New Trends in Early Foreign Language Learning
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This volume collects a selection of papers presented at the Conference on “Early Foreign Language Learning in Educational Contexts. Bridging Good Practices and Research” organized by the University of Bari, the University Ramon Lull and LEND (Lingua e Nuova Didattica) and held at the Faculty of Education of the Aldo Moro University of Bari (Italy) in March 2010.

This Conference stemmed from a common interest and desire, that is, to launch an International Conference which could provide a unique and fruitful opportunity to discuss past, present and future theoretical models and research methods related to the didactics of English as a foreign language in Infant and Primary Schools (for our purposes, 3-14 year olds) and to compare experiences among different local, national and European educational contexts.

To this end, we invited scholars and researchers, together with school teachers, to join the Conference in order not only to examine the new language teaching theories and practices from a transnational and intercultural perspective, but also to fill the gap in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in schools and to pave the way for a wider platform of discussion between School and University. Indeed, since these two institutions have often had little or no contact and, as there is excellent work carried out in both, our attempt was to build more solid bridges across their contexts, engaging school practising teachers in ongoing research and bringing everyday classroom reality nearer to university theoreticians in an open exchange forum so that the reflection on teaching and learning practices becomes relevant and rewarding for the participants involved in Early Foreign Language Learning.

With this in mind, we have encouraged the participants in the Conference to vocalize the changes we are all witnessing and to provide with their contributions a valuable insight into how we can teach efficiently in a 21st century classroom.

Drawing on the main topics presented throughout the Conference, this book has been structured around three main thematic areas:
1) the Age Factor,
2) CLIL and Content-based research and practices, and
3) developing intercultural competence: use of the L1 and translation as mediation skills.

Each of these sections encompasses high quality contributions, all informed by salient and recent research, clear and justified theoretical standpoints and good practices which are appealing to an international audience and setting.

Specifically, the first section opens with Celaya’s discussion of the traditional idea of “the earlier, the better” related to introducing foreign languages in the school curriculum. This idea was brought into European classrooms because of findings in naturalistic contexts (second language acquisition), but has not always proved true in formal early foreign language learning contexts. Starting from a brief review of research on the age factor, Celaya focuses on the reasons and requirements for an efficient early introduction of EFL in schools, while exploring relevant research, and, finally, she analyses the different practices that are being implemented to teach EFL at an early age by presenting several recommendations to improve our classes with young learners.

Issues related to the age factor are also developed by Mezzi whose study highlights the different level of competence attained in language learning according to an early or late start in terms of time and quality of the performance. In particular, focusing on the field of lexical competence, she suggests and examines several activities for helping younger learners develop fluency with survival vocabulary related to the communicative function, from single words to storytelling.

The second section leads us to reflections on how these young learners can learn in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) settings. In the introductory chapter, Coyle explores how this methodology can help us reconceptualize the role of language where language is both the object of learning and the medium for understanding and constructing new knowledge. By establishing a distinction between language use and language learning, she discusses how a 4 C’s framework can enable teachers to provide a high quality learning environment for their learners.

The CLIL approach is also adopted by Mallol together with a focus on information and communication technology (ICT) since nowadays both play a crucial role in foreign language teaching and learning. In particular, by presenting her positive experience with digital project work, she shows that it is an efficient way to connect previous knowledge to new knowledge through either autonomous or cooperative work, to motivate students with different topics and to involve students in their own improvement in the
future. As it stands, CLIL implemented alongside social constructivism and connectivism, highlights the extraordinary power of project work to integrate knowledge and extrapolate it to real experiences.

Similar pertinent topics are also investigated by Baldassarre and Paiano in their contribution on digital storytelling (DST) conceived as the practice of combining narrative with digital content, including images, sound, and video, to create a short movie with a strong emotional component. The aim of their work is to integrate digital storytelling in the curriculum to engage early English language learners in creating and improving their language skills: grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading and writing.

A step further into the investigation of teaching tools for early foreign language acquisition is provided by Ippolito who argues that adopting attractive authentic materials such as comic strips can be fundamental to the enhancement of children’s performance in the L2 classroom since they are a form of “multimodal text” in which words and drawings cooperate to shape the narration and interact with other formal communicative means, such as layout, size and shape of panels, balloons, colours and lettering.

The third section is the most heterogeneous since it tackles the multifaceted topic of intercultural competence, which can be explored from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. For example, both González Davies and Leonardi advocate the comeback of the role of L1 and the use of translation in foreign language classes throwing light on their positive aspects when carried out from a communicative perspective, far from Grammar-Translation premises. In their contributions, they present some ideas, activities and projects that can be carried out with young learners to develop both intercultural competence and translation as a skill and as a learning strategy to improve foreign language acquisition (FLA).

Another approach to the study of intercultural competence is provided by Petillo who suggests that using audiovisual products with subtitles in the educational context of Primary Schools can make early English language learners become familiar with the foreign language and culture in an entertaining way. In particular, she focuses on the famous sitcom *Tracy e Polpetta* broadcasted by RAI Educational in Italy and investigates and illustrates the role of subtitling as a fruitful didactic device that exposes young learners to the simultaneous visual and textual presence of both L1 and L2.

With a similar approach to developing intercultural competence among young learners, Lugossy stresses the cognitive, affective and linguistic benefits of telling and listening to stories in Primary classes by presenting
and discussing an exploratory project undertaken by thirty-two Hungarian teachers of English participating in a postgraduate methodology course which enabled them to regard their practice more consciously, embedded in a wider spectrum of social-cultural and educational traditions.

Learning to teach narratives in English Primary classes in order to develop intercultural competence is also investigated by Taronna who aims to understand why and how to train prospective Primary English teachers (PPETs) in cultural diversity concerning the English-speaking communities in the United States through the use of children’s multiethnic literature. The challenge is to integrate children’s multiethnic literature in the classroom as a way to create learning communities that not only acknowledge and celebrate diversity, but also to dispel stereotypes about race.

Teaching interculturality to young learners through the English language is a research aim also shared by Maglie who detects a gap between intercultural theory and practice in the scarce presence of the intercultural component in English Language Teaching coursebooks. To this end, she considers the current literature on teaching EICL (English as an Intercultural Language) which aspires to create a wider range of options for pedagogical practice that can effectively address the challenges that teachers face in teaching English in postcolonial, multinational and global settings. The language textbook concerned with ‘culture’ which is proposed in her article broadens the scope of traditional textbooks from a focus on improving the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking to include a fifth skill, the ability to recognise each other’s culture and appreciate diversity.

A final excursion into the field of interculturality is provided by Corcoll López who introduces the concept of plurilingual and pluricultural competence in reference to the ability to use languages for the purpose of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction. More specifically, she explores how plurilingual competence can be developed by the foreign language teacher in the classroom and in which terms it might be defined when talking about young learners. She illustrates her research carried out in a Catalan school with seven and eightyearolds through several activities that brought together the children’s mother tongue/s (Catalan and/or Spanish) and the foreign language (English).

We sincerely hope that this volume contributes to widen the field of foreign language teaching and learning to include studies on young learners’ perceptions and performance. At the same time, we would like to highlight the decisive new focus on language learning adopted in the 21st century: the inclusion of a wider vision of language acquisition, one that
highlights the relevance of using languages not only to communicate but, more relevantly, to mediate between cultures, as a means to bring together the plurilingual and pluricultural citizens of our future.

Notes

1 This volume is part of a wider project, partially funded by the University Ramon Llull: Ajuts URL Suport Grups de Recerca 200910 and 201011. Also, by the MQD (Millora de la Qualitat Docent) programme granted by the AGAUR (Agència de Gestió d’Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca, Catalan Government), ref. 2010MQD 00139.
PART I.

THE AGE FACTOR:
INFORMED PROCEDURES
FOR VERY YOUNG LEARNERS
CHAPTER ONE

“I WISH I WERE THREE!”: LEARNING EFL AT AN EARLY AGE

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1.1 Introduction

“I wish I were three!”: this exclamation expresses the frustration that many adult learners feel when they try to learn a foreign language. It is also a comment that many parents may make when they enthusiastically listen to their own children singing songs from their English class at school. “I wish I were three!” reflects the idea of “the earlier, the better” which was introduced into European classrooms in the light of findings in naturalistic contexts (second language acquisition) and which, as we will argue in this chapter, has not always proved true in foreign language learning contexts, i.e. in formal learning contexts. The title, therefore, is intended to have two apparently contradictory readings: on the one hand, positive popular conceptions of the early introduction of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the school curriculum; on the other, an informed criticism of the early introduction of EFL in the absence of any further changes to the curriculum.

The chapter is structured in three main parts. First, there is a brief review of research on the age factor and a discussion on the popular idea of introducing a foreign language as early as possible in schools to stress that this policy has not always produced the expected results. Research on the issue of age began with the analysis of the acquisition of first languages in the 1960s with Lenneberg’s Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (1967), which proposed maturational constraints for the normal acquisition of a first language. This was the starting point for research on age and second language acquisition in naturalistic contexts where older second language learners were found to be faster and achieve higher levels
of proficiency in the short term; in the long run, however, those who had arrived in the second language context at an earlier age outperformed Late Starters (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979). These findings were later extrapolated to foreign language contexts, although in some studies this idea has been questioned because of the important differences between second and foreign language learning contexts. Here, we discuss two research projects carried out in Spain in the last decade.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the reasons for the early introduction of English as a Foreign Language in schools, even if against all evidence from research. It is a fact that both learners’ motivation in the English class and parents’ beliefs and satisfaction after the implementation of several pilot projects led educational authorities and politicians to bring forward the starting age for learning English in formal contexts. In this section we discuss the responses from a questionnaire on attitudes to the early introduction of English in the school curriculum.

Finally, in the third part of the chapter we explore the situation in Europe in relation to language learning and analyse some current practices, with special reference to an ongoing European Project promoting the introduction of EFL at early ages. We argue that the policy in place until very recently—that is, advancing the starting age without making any other changes—may not in fact be the ideal way (and certainly not the only way) to increase proficiency in EFL in European countries.

1.2 Part 1

In this first part of the chapter we present a brief overview of what is known as “the age factor” in language acquisition, with special emphasis on foreign, as opposed to second, language acquisition contexts; we will summarize the findings from two research projects carried out in two bilingual communities in Spain, Catalonia and the Basque Country.

As mentioned above, research on the issue of age in language acquisition began with the analysis of the acquisition of first languages in the 1960s with Lenneberg’s Critical Period Hypothesis (1967), which proposed maturational constraints for the normal acquisition of a first language. The case of children who had been found living in isolation and who had not developed language led experts to claim that it was not possible to acquire a language after a certain age. Nowadays, however, it seems that in both first and second language acquisition there are sensitive periods related to the acquisition of different linguistic abilities (Long 1990) (see Muñoz & Singleton 2011 for the most recent critical review on the age factor).
This was the starting point for research on age and second language acquisition in naturalistic contexts (see Birdsong 2005 and Singleton & Ryan 2004 for updated states of the art). It was found that older second language learners were faster and achieved higher levels of proficiency in the short term, especially in morphosyntax; in the long run, however, those who had arrived in the second language context at an earlier age outperformed Late Starters (Krashen, Long & Scarcella 1979). Studying immigrants who had lived in the US for at least five years, Patkowski (1980) found that those who were exposed to the second language before the age of 15 achieved a higher syntactic command than those who had arrived later. Johnson and Newport (1989) correlated the age of arrival in the US with proficiency in English and concluded that age of arrival was the best predictor of second language proficiency.

Such findings were later assumed to be applicable in foreign language contexts, although some researchers questioned this claim on the grounds that there are important differences between second and foreign language learning contexts. The studies in foreign language settings from the 1960s and 1970s that analysed the results of introducing a foreign language in primary school showed that, as in naturalistic contexts, older learners were faster than younger ones, especially in grammar and cognitively demanding tasks, but, in contrast to naturalistic contexts, children did not outperform older learners in the mid or long term (see, for instance, Burstall 1975).

There appear to be several possible reasons for the differences in the findings. According to Muñoz (2008), when analysing the age factor, one must take into account the difference between rate of learning and ultimate attainment in the two contexts. Studies on ultimate attainment carried out in school contexts cannot analyse the same time span as in naturalistic settings. Learners might be followed during their school years but, after compulsory education, they either stop learning the foreign language or their learning experiences differ so greatly that it is impossible to obtain a homogeneous sample. Muñoz (2008) also stresses the different amount and type of exposure to the second language in naturalistic and foreign language learning contexts; with the limited exposure to the language provided in the EFL context, the possible benefits of an early start are not confirmed. However, in Canadian immersion programmes, learners who had started earlier showed higher competence (see, for instance, Cummins 1983), since the contact with the foreign language is greater than in non-immersion. Finally, as noted by Celaya (1991), the different communicative needs that exist in naturalistic and formal learning contexts seem to be decisive in acquisition. A language that is used for real life
communication will be felt as part of oneself: the learner will try to get meaning across and to use all sorts of strategies.

Two large scale projects in two bilingual communities in Spain proved that an early introduction of EFL in the school curriculum does not produce the expected benefits. At the time when these projects were set up, no previous studies had analysed this issue in Spain; EFL had been introduced in schools at an early age, but the decision to do so had been taken without any support from research. Perhaps the educational authorities had been misled by popular beliefs, by research coming from naturalistic contexts, as mentioned above, or by findings in other European countries where both the relationship in terms of typology between learners’ L1s and EFL (an issue often neglected in large scale surveys of results) and the contexts (mass media, for instance) were different.

The BAF (Barcelona Age Factor) Project at the University of Barcelona (see Muñoz 2006 for results) analysed the introduction of English at 8 years old in contrast to the previous educational policy which introduced English at 11. Today, English is compulsory from Primary 1 (that is, at six years of age), although many schools introduce it as early as three years of age. The participants in BAF were learners of EFL from different state funded schools in Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). They were all Catalan/Spanish bilinguals. The Early Starters (ES) began learning English at age 8 at Grade 3 and the Late Starters (LS) began learning English at the age of 11 at Grade 6. The study compared ES and LS, keeping the amount of instruction constant in both groups at three different measuring times (Time 1, Time 2 and Time 3): T1, in the short run, after 200 hours of instruction (ES = 10 years old, Grade 5 / LS = 12, Grade 7); T2, in the mid run, after 416 hours of instruction (ES = 12, Grade 7 / LS = 14, Grade 9) and, finally, T3, in the long run, after 726 hours of instruction (ES = 16, Grade 11 / LS = 17, Grade 12). ES received instruction over a total of nine years, while the LS received the same amount of instruction in only seven. The areas analysed in the project were perception and production skills, oral fluency, vocabulary, morphology, written development, interactional skills, strategy use, narrative development and motivation. Comparison of ES and LS at the three measuring times – even after 726 hours at Time 3 – found that the LS significantly outperformed the ES in most domains, especially in cognitively demanding tasks (see, for instance, Torras, Navés, Celaya & Pérez Vidal 2006).

The study of the age factor in a formal context in the Basque Country (see García Mayo & García Lecumberri 2003 for results) started in 1996; the learners were similar to those in the BAF Project with respect to age and the fact that they were bilingual (Spanish/Basque), although, unlike
Catalan, Basque is not a Romance language and so bears no relation to Spanish. In some of their analyses a third group of learners was also investigated: a group of learners who had started English in Kindergarten 2, at the age of four. The studies also confirmed the idea that it is the older learners that progress faster, and that an early start in a formal context does not guarantee better performance. However, whereas the BAF study had found higher levels of motivation in older learners, the study in the Basque Country found better attitudes and motivation in ES.

As Celaya & Navés (2009) argue, differences between the implicit and explicit learning which is characteristic of children and young adults, and the superior cognitive maturity of the older learners (DeKeyser 2000) might also explain the different outcomes in relation to specific skills. Moreover, it is widely accepted today that adults possess certain characteristics that might aid second language acquisition: learning capacity, analytic ability, pragmatic skills, greater knowledge of L1 and real world knowledge (Saville Troike 2006). Recent research, as Ortega (2009) points out, has found age effects as early as four years – or even at age two – in second language acquisition, indicating that native-like levels only appear in those learners who have been exposed to the two languages from birth. In view of these findings, which may challenge the widely accepted ideal age of 6 for phonology and around 15 for morphosyntax, Ortega argues that advancing the starting age in the school context might not prove useful as far as ultimate attainment is concerned.

1.3 Part 2

As pointed out above, the two projects in Spain yielded different results in the area of motivation and attitude when analysing the early introduction of EFL in Spain. Motivation is precisely the factor that defenders of an early start put forward to claim that young learners are better language learners. Torras, Arbonés & Civera (2007) present excerpts from real classrooms in Barcelona that show this eagerness and enjoyment on the part of children in the EFL class; López Flores (2010) is another example of motivated learners and the importance of the type of activity proposed by teachers.

From the classical studies by Gardner (1985) to the most recent ones by Dörnyei (2005), motivation has been defined as a key factor in second language acquisition. According to Lobo (2004: 11), one of the most widely acknowledged experts on research on teaching young children in Spain, “when motivating children, we are paving the way for their education”. Lobo states that both the teacher and the materials are
important factors for fostering motivation in the classroom. She describes 32 characteristics of the motivating teacher: among them, the motivating teacher likes his/her job, is ready to help the children to grow personally, caters for different needs, abilities and capabilities, has a sense of humour, is open to children’s suggestions, and has a good knowledge of English. As for materials, they must be varied, attractive, interesting, accessible, challenging, encouraging and they must foster creativity and imagination.

As a working document, we designed a short questionnaire and piloted it with five children ranging from 4 to 7 years old and their parents (n = 6). The questions for parents tried to elicit information both on their children’s English classes at school (starting age, hours per week and so on) and on their own conceptions regarding learning English at a young age – something they had been unable to do when they were schoolchildren themselves. For their part, the children were asked orally about their English class, on the language used by the English teacher in class and whether they liked English (See Appendix 1 for the translated version from the original in Catalan into English). The responses showed that all parents were happy with their children learning English at an early age because their own experience with either English or French as the foreign language at school had been unsatisfactory. They attributed this lack of success to the fact that they had started at a later age than their children, and thus supported “the earlier, the better” notion explained in the introduction. However, they did not mention any possible effects of the methodology, the materials or the teacher. Interestingly, though, one of the mothers, a teacher of English, thought that her students learnt faster in the former curriculum design (when they started English at eleven). All the parents gave the same ideas for improving their children’s level of English: more cartoons in English on TV, more summer camps in Spain, stays abroad when they get older, especially if integrated into the school curriculum, and, finally, attending classes after school. As for the children, three of them said English was their favourite subject; they reported doing very similar activities in their English class, irrespective of their age; similarly, when asked to say something in English, all of them produced one word; finally, all of them said their teachers sometimes used Catalan (the L1 usually shared by teachers and students) in class.

1.4 Part 3

More than a decade ago, Torras, Tragant & Bermejo (1997) analysed the reasons why parents wanted their children to learn English very early.
The most widely held belief was that children possessed a sponge-like ability to learn. However, as Muñoz (2002: 66) states “si la esponja no está inmersa en el agua, poco podrá absorber” (if the sponge is not soaked in water, it won’t absorb much), where the sponge is children, who are thought to learn new knowledge almost effortlessly, and the water is English. Surveys such as the Eurobarometer (2005) show that the likelihood of speaking at least one foreign language increases the younger the respondent is (69% in the youngest age group vs. 35% among the oldest group). This might mean that the teaching of foreign languages in school is already yielding positive effects. However, only 36% of the population speak at least another language in Spain vs. 87% in the Netherlands, for instance; out of 31 countries, Spain occupies the 21st position as to the use of more than one language.

At first sight, these figures appear discouraging. Nevertheless, there are two issues which tend to be overlooked in this respect. The first is the linguistic distance between the learner’s L1 and the foreign language. English is closer to Dutch, for instance, than it is to Spanish and many studies have proved that typological relations may affect the learning of a foreign language. The other issue is pointed out by González Davies (2007): even though figures in many European countries are higher than in Spain, the level of proficiency of English in Europe is not as high as one might think: only 24% of Europeans judged their level of English to be very good and 31% thought it was basic.

In spite of the results of surveys, we honestly think the teaching of EFL in Europe is improving thanks, in many cases, to the work, ideas and effort of teachers; we should be encouraged by figures such as the ones provided in the Eurobarometer (2006) where 57% of the respondents think that language lessons at school are the most effective way of learning languages, ahead of items such as conversation exchanges with a native speaker. Flores & Corcoll (2008) state that teaching English at an early age should become a school project involving teachers, school heads and families – not just an isolated idea implemented thanks to the goodwill of a teacher.

At this stage, though, there seems no way to backtrack and to base the curricula on the results of projects that have found no benefits from an early start. Instead, an early start is (or should be) combined with other measures, such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), intensive exposure, immersion, the use of new materials and resources (including new technologies) and, finally, being exposed to the foreign language through the media at home. As Muñoz (2008: 582) states, “an early starting age produces long term benefits when associated with
greater time and massive exposure, as in immersion programmes, but not when associated with limited time and exposure, as in typical foreign language learning classrooms”. Ortega (2009) stresses the fact that both motivation and high quality instructional experience are two necessary components for successful learning to take place. And this is precisely what we should aim at.

There is still a long way ahead, but publications such as *The International CLIL Research Journal*, Coyle, Hood & Marsh (2010), Jiménez Catalán, Ruiz de Zarobe & Cenoz (2006), Jiménez Catalán & Ruiz de Zarobe (2009), Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe (2010), Navés & Victorí (2010) show that CLIL seems to be producing the expected results in foreign language learning. There is a problem, however, in stating that it is CLIL alone that benefits SLA. CLIL classes imply more contact hours with the foreign language, so we cannot know whether the benefits come from CLIL alone, from the higher number of hours compared with regular classes or from the combination of the two factors (see Celaya, 2008; Celaya & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010).

In another direction, several studies have called for a different distribution of the hours of instruction in relation to an early start. Studies in Canadian schools (mainly Quebec: see White & Turner, 2005) demonstrate that intensive classes yield more positive results than classes where instruction in the second language is spread in the typical form of two hours a week. It would be interesting to establish if this is also the case with children in our contexts.

Another action that many parents and some schools (at least in Spain) are taking is to send learners on a (short) stay abroad. In her study of age differences and study abroad contexts, Llanes (2010) found out that, in line with previous studies in BAF (see above) adults outperform children but when children abroad are compared to children at home and adults abroad are compared to adults at home, it is always the children who benefit the most from being immersed in the foreign language (English in this case) especially in measures of fluency and accuracy.

Finally, studies such as ELLiE (Early Language Learning in Europe, 2012), a European project currently under way, are already yielding fruitful results that are likely to improve the teaching of foreign languages in the near future. ELLiE comprises seven countries, Spain among them, and analyses six schools in each country from Primary 1 to Primary 4, with a detailed study of six children at each of the schools through oral tests and interviews once a year.


1.5 Conclusions and the future

Advancing the starting age without making any other changes does not appear to be the ideal way of increasing proficiency in English as a foreign language. Discussing the Spanish context, Flores & Corcoll (2008) state that the early start of English at 3 years old was introduced without any previous analysis of the situation; consequently, there has been no previous teacher training, no analysis of the occasionally low level of English of teachers, and no preparation of specific materials; finally, teaching English at age 3 consists mainly in teaching “one hour of English”. I would add that the process of learning a language is different from that of learning other school subjects and that, therefore, teachers who are “specialists” are needed; it is not enough to know English and to be willing to teach it.

Some experts state that advancing the age might not be enough and have called for other measures. Among them, González Davies (2007) addresses the main problems and solutions in relation to the learning of foreign languages in Catalonia (Spain). She suggests, among others, the following measures for improving the level of English:

- Society should give more prestige to languages. [And, let me add here: to teaching and teachers as well.]
- The educational system should improve little by little and with realistic aims such as the presence of two teachers in the English class and smaller groups. [I would add here that the educational system can also profit from results in the SLA field; more courses on SLA should be offered to in-service teachers.]
- Teacher training (in-service) should be guaranteed by educational policies to promote participation at conferences and seminars.
- The use of English in the mass media (with films in original versions, for instance), if carefully planned and organized, would be beneficial.

However, several reports state that Primary and Secondary Education are currently underperforming in European countries. Why do we expect so much from their English classes? Why does society seem to blame teachers exclusively for the low levels of competence in EFL? Why, after all, are the schools held responsible – what about parents’ interest and involvement? What action can we take to improve our command of foreign languages after compulsory education?
Appendix A

• **Questionnaire for parents**

Do you like the fact that your child learns English at school? How old was he/she when he began?
How many classes does he have per week?
Would you like him to have started earlier? Why? Why not?
Do you think he will know more English than you in the long run? If so, why do you think it will be so?
Have you got any plans for his English? Stay abroad, extra school classes, etc
Have you got any ideas as to how your child’s English could improve?
Has your child’s school taken any special actions in the area of English?

• **Questionnaire for children**

Which of the classes you have at school do you like most?
Do you have English?
Do you like it? Why? Why not?
What do you do in your English class?
Tell me something in English
Does your teacher talk to you in Catalan or in English?

**Notes**

1 This chapter is dedicated to my dear colleague Mia Victorı (a member of GRAL and senior lecturer at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), who did so much for CLIL and SLA research in general and died so unexpectedly last year at the age of only 44.
2 The author, a member of the GRAL research team at the University of Barcelona, acknowledges support through grants FFI201021478 and 2009SGR137.
3 In the present chapter “foreign language learning contexts”, unless specified otherwise, refers to the typical one or two hour a week English class with an average of 25 students.
4 The BAF Project was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education from 1995 to 2003 (PB 940944, PB 970901, BFF20013384).
CHAPTER TWO

BEING YOUNG, BEING ADULT: 
THE AGE FACTOR ISSUE 
FOR VOCABULARY IN FL EDUCATION

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“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone. “It means just what I choose it to mean neither more or less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master that's all.”
—Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

2.1 Introduction: Learning in naturalistic or instructed contexts

After decades of repeating the widespread “dogma” that for learning a second language (L2) “younger is better”, this apparent axiom has, at least, become controversial. Muñoz (2006: vii; 107) points out that this belief was the result of earlier empirical research based on informal observations of immigrants living in natural settings, or of children who, basically, lived immersed in their school settings. So, considering these learning contexts naturalistic or in immersion it is true that if one begins to expose himself/herself to a L2 very early in life, he/she generally attains higher levels of proficiency than those who start later. The problem of this idea lies in its over diffusion and contextual applicability. Indeed, the setting or learning context does not have standard and universal characteristics which are suitable everywhere; the quality and quantity of linguistic and cultural inputs coming from a naturalistic context are continuous and different from those coming from the instructed ones. At school, there is just one setting (the classroom), one interlocutor (the teacher, who hardly
ever is a native speaker) and a very limited amount of time (generally three hours a week).

Furthermore, following Ellis (2001) and Hsiao and Oxford (2002), it can be said that acquiring a language in formal or non-formal environments implies that students’ language learning strategies differ considerably, especially considering different ages of acquisition. The role of the age factor and the hypotheses of the existence of a critical period is a key research area in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. Hernandez, Ping and MacWhinney (2005: 220) point out that “the idea of a biologically determined critical period plays a pivotal role not just in linguistic theory, but in cognitive science as a whole”. Cognitive approaches to and neurobiological explanations of SLA have recently emphasised a distinction between processes interacting in the development of language proficiency in line with the procedural/declarative dimension widely accepted in cognitive science (MacWhinney 2005, Paradis 2004). It is said that young children learn quickly and with little effort compared to the adults’ reduced ability to speak a foreign language (FL) fluently, particularly as far as pronunciation and intonation are concerned. But it is not really so evident and simple. The issues are far from being obvious, as will be shown.

2.2 Learning normally fast or normally slow: theories and generalisations

In studies on second language acquisition (SLA), there are two widespread diffused hypotheses (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam 2009, Fullana 2006, Singleton 2005): the existence of a Critical Period Hypothesis (henceforth CP) and the alternative theories against CP. The first idea is attributed to the neurologists Penfield and Roberts (1959) and Lenneberg (1967). They assume that children who are between 4 and 10 years old (the CP) can learn an L2 more successfully than those who start learning after puberty thanks to the rapid growth of their nerve connections. Thereafter, it would be impossible for languages to be acquired instinctively as occurs in the initial years. In their opinion, the human brain loses plasticity with physiological growth after puberty, and this would explain the impossibility to be highly competent in a L2/FL. But it was with Krashen (Krashen et al. 1979) that possible divergences between older and younger individuals have been inquired into. To investigate between a structural and a temporal dimension, Krashen considered three parameters: route, ultimate attainment and rate. “Route” refers to the course of development, i.e. the order and sequence in which elements (structures, functions) of the
L2 are acquired. The temporal dimension refers to the “rate” at which learners go on along the route of acquisition, and to their “ultimate attainment”, i.e. how far along the route of acquisition they have reached after a given period of time. According to L2 learning research (Nikolov & Dzigunovic 2006, Selinker 2001), L2 learners would learn following a similar natural route of acquisition, but they may differ in terms of rate and ultimate attainment. These scholars argue that post-puberal L2 individuals present faster and better acquisition as to their rate, particularly during the first morphosyntactical phases. In contrast, younger individuals would, at first, be slower, but more successful in their ultimate attainment and more able to reach native-like levels of proficiency. These findings, in a sense, confirm the existence of a CP for second language acquisition. Since then, many other studies have also followed this argument either supporting (inter alia Coppieters 1987, DeKeyser 2000) or refuting (inter alia Bialystok & Hakuta 1999, Birdsong & Molis 2001) the reliability of these scientific data. The presence of these divergent and controversial debates shows an evident lack of agreement on the issue (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam 2009; Long 2005). Up to now, neither causes nor onsets and offsets, nor language domain for a CP have shown universally scientific accepted data. Consensus seems only related to the evidence that age affects language learning in broad terms with pronunciation as the most influenced skill.

In order to understand how these generalisations can be helpful for studying FL learning in instructed contexts, it is important to take into consideration the issue of teaching in formal settings, where the exposure to a FL is very limited. In case of a late start (at the end, or almost at the end of the CP), the individuals would attain a low level of competence during or after puberty. Unfortunately, most studies about CP have only investigated learning in terms of ultimate attainment and only minimally in terms of rate. In other words, the adults may take more advantages along the route of acquisition than non-adults.

According to Krashen et al. (1979), Muñoz (2006) and Singleton & Ryan (2004), there is general agreement about adults’ faster learning as far as the first stages of learning are concerned, such as in the short, differently from younger students, who would, in their turn, be able to reach native-like levels of proficiency. Earlier starters, during the first periods, are supposed to run after the adults, who are more skillful during the explicit, metalinguistic, declarative and analytic learning, as they can count on their more developed cognitive abilities and encyclopedic knowledge (De Keyser 2000: 335). After that time, young learners reach and overtake them, gaining a higher ultimate attainment. It would
therefore be the non-adult’s inductive skills that explain their advantages over the adults, who, upon reaching a certain age, cannot count on their automatic mechanism for learning a language.

2.3. Developing FL vocabulary

Unfortunately, reading material on FL lexical learning is mainly about the general methods and activities to use for developing and retaining the lexis in both early and late time, or about strategies to adopt with older and younger students, mnemonic strategies, word associations, learning styles, transfer. Almost nothing is said about the age factor issues (see Miralpeix 2006). The reasons behind this scientific deficiency are twofold: the essential idea that vocabulary can be implicitly learnt, and the evidence, from a neurolinguistic point of view, that semantic and grammatical functions are neurobiologically different (Neville & Lawson 1992). Paradis (1994: 398) refers that the influence of these two systems seems to be divergent. Patterns of cortical organisation associated with the processing of morphosyntax are altered as a function of age acquisition to a greater extent than those associated with the processing of vocabulary. In contrast, other studies (Burstall et al. 1974: 6970) declare that individuals learn vocabulary and pronunciation more effectively in the first stages of learning a language.

In the investigation of these cases of acquisition of new vocabulary, it is necessary, once more, to distinguish between naturalistic contexts and formal settings. As regards the former, Cummins and Swain (1986) assume that older learners would acquire L2 proficiency more quickly than younger students in the short term; but, at the same time, in other research, Hyltenstam (1992) has shown that early starters will presumably overtake late starters in the long run. As regards the latter, instead, studies have shown that not only do older learners outperform younger individuals in the short run (Stankowskis Gratton 1980), but they seem to do better than the others in the long term, too (Miralpeix 2006). Evidence from these case studies shows that an early start does not necessarily mean better long term performance. The reason is due to adults’ ability to better control their outputs when producing vocabulary.

2.4. Young learners and oral vocabulary of speaking: from imitation and reproduction to production

Since languages are the assumption for professional, social and cultural participation in heterogeneous multicultural contexts, starting to learn a
foreign language early is advisable for many reasons. Teachers can, for example, make the most of children’s enthusiastic and lively aptitude to learning and their minor embarrassment at talking because they are not prevented by inhibition, though they tend to lose interest quickly. When learning a FL, there are then other apparently subordinate factors to consider. The quality of resources (i.e. the room: seating, sightlines, space, light, equipment), the quality of teaching (the teacher’s personal qualities, rapport, the atmosphere generated by him/her; his/her classroom action research), the time of exposure, issues of motivation (kind of activities used, nature of student involvement), cognitive development and intellectual flexibility, possible different personalities, backgrounds and preferences are some of the most important elements to take into consideration (Edelenbos et al. 2006: 22).

Moreover, if it is true that productive use of language in communicative situations needs to be developed from the start, it is also true that teachers are supposed to take into account that, at the beginning, young learners can soon speak, but predominantly by imitating and reproducing simple models of language use. To do this, children must previously be amply exposed to language and listening comprehension. The models of language use that they can apply and adapt have to be suitable to their communicative needs (Legutke ibid: 54). Teachers should therefore be prepared to adapt activities in order to present children with real communicative tasks. In a sense, we should go from matching and completing, reconstructing skeleton texts, mini dialogues and constructions of sentences or short fictional and nonfictional texts to games, storytelling activities, role plays, drama, interviews, sketches. Indeed, Nation (2001: 125) remarks that items need to be practiced as single items and afterwards in flexible dialogues in order to present the students with some element of unpredictability. Several small role plays, based on events of daily life, could be planned about spoken vocabulary knowledge, for example using the lexis for “going to a party”. The aim is to stimulate meaningful interactions in conversations from the start, so that children can learn that mutual understanding can be achieved by means of their constant process of negotiating meaning.

2.4.1 The importance of chunks of language and discourse to learn a FL

Lewis (1993: 15) claims that “fluency is based on the acquisition of a large store of fixed and semi-fixed prefabricated items”. These prefabricated language patterns are better known as “lexical chunks”. They are a set of