused classroom activities.

In the Varia section there is an article *Character Strengths and Life Satisfaction of Slovenian In-service and Pre-service Teachers* written by Polona Gradišek who researched character strengths and life satisfaction of Slovenian in-service and pre-service teachers. The VIA-IS self-assessment questionnaire has been translated into the Slovenian language and has been used for the first time in Slovenia. From the research findings, it can be concluded that professional environment should stimulate, as well as provide support and opportunities for teachers to build not only upon the strengths of humanity and justice, but also on those of wisdom and knowledge. There is a need in the undergraduate level of teacher education for systematic interventions regarding students' intellectual strengths with a special focus on cultivating their creativity.

In the last section a review by Florina Erbeli of a monograph *Teaching Languages to Students with Specific Learning Differences*, written by Kormos, J. and Smith, A. M. (2012, Bristol: Multilingual Matters. ISBN 978-1-84769-620-5) is presented.

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