

Book Review

Early learning and teaching of English: New dynamics of primary English

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Although the changing dynamics of language instruction and acquisition is constantly attracting attention, the diverse angles adopted by the researchers are far from exhausted. While some studies focus on modern trends across different age levels (e.g., Hinkel & Fotos, 2008), others offer a more theoretical overview (e.g., Frankenberg-Garcia, Flowerdew, & Aston, 2011). This leaves researchers specializing in early EFL instruction like myself with a feeling that this dynamically developing area is somewhat neglected. Even though a number of publications deal with the topic of young learners, they mostly offer single glimpses into the nature of teaching and learning English (e.g., González Davies, & Taronna, 2012) or are set in a second, rather than foreign language environment (e.g., Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2003). Therefore, the recently published volume *Early Learning and Teaching of English. New Dynamics of Primary Teaching* has been a long awaited title for anyone scientifically or practically involved in teaching English to young learners.

The book comprises a selection of longitudinal research projects into how English is learnt and taught in Croatian primary schools. The studies were conducted

within the framework of a Croatian national five-year long research project *Learning English From an Early Age: Analysis of Learner Language*. The remarkably wide scope of these studies offers valuable insight into language learning and teaching across a long period of time. Changes reported in the book have not been observed overnight, nor are they a result of chance but rather testify to a dynamics in language acquisition that has been meticulously studied by the researchers over a span of a few years in the reality of a primary classroom.

The volume consists of nine chapters, all of which (with one exception only) were written by scholars from the University of Zagreb, Croatia. Although it may seem rather hermetic, it is fully justified by the fact that all the presented research has been part of a national project. Limiting the scope of the research to one socio-cultural setting might seem to unnecessarily narrow down the perspective. However, the issues raised in the studies and the areas of language acquisition addressed are, in my opinion, largely universal and the findings are applicable to other European contexts.

Each article situates the study within the research tradition of the respective linguistic area discussed, provides relevant empirical evidence and identifies pedagogical implications for practical classroom application. The opening chapter offers an overview of the context in which the study was carried out. It describes briefly the educational policy of Croatia and defines the broad aims of the national project the following studies pertain to. Chapter Two explores the issue of individual differences, focusing on the affective factors and, more specifically, on motivation, attitudes and self-concept. The author investigates the connections between affective factors, age and language proficiency. As a result of a three-year long study, separate trajectories have been determined and correlations between some of the researched factors have proved to be significant. In Chapter Three, emphasis is laid on identifying the importance of pronunciation in contemporary English-as-a-foreign-language primary classroom. This chapter, in my opinion, merits special attention as it offers a fresh, if at times controversial, perspective on how English is perceived by primary school learners, many of whom are defined by the author as “users,” that is, “participants whose proficiency is generally higher than that of their peers, but who do not believe much in formal classes within the education system” (p. 43). Dynamic changes in the availability of exposure to English outside school have influenced students’ perception of what is and what is not useful to them. These beliefs, in turn, affect their willingness to acquire pronunciation models that are native-like but less comprehensible in international communication than their corrupted forms. The author provokes a very interesting discussion of the question whether this tendency of shifting from English as a foreign language (EFL) to English as a lingua franca (ELF) should be promoted (especially in the case of

noncore features) in a language classroom or discouraged in favour of the model native pronunciation. The subject of the study presented in Chapter Four is acquisition of definiteness and indefiniteness markers assessed on the basis of written production. Chapters Five and Six take up the issue of acquiring temporal meanings of grammar structures. The former concentrates on the stages of mastering the ways to express the present through analyses of oral samples from a cognitive (conceptualization, grammaticalization and emergentism) and SLA (crosslinguistic influence and language transfer) perspectives. The latter explores the processes of identifying temporal meanings of present and past verbs in narrative discourse. The focus here is on young learners' acquisition of the meaning of verb forms in context throughout five years of EFL instruction. Chapter Seven investigates conceptual preferences in forming meaning relations. The author examines the process of lexical and structural formation of networks in young learners' mental lexicons. Chapter Nine discusses correlations between an increase in receptive skills proficiency, and individual and contextual factors. In the closing chapter, the author assumes the dynamic systems perspective in order to explore the process of increasing linguistic complexity in oral production.

Undoubtedly, the greatest value of this book lies in its longitudinal approach to the research. The context of primary school education allowed a prolonged study period of the same participants, which enabled the researchers to record individual and group progress across a few years of formal EFL instruction. Such a design offers much better insights into the linguistic processes which were investigated than a short, one-off intervention. The persistence of the researchers is also admirable as they worked on their projects for years rather than months. The overall impression this volume leaves me with is one of a professional analysis paired with genuine care for the young learners' linguistic development. Apart from detailed statistical analyses, some chapters (e.g., Chapter Two and Chapter Seven) also offer much more insightful, in my opinion, qualitative analyses. The authors have been able to observe changes in the role of the classroom teaching caused by out-of-school exposure to the target language and digitalisation of life. Above all, however, they manifest a very open-minded attitude to formal EFL education in primary school context. Their comments reflect strong beliefs in young learners' abilities to process the language more naturally than many teachers expect, a stand that I strongly support. As Geld points out, for instance, "we can easily imagine a young learner of English acquiring a new form and effortlessly attaching it to conceptual content she had acquired in her L1" (p. 151). This is an argument that has been maintained for years, and yet not very widespread especially in lower primary EFL education. Similarly, chapters focusing on grammar, beside scientific data analyses, present explanations of young learners' perceptions of EFL that may for some (especially

teachers) be surprising and inspiring. Narančić Kovač and Milković explain why teachers avoid using more complex structures or what the authors call the “difficult past tense” in primary school context identifying this fear as “the widespread, and sometimes unconscious, misconception that children need to understand the formal grammatical features of certain structures to be able to use them properly” (p. 144). As a result, instead of the natural forms teachers use corrupted or nonnative variation, depriving their students of the challenging opportunity to infer the meaning from the context and to implicitly acquire target language structure.

All the positive qualities of the book described above considerably outweigh its weaknesses. It seems, however, that there are many more other areas worth exploring in the research area of early learning and teaching of EFL. What I missed was a chapter on content and language integrated learning (CLIL), a mode of teaching English very dynamically spreading across primary (and preprimary) education. Other issues, I feel, could have been explored further. For example, the issue of the interference of ELF with native-like model pronunciation teaching could have been broadened to encompass also lexical and structural simplifications. Finally, with the exception of Chapter One, all other studies focused mainly on the linguistic aspects of EFL, neglecting the equally interesting socio- and psycholinguistic issues that no doubt played a part in students’ development.

The approach to researching early learning and teaching of English from a classroom perspective, as illustrated in this book, is an important step forward from current trends of desktop analyses of data sets gathered through questionnaires in less controlled settings. Most of the research findings discussed in this volume have clear pedagogical implications and can inform formal instruction, offering an incentive for a real change in an EFL classroom. This volume offers valuable insight into the nature and dynamics of EFL acquisition and formal instruction from a first-hand experience of a language classroom. It is my sincere hope that this book, a very interesting publication not only for primary EFL researchers but also for in-service and prospective teachers, will be both a refreshing and thought-provoking read.

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