



---

## Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

Department of English Studies, Faculty of Pedagogy and Fine Arts, Adam Mickiewicz University, Kalisz

SSLT 9 (2). 2019. 421-427

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14746/sslit.2019.9.2.8>

<http://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/sslit>

---

### Book Review

#### *Policy and politics in global primary English*

Author:

Janet Enever

Publisher:

Oxford University Press, 2018

ISBN:

9780194200547

Pages:

196

Teaching foreign languages to children, English in particular, has been popular in countries aspiring to benefit from the global economy. With the fall of the Iron Curtain nearly three decades ago, Central-European countries such as Poland, Croatia and Hungary, to name just a few, recognized that competence in foreign languages (FLs) could be the key to catching up with the West. From that time on a substantial amount of research on child foreign language learning (FLL) has been conducted in those countries (e.g., Nikolov, 2009; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006, 2011). Despite the realization that early instruction does not guarantee FL success, early teaching of English is still a widespread global phenomenon, including such diverse contexts as China, Chile, Slovenia, Italy, and Columbia, among others.

The latest book by Janet Enever deftly explains the popularity of the early teaching of FLs, mostly English at the cost of other languages, by scrutinizing the forces behind the educational policy and politics of those countries which introduce early English instruction. Her thesis is that these forces are rooted in the historical and economic past of these countries. As a starting point, she considers

the assumption that a decision to introduce early teaching of English depends on governance in education, that is, understanding who possesses the power to make decisions about education. She observes that this governance is nowadays mainly global as it is held by global organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, or pan-continental bodies such as the European Union. Organizations such as these promote certain policies by sponsoring educational projects and establishing standards for comparison of various educational systems. Needless to say, in such a globalized world the knowledge of English, which is the language of global communication, has become an important asset, allowing individuals to compete on the global market for employment opportunities. Another influential source of power are the voters in each individual country, whose demands should also be considered when forming the educational policy advocated by the ruling party. The demand for early English instruction comes from ambitious, often middle-class parents who perceive early FL teaching as important capital, necessary to equip their children for a better future. This bottom-up motive is often called "parentocracy." Governmental educational decisions are also political and are meant to show that parental aspirations are being taken into account. Enever argues that the introduction of early English instruction should be seen as an outcome of an interplay of global and local politics rather than a research-based educational innovation. The notions of policy and politics and their different manifestations in the contexts of various countries are the recurring theme of this work.

The book consists of two parts, each comprising four chapters. In Chapter 1 the author presents the interdependence of the state, economy and civil society as a framework for the book. Her aim, she clarifies, is to show how educational policy, on the one hand, and parentocracy, on the other, act as forces in different contexts globally, leading to the introduction of English at primary and often pre-primary levels. She introduces the notion of language as human capital. The voices of parents can be heard through the marketization of educational services, that is, the availability of widespread educational offer in the private sector. The key assumption presented in Chapter 1 is that stability in any nation state can be maintained if there is a balance of power between the state, society and the economy. As Enever argues, "for the stability and survival of the state, there also needs to be broad agreement on the potential of economic policy to secure a legitimate future for civil society within the state" (p. 5). Therefore, in shaping a country's educational policy, the aspirations of civil society should be taken into account, envisioning the potential gains such a policy can bring. This recommendation explains how the decisions to introduce primary or even pre-primary instruction are usually political, taking into account societal aspirations or succumbing to the rules of powerful institutions. In the same chapter, Enever observes that

globalization has also affected education in the sense that power is possessed by global forces and manifests itself through comparative global measurement, a good example being the PISA studies (<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>); standardization, as exemplified in the use of the CEFR scales; accountability; policy and pedagogical borrowings. Having reviewed the linguistic and cognitive gains of early instruction, the author signals that early FL instruction has not escaped the aforementioned processes, a theme which is explored further in Chapter 6.

Chapter 2 presents language learning at the primary level in two different contexts: India and Spain. The first example shows the change of attitude towards English in language policy from its being viewed as the symbol of oppression of a former colonial power to its perception as an asset in times of rapid economic growth. This attitude is evident in the promotion of English in education, often at the cost of local Indian languages. Competence in English as a global language is even one of the issues taken into account when choosing a future spouse. The popularity of English has led to the growth of private ELT institutions, which may result in, as Enever fears, an increase in discrepancies between children of different socioeconomic status/castes if no policy measures are undertaken to regulate the process.

The example of India is juxtaposed with the example of Spain, which is shown as a specimen country where a bilingual/English-medium type of education has been successfully introduced in many schools. Nowhere else has CLIL methodology gained such popularity as there, and this was only made possible thanks to clearly supportive educational policy. Schools implementing the methodology were founded with the support of the British Council. However, the author rightly notes the problems that CLIL instruction brings, such as a shortage of competent teachers, problems with exam requirements for children learning in CLIL and non-CLIL settings, lack of support for children joining CLIL instruction, or the occurrence of learning difficulties.

Chapter 3 presents the rationale for the introduction of English at the pre-primary level and descriptions of different contexts. In Europe, an early start is an outcome of documents issued by the European Commission, which lay out the policy of plurilingualism as a means of fostering social cohesion. The countries in focus which aim to pursue this policy at least to some extent, are Italy, Portugal, and Poland. Enever observes that despite official guidelines, there are still problems concerning the availability of highly educated and competent language teachers and the implementation of appropriate methodology for teaching the youngest learners. To set an example, she presents vignettes of kindergartens in Shanghai, where teaching English at the pre-primary level has been quite successful thanks to the city's international position as a port and financial hub, which has led to its multilingual landscape. She shows that in this context

learning English is successfully conducted without the neglect of minority languages, thanks to well-trained pre-primary teachers.

Chapter 4 presents three European countries where early English initiatives were introduced via deliberate policy measures, that is, Poland, Italy, and Sweden. Each of these countries has a different geopolitical past and serves as an illustration of how global forces responsible for introducing primary English materialize differently in each setting, depending on the historical and material heritage.

The second part of the book, Chapters 5 to 8, takes a critical look at global policy and its effect on language teaching and assessment in various settings. The dimensions of global impact include regional soft policy, assessment, accountability, transparency, and standardization in education. The analysis of the different ways global policy is implemented raises doubts as to whether standardization leads to equity in English education, and, consequently, whether it increases the life opportunities of individuals.

Chapter 5 offers an example of regional soft policy, that of the European Union. The author points to enhanced cooperation between European countries in the second half of the 20th century as the beginning of a process referred to as “policy borrowing.” Cooperation and research networks which started as initiatives of the Council of Europe, aimed at promoting language learning and mutual understanding, led to European institutions and projects leading governance in education. This is visible in the activities of such institutions as the European Center for Modern Languages, the introduction of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* or the *European Language Portfolio*, and the implementation of such programs as *Action Plan 2004-06*, *Eurydice* or *Lifelong Learning* (2007-2013). The impact of this soft policy can be evaluated using the examples of Germany and Slovenia.

Chapter 6 focuses on the *Common European Framework of Reference*. The author presents it as a marker of standardization of teaching and assessment, of influence not only in Europe but also across the whole globe. She critically evaluates its impact on the international exam market and specific exams that are offered to ever younger children, without taking into account the dynamics of children’s learning process or their individual predispositions. She also highlights the negative washback effect that particularly high-stake exams have on children, teachers and curricula.

The implementation of the CEFR in other contexts is regarded as an instance of policy borrowing. Vietnam and Uruguay are presented as examples of countries where the CEFR was introduced with disregard for the local teaching philosophies. In the case of Vietnam “economic imperatives are currently directing the country towards neo-liberal policies” (p. 135); thus setting high educational standards and criterion-referenced assessment are means towards this

goal. Conversely, in Uruguay left-wing arguments of equal opportunity and social inclusion through the provision of English language instruction to all are used. In both cases introduction of English curricula based on the CEFR in mandatory instruction was politically motivated, yet investigation of the long-term impact on student outcomes is as yet unavailable.

In Chapter 7, the author continues discussion of the impact of global measurement and accountability. She observes that standardized exams and cross-national comparative indicators are rooted in global governance in education, that is, powerful organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which prioritize neo-liberal economic models in their policies. Since they often give loans to member countries, they expect similar economic models to be implemented by their beneficiaries and require efficiency to be demonstrated by measures of accountability and performance indicators, which leave little freedom for member countries to decide about the shape of education. The new OECD member or aspiring countries of Chile and Columbia are presented to show how their historical and geographical conditions shaped early language learning policy. Chile is presented as generally conforming to the neoliberal policy in education, as it had been exposed to a similar approach in its economy long before joining the OECD, whereas teachers in Columbia are reported to complain about the “growth of an audit culture, which expects [them] to measure and record anything and everything, providing evidence of a quantitative nature for the audit, with possibly less acknowledgement of the quality achieved under difficult circumstance” (p. 155). Another prominent consequence of neo-liberal policy is adopting business language to talk about language education.

In Chapter 8, Enever recapitulates the issues discussed in earlier chapters, positing that, too often, early English learning is introduced as a measure of short-term policy aimed at gaining political power (for example, through gaining the votes of parents), and that such moves disregard the role of learning English, or languages in general. Language learning should be seen as an important form of capital that requires considerable long-term investment. In conclusion, she enumerates clear criteria that should be met if success in early FLL is to be achieved. The factors impacting the efficiency of early language learning are: appropriate pre-service education of teachers with an understanding of early years pedagogy; teachers who are prepared to teach in English and have the ability to speak fluently and confidently at least at the B2-C1 level; and investments in ongoing professional development of teachers.

The global view of the phenomenon of early foreign language teaching is the strongest aspect of this book. The presentation of a number of country case studies where the author presents historical and geopolitical data/facts that might have underpinned the decisions to introduce English early is enlightening.

In all these contexts, the desire to follow global policies encouraged local governments to introduce early English instruction, which was at times in line with parental aspirations.

Showing the socio-political context of language acquisition, which is in line with the current poststructuralist approach to the study of language acquisition (Główska 2015; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), deepens the realization that any educational decisions are the result of hidden agendas of those who are in power and can make them, that is, policy makers, and that teachers, teacher educators, researchers, parents and the like are all but agents of global politics.

The book is well written. It has a clear framework: Each chapter starts with an introduction and finishes with a summary, which help to orient the reader. My only suggestion would be to add a list of abbreviations of global organizations or specialist terms (e.g., WB stands for World Bank and AfL for Assessment for learning) at the beginning of the book. They are usually explained when first mentioned, yet readers who choose to read single chapters or are less knowledgeable about ELT methodology or politics may find the abbreviations, which are used densely throughout book, less accessible.

Despite this small problem, this book should be valued for giving a sound background to understanding the motives behind the introduction of early English instruction globally. It is thought-provoking in the sense that it directly tackles the question whether early instruction is beneficial in all contexts and under all conditions. An important concern that the book raises is the issue of equity, which could guide future policy makers in planning language education in their countries. Specifically, the effectiveness of early language learning programs can be seen only when equal quality of education is provided to all children in the long term, irrespective of their background.

The book is a must read for all researchers considering conducting a research project on early FLL. It helps readers understand reasons behind the introduction of early English teaching, which go far beyond possible linguistic benefits. The conditions which should be met to maximize the benefits are also mentioned, yet, as the author admits, it is not possible to fulfill them due to prohibitive costs and lack of appropriate teacher preparation, which would require serious investment.

Reviewed by  
Joanna Rokita-Jaśkow  
Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland  
*jrokita@up.krakow.pl*

## References

- Główka, D. (2015). Post-structuralist social theories of second language acquisition. *Konin Language Studies*, 3(3), 239-253.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex systems in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nikolov, M. (2009). *Early learning of modern foreign languages: Processes and outcomes*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Nikolov, M., & Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (2006). Recent research on age, second language acquisition and early foreign language learning. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 234-260.
- Nikolov, M., & Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (2011). All shades of every colour: An overview of early teaching and learning of foreign languages. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 95-119.