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## Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

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### Book Review

#### *Early instructed second language acquisition: Pathways to competence*

Editors:

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In a large scale survey of teachers' perceptions of the challenges they face in teaching English to young primary school learners (Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014), some of the key issues that are identified are as follows: teaching speaking, using only English in the classroom, enhancing motivation, maintaining discipline, catering for different individual needs (including special educational needs), dealing with parents, and teaching grammar as well as reading and writing. The relevance of *Early Instructed Second Language Acquisition*, edited by Rokita-Jaśkow and Ellis, is clearly shown by the fact that it addresses most of these central issues.

The book consists of a general introduction and twelve chapters which are organized into three parts: "Early language learning in compulsory instruction," "Pathways to developing early L2 oracy and literacy," and "Pathways to understanding relationships in early foreign language learning and teaching." Part 2 is further subdivided into a section on forms and functions of the second or foreign language (L2) classroom input and a section dealing with pathways to developing

early literacy. Each part and subsection is preceded by an introduction which describes the general background and the specific contexts in which the studies are set. An afterword is provided to bring together the main themes of the individual chapters and to suggest avenues for further research.

In Chapter 1, titled "Policy and practice in early foreign language learning: The case of Poland," Joanna Rokita-Jaskow and Małgorzata Pamuła-Behrens describe the implementation of very early language policy in Poland. The authors show very clearly how a combination of bottom-up influences (e.g., parental motives) and historical context (e.g., joining the European Union) led in 2014 to the adoption of regulations which introduced foreign language instruction for five-year-old children into their final year of pre-primary education. The provision of FL teaching was then to be extended to include even younger children; however, after a change of government these plans were abandoned. As the authors conclude (p. 23), "the motives for making these decisions, as well as further directions in reforms are as yet unknown and difficult to evaluate."

The second chapter in this part of the book concerns instructional practices in pre-primary foreign language [FL] instruction. Sandie Mourão argues that in order to make FL instruction at this level more effective, we need a model in which pre-primary practices are emulated and in which play is a central feature. In the model, circle time, routines and play, which are all elements of early childhood education and care, provide the basis for FL teaching. During circle time and other daily routines children may be first exposed to new language which is then practiced in teacher-led play activities. Central to the model is providing children with opportunities for spontaneous language use and play in specially designed English language areas. These areas need to contain materials used in teacher-led activities so that the children can recreate some of the activities experienced earlier. The examples of interaction between children in a Portuguese pre-primary institution indicate that in such child-initiated play, FL words and phrases are indeed used by the learners.

The third contribution in the collection, "From research on child L2 acquisition of English to classroom practice" by Teresa Fleta, focuses on the acquisition of English morphosyntax by Spanish child learners aged four to eleven, attending a private immersion school in Madrid, in which 90% of the instruction takes place in English. The data that Fleta discusses come from two studies, one longitudinal and one cross-sectional, both of which were conducted in the early 2000s. Fleta examines transfer from Spanish into English, developmental stages for English grammatical constructions, and common English patterns appearing in the children's output. As far as transfer is concerned, she finds that the occurrence of null subjects in children's English sentences is limited. Only limited transfer is also present in the formation of interrogatives: The learners did not invert subjects with

main verbs, as is the case in Spanish, and they followed clear developmental stages. Finally, the children shared structures containing dummy *be* forms.

In Chapter 4, "Spotting the differences between child-child and child-adult interactions: Evidence from Spanish EFL learners at low levels of proficiency," Amparo Lázaro-Ibarrola and Raúl Azplicueta-Martinez examine the interaction that takes place in the above-mentioned types of dyads. There were 20 child participants, who were year-three primary school students, aged eight and nine. They performed story-based pictured placement tasks either with their level-matched peers or with one of the researchers. The authors were interested in the negotiation for meaning (NoM) strategies used by the learners in both arrangements. The main finding that the analysis produced was that there was frequent use of NoM strategies with some significant differences between the modes. To mention just two of them, when interacting with the researcher, the learners more often repeated his production, which, as the researchers argue (p. 95), suggests "a great amount of uptake by imitation of the model." Secondly, in child-child pairs, there was significantly more structural transfer, which testifies to the "risk of structural transfer being reinforced in peer-peer interactions" (p. 96).

The last chapter in the section dealing with forms and functions of L2 classroom input is the contribution by Małgorzata Szulc-Kurpaska, titled "The role of teacher language in a young learner classroom." It is an account of an investigation into teacher and learner language on the basis of recordings made in four Grade 6 classes of primary school in a small town in Poland. The four teachers who volunteered to have their lessons recorded were women in their late twenties, with similar teaching experience (4-6 years). Szulc-Kurpaska investigated own-language use by the teacher and the learners, as well as the functions of teacher language and interactional features (e.g., scaffolding and feedback). The author provides a very detailed description of these aspects of classroom language, performing both quantitative and qualitative analysis. To illustrate, the quantitative analysis showed that teacher language dominated classroom talk, ranging from 82% to 89% of all the words spoken. Furthermore, a sizeable proportion of that language was delivered in the L1, namely from 23% to 55%. Learners' responses were brief and "there were no instances of creativity or spontaneity in their target language use" (p. 121).

Chapter 6 by Renata Šamo opens Part 2 of the book. It is titled "Young EFL learners and their reading awareness: A case study with twins," and it deals with the knowledge and use of reading comprehension strategies in reading narrative texts in L1 Croatian and L2 English. The participants were a boy and a girl attending Grade 5 of primary school in Croatia at the time of the study. Their L1 was Croatian and their L2 English. Šamo used three tools to collect the data: a meta-comprehension strategy questionnaire, L1/L2 reading comprehension

tasks, and self-report questionnaires which followed the reading comprehension tasks. With respect to their performance on the comprehension tasks, both children obtained very high scores. However, their awareness of comprehension strategies differed since the female member of the pair exhibited a higher level of meta-comprehension.

The next chapter, "Effective learning interventions in young children: The impact of critical reading strategies" by Yolanda Ruiz de Zarobe and Maria Victoria Zenotz, is a report on a quasi-experimental study investigating the effectiveness of the teaching of critical reading strategies. The participants were 100 students receiving instruction based on CLIL (content and language integrated learning) in a school in the Basque Country. The students were taught the school subjects through English, Basque and Spanish. In the study, participants in experimental groups in Year 5 and Year 6 received explicit instruction in task-based reading strategies and critical reading strategies respectively. So, for example, in Year 6 the students received training in deciding whether what they were reading was true or not. That was followed by a critical reading test in which the students' task was, among other things, to distinguish "true from false." The critical reading intervention turned out to be effective since the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test, with the difference in scores being statistically significant.

In the final chapter in the section concerning the development of reading skills, "Extensive reading in primary EFL: Can story apps do the trick," Annika Kolb and Sonja Brunsmeier explore the potential of story apps to foster extensive reading in Grade 3 and Grade 4 (aged 8-11) in German primary school. The focus of the chapter is on the ways in which the children make meaning from the text. The data were collected through video recordings, interviews and the children's worksheets. The analysis showed that the children used a variety of comprehension strategies: they made predictions and inferences, and they monitored their comprehension. The child readers also empathized with the characters in the stories, which supported understanding as well. The authors conclude that the "multimodal and interactive nature" (p. 165) of story apps contributes to navigating the meaning-making process.

The part of the book addressing relationships in early FL learning begins with the chapter by Barbara Loranc-Paszyk entitled "Parental perceptions of bilingual primary schools in Poland: The (added) value of English." The researcher distributed a questionnaire among 31 parents whose children attended private primary English-medium instruction schools in the Silesian voivodship in Poland. She also interviewed 15 of the parents who were asked about the advantages of attending bilingual primary level programs and obstacles to such programs, as well as, more generally, about how satisfied they were with the programs and

their children's progress in English. In their responses, the parents referred to two main advantages: immersion in English and having native-speaker teachers. Interestingly, despite these advantages, the parents were not satisfied with the progress that their children were making in learning English. Some of the other concerns that they voiced related to school enrolment policies which allowed admitting beginner level students, inadequate classroom management skills of native-speaker teachers, and insufficient use of English by Polish teachers. As participants' children had only completed year 1 or year 2 of primary school, concerns were also expressed about the provision and the quality of bilingual teaching at further stages of education.

Foreign language learners' parents are also the focus of the contribution by Joanna Rokita-Jaśkow. Her paper, "Parental involvement in very early FL education," explores the ways in which parents support the development of very young learners' EFL skills as well as the correlations between parental involvement and such variables as parents' knowledge of English. The participants were 125 parents of children aged from three to six living in a town in southern Poland. They were given a survey consisting of 35 statements grouped into three categories: learning at home (e.g., reading FL books to the child), parenting (e.g., providing the child with FL educational games), and communicating (e.g., talking to FL teachers). In general, the results indicated a somewhat limited level of involvement on the part of the parents, as evidenced by the fact that the means for most types of activities were below 3.0 on a 5-point scale. As for the correlations, unsurprisingly, it was found that a certain level of FL proficiency is necessary for a parent to engage in various types of activities at home and that parents with a higher level of education were more likely to create a stimulating FL environment for their children.

In Chapter 11, "Investigating the self-concept of children with special educational needs in the context of foreign language learning," Król-Gierat examines how special educational needs (SEN) learners perceive themselves as foreign language learners, whether they like EFL instruction and find it easy or difficult, and whether their self-concept as learners is consistent with their end-of-term evaluation. The participants were 10 Grade 3 primary school pupils with SEN who were asked to fill out a simple questionnaire and to take part in an interview. Information about their progress in English was collected from their teacher. The general picture of SEN EFL learners in the study is quite positive: They mostly enjoyed their English lessons, they found learning English easy or only moderately difficult, and they were able to meet the requirements of the curriculum. However, five of the 10 children provided descriptions of their "academic self-concept" which conflicted with those of their teacher.

The final chapter included in the book is “Power relationships in an early foreign language classroom” by Ewa Guz and Małgorzata Tetiurka. It reports the results of a study which investigated how trainee teachers communicate and negotiate power in a primary school classroom. The analysis is based on 45 video recordings, lesson transcripts and observations. The focus of the researchers was on cases in which teachers failed to establish successful classroom relationships. It was revealed that certain verbal and non-verbal behaviors disrupt communication between the teacher and the children. As a consequence, learners “disengage cognitively, verbally and behaviorally,” which may lead to the teacher losing control of the class (p. 240).

The collection of papers edited by Rokita-Jaśkow and Ellis offers the reader valuable insights into a range of important issues in early FL instruction. It contains studies examining various early FLL contexts by means of a variety of research designs. All this makes it relevant and useful to those involved in the process of providing language instruction to young learners. Rather unsurprisingly, the two general issues which run through many of the papers, and which are also crucial in early FL learning, are those of input and interaction. For acquisition to occur, young learners need large amounts of both input and communicative interaction. The classroom should of course provide large amounts of it; however, it does not always do this, as the paper by Szulc-Kurpaska (Chapter 5) shows. The classroom described by Szulc-Kurpaska, that is, one in which learners do not initiate spontaneous utterances, and where there is little or no creativity in their language production, is not one that we want. However, leaving learners unmonitored to interact for extended periods may not be the best solution either. As Lázaro-Ibarrola and Azplicueta-Martinez make clear in Chapter 4, in child-child FL interactions L1 structural transfer is “abundant.” As they point out, “this finding warns of the risk of L1 structural transfer being reinforced in peer-peer interactions” (p. 96). Research is needed to determine how serious this risk is. Since classroom time is limited, learners need exposure and practice outside formal instruction. One way for learners to experience a foreign language at home is through story apps, which, as Kolb and Brunsmeier show in Chapter 8, “can do the trick” and engage child-learners with different texts. Another option suggested by Rokita-Jaśkow in Chapter 10 is for children to watch L2 educational videos and cartoons, preferably with support from the children’s parents. This suggestion is in line with the proposal offered, among others, by Scheffler (2015), who shows how very young learners can be introduced to English through a TV animated series. While the beneficial role of FL (subtitled) television is generally recognized, a little more controversial seems to be another proposal made by Rokita-Jaśkow and Ellis in the afterword, according to which

parents should engage in “quasi-authentic communication in L2” with their children, following an FL system developed in Poland by Grzegorz Śpiewak, called the DeDOMO method. As pointed out by Scheffler and Wysocka (2013), the main drawback of this system is the fact that it relies on extrinsic motivation because children are rewarded for producing utterances in English. They may also be punished by their parents by not having their requests granted if these requests are made in Polish. This is contrary to what Rokita-Jaśkow and Ellis themselves advocate (p. 245) when they stress the importance of developing and sustaining learners’ intrinsic motivation.

As the brief comments in the previous section indicate, the book clearly has potential to stimulate discussion and further research. It contains good quality research, with only minor issues that could have been presented more clearly or elaborated on. For example, the discussion section in Fleta’s chapter could have been aligned better with the results section and research questions. As it stands, it refers to the acquisition of negation, which is not covered in the description of the results. In Šamo’s paper, the distinction between identical and fraternal twins should have been addressed. The children who are the subject of Šamo’s study are fraternal twins, which means that they are just like siblings born at different times. Finally, the statistical analysis in Rokita-Jaśkow’s paper (Chapter 10) could have been explained in more detail. For example, the statement that the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to investigate correlations “since the statements were of a descriptive character” (p. 197) is not sufficient.

The editors took great care to produce a well-designed volume. The introductory parts, the afterword and the division of the material into three main sections are certainly useful, with just two or three editorial decisions being not entirely clear to this reader. For example, the chapter by Mourão is placed in the part addressing issues in compulsory instruction; yet, the data that are discussed come from a private institution in Portugal where pre-primary children attend English lessons at the initiative of the school director. As Mourão (p. 30) says, “English becomes part of the primary curriculum in Grade 3 (8 years old),” and thus the instructional proposals made, interesting as they are, may not be applicable to teaching provided to older learners in primary schools. Another somewhat puzzling decision was to place the chapter by Fleta in the subsection on classroom input. Fleta focuses on the language that young learners actually produce, for example, how they form interrogative structures in English, so the focus is on output rather than input. Finally, all the data from learners, teachers and parents are either samples of the English language or are related to English instruction. The book is, then, primarily about the acquisition of English in instructed settings rather than early instructed second language acquisition in general, as the title implies. This said, the publication makes an important contribution

to the field and is bound to provide an impetus for research on how children learn additional languages and how they should effectively be taught.

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