



First Interim Report

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ELLiE Research Team

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Interim Findings 2007-2008

1. Introduction

The main aim of this research study is to investigate the development of young foreign language learners, gaining insights into the factors that influence both learners' perceptions of language learning and their responses in schooled contexts, where a quite limited amount of curriculum time is available. Specific research areas are:

- Individual country language policies;
- Factors contributing most effectively to the success of early language learning;
- Children's linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes.

Priority strands of investigation throughout the study are the use of digital media and the teacher's role in early language learning.

This 36 month longitudinal study traces the progress of approximately 1200 primary school children from the age of 7/8 to 10/11 who are learning foreign languages in seven European countries: Croatia, England, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Sweden. In England the study concerns French and Spanish, in the other participating countries the focus is on children learning English as the first foreign language.

Prior to the start of the 36 month project, a smaller team comprising six of the above countries conducted a preliminary scoping study partially funded by the British Council (2006/07). The findings from this study provided valuable insights for the potential of a broader, longitudinal study. This ELLiE project is funded under the European Commission *Lifelong Learning Programme* (01.12.07-30.11.10). The British Council has provided separate funding in support of a research team from Croatia – a candidate country for EU membership. This interim report concerns last year, i.e. December 2007 - November 2008.



2. Key findings

In the first year of the ELLiE the main participants were children aged 7/8. Findings indicate that:

- Children are highly motivated for learning a foreign language at this age;
- Children can give a fair account of their linguistic abilities and their progress in the foreign language;
- School principals, teachers and parents of the project schools positively support the early introduction of language learning and perceive an early start as a relevant factor in children's learning outcomes;
- Positive environment, access to a variety of materials and media, and active involvement in language activities contribute advantageously to children's progress and motivation;
- In terms of teaching approaches, there is a strong emphasis on oracy development in classroom activities.

3. Methodology

The study is innovative in that it aims to be longitudinal and it sets qualitative alongside quantitative data. It investigates a large number of case studies using the same research approach and instruments across seven countries in Europe. Evidence is built in this way from which to draw out strands for transnational analyses.

Participants

Each country has chosen 6 to 8 schools selected from a variety of school types. School selection was based on a convenience sample, allowing for both a socio-economic range and geographical spread within the sample region. Schools in large cities as well as in rural villages are thus part of the sample. Further selection criteria included state funded schools, qualified teachers and classes with a minimum of 50% first language speakers of the national language. In total the study covers approximately 1200 children: in each country a sample of 150-180 children aged 7-8 years was identified. Class sizes ranged from 15 to 30 students. The selected children will be followed throughout the three years of the project. The project is collecting comprehensive data in relation to the language learning experiences of both whole classes of children and of a selected group of 6 focal learners per class.

Data collection and analyses

Data is being collected at two or three points during each school year, synchronized in the seven countries. A multimethod approach is used drawing on qualitative and quantitative research methods, with all countries using the same instruments. Information from participants has been gathered by the following means: standardised questionnaires, individual interviews, classroom observation, listening and production tasks.

The school principals were interviewed to provide background information about each school context. In the first year interviews and questionnaire completion was carried out with all language teachers and class teachers. In addition, all parents were asked to complete a questionnaire about aspects of the home environment relevant for FL learning and exposure to the FL outside school. In each class information about all students was gathered concerning their linguistic and non-linguistic progress. A listening comprehension task and a motivation questionnaire have been administered to the whole class, whilst lesson observations were also conducted. For each of the focal learners individual interviews and production tasks were used and specifically directed lesson observations were carried out.

Analyses involve triangulation of data through different sources and from different participants. In this way findings are corroborated and complement each other to gain a full insight into the learning environment.



4. Summary of findings

The following is a summary of the findings of the project based on the initial analysis of the data gathered during visits to schools in the school year 2007 – 2008.

1. Children's response to foreign language learning

The whole class motivation questionnaire and the focal learners' interview were combined to obtain this information.

- Children are highly motivated for learning a foreign language at this age;
- Children are aware of their abilities and of their progress in the foreign language;
- Children show clear preferences in terms of the foreign language learning environment and classroom activities.

2. Linguistic outcomes

Results on production tasks were viewed in the light of information from classroom observations and teachers' interviews.

- Strong emphasis on oracy seems to have an effect on children's production, particularly in terms of vocabulary production;
- In terms of lexical knowledge, children at this stage produce many more nouns than verbs. They show a developing ability to produce meaningful chunks of language e.g. greetings.

3. Responses of principals, teachers and parents to early foreign language learning

Questionnaires and interviews were used with these participants.

- School principals, teachers and the children's parents positively support early introduction of language learning and perceive an early start as a relevant factor in children's learning outcomes.

4. Learning environment

The teachers' and parents' interviews add information to the classroom observations. The tasks on motivation, listening and speaking were related to this information.

- Teaching is strongly focused on oracy;
- Positive environment, access to a variety of materials and media, and involvement in a variety of language activities contribute to the children's advantageous progress and motivation.

5. Policy

Policy documents from each country shed light on the overall features of early foreign language learning.

- A main variable across countries is teacher qualifications. All countries preferred generalist primary teachers, with an expertise in the foreign language. However, only limited pre-service and in-service foreign language training was available in some instances. Not all countries require a minimum level of language proficiency for primary language teachers. Where stated, this is likely to be at an approximate entry level of B1 (as described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). In some countries a language specialist is more commonly responsible for foreign language teaching at both primary and secondary levels.

5. Next steps

As the children progress to the next year of their primary schooling (age 8/9) the research team will further explore the emerging findings and continue to monitor the key defining aspects of the classroom language learning environment.



Additional Information

ELLiEs research briefs and full reports can be accessed at <http://www.ellieresearch.eu>
Additional information about this research can be obtained from the international project director Dr Janet Enever (ellie.europe@londonmet.ac.uk), or from each of the national project directors, as follows:

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