

# Pedagogical and Teaching Practices for Young Language Learners: how it all started, some notes.

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## Introduction

According to Figel (2005), in a multilingual Europe, learning foreign languages at an early age can allow people to explore different cultures and get prepared for a potential mobility. Teaching Young Learners has been placed at the center of the research and teaching activity for a number of years now, which entails an increased interest in investigating the pedagogy of teaching young language learners within the school context. Young second/foreign language learners are one of the fastest growing groups of the global populations (Kan & Kohnert, 2005:380).

Teaching young language learners requires a very careful design of teaching instructions and practice, considering various features of young language learners and their general background (e.g. linguistic, cultural, psychological etc.). Given the above, teachers, educators, researchers and policy makers have been dealing with and calling for more specialized focus on the issues that could facilitate teachers' instructional repertoire/behaviour on the one hand, and the learners' language learning experiences on the other hand.

While several countries have exhibited a great interest in teaching young learners, limited cross-cultural research has been carried out in this field. As the countries of South-Eastern Europe constitute a cross - road of languages and cultures, a lot of research has been carried out in this region and a number of educational programs have been implemented,

often making an influence on global research. In other words, SE Countries have a longitudinal character as a bridge for immigrant and refugee populations, giving the region significance of a place with high interest and making it a crossroad of views and ideas passing from one country to another- and, from one generation to another.

## Our study

Appreciating the need and importance of doing research in this region, Dr Isaak Papadopoulos and Dr Vera Savic decided to investigate how young language learners' education is designed and implemented in SE European countries. They designed a detailed questionnaire comprising thematic strands related to language teaching, learning and assessment, which was distributed to teachers in Cyprus, Serbia, Croatia, Albania, Greece and Romania through the valuable help of the National Research Coordinators in each country.

As part of the questionnaire, at first the teachers needed to focus on their prior teaching and educational experience, while special emphasis was placed on their practices with regard to their lesson planning, teaching practice, materials design, assessment of young learners and classroom management in an attempt to cover all the necessary axes of the teaching methodology context. The questionnaire was developed and piloted in Greece with a 10% of the total sample of all the participants in all the countries. In the second phase and following the feedback from the teachers who completed it, the survey questionnaire was further improved following the proposals from the research coordinators in all the countries. The final version of the questionnaire was developed and piloted with the 20% of the total sample of the study coming from Greece. (The questionnaire is presented in the Appendix.)

Based on the above, we do hope that this book will be of great help both from the teaching and research perspectives. The perspectives, the practices and the suggestions that are presented in each chapter can facilitate young learners' teachers, while we also hope that this book will inspire further research on early second/foreign language teaching.

In particular, Chapter 2 presents the way and the extent to which European Language Policy is implemented within the Cypriot context. It offers a descriptive account of the teachers' perspectives with regard to young learners' characteristics and their practices and needs within the classroom.

Chapter 3, the relationship between contextual variables and practising language teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practices in Serbia was explored. The survey results pointed to the fact that the teachers' context-sensitive pedagogical practice was shaped both by the country context and by the teachers' specific teaching contexts, indicating mainly good coordination between language curriculum requirements and the actual practice in state schools.

In Chapter 4, special emphasis is placed on the early foreign language teaching and learning context in Greece. The importance of intercultural dimension in the classroom is highlighted, while a multimodal teaching context and an alternative assessment is proposed as a need and priority for young learners' foreign language development.

In Chapter 5, an attempt was made to present the teachers' perspectives and practices in the Romanian context. In particular, special focus was placed on materials design, development and adaptation, as it is regarded to be one of the most important elements/factors that Romanian teachers are concerned with, and this chapter studies the relationship between educational materials and teaching objectives of the teachers.

In Chapter 6, an extensive analysis of the early foreign language learning policy in the Croatian context was made. In fact, Croatian teachers implied the need for further and more effective training sessions as they underlined the low impact of the recent training programs had on their teaching practices.

In Chapter 7, an attempt was made to delve into the Albanian teachers' perspectives and practices. The teachers underlined the importance of using or adapting educational material that may attract the learners' attention in the language classroom, while they implied the need for alternative assessment for young learners as it is not very usual in the Albanian classrooms.

Chapter 8 is devoted to a reflective account of the findings derived from our study in these countries, highlighting the similarities, the differentiations and the important points to consider.

It is our wish that this book will be of great to teachers, scientists and researchers in this field and it will encourage further research.

# Context-sensitive pedagogical knowledge and skills

## Beliefs and pedagogical practices of English language teachers in Serbia

# 3

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### Abstract

The chapter studies early foreign language learning (EFLL) and teaching in Serbia, aiming to deepen our understanding of teachers' beliefs about children's language learning and to determine how teacher cognition and pedagogical practices are shaped by the country context and by the teaching contexts. Teachers' beliefs are generally found to affect their pedagogical practices and to play a significant role in teaching decisions. The chapter reports the results of an extensive study in Serbia, exploring the relationship among contextual variables and practicing teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practices, and is a part of a wider multidimensional research on policy and pedagogical practices in South-Eastern Europe. The participants were 109 fully qualified English language teachers teaching English to young and very young learners (children aged 3-12), and working in the state and private sectors (55 and 44 per cent respectively). The data were collected via an online questionnaire by applying self-selection non-probability sampling. The results indicate that all the respondents were in favour of EFLL and considered an early start beneficial, mainly for the purpose of raising young learners' intercultural awareness and sensitivity, for developing their FL communication skills and for achieving overall proficiency in a FL. Correlational analysis showed that the age group the respondents taught (very young learners or young learners) and the type of school (state or private) influenced the participants' perspectives

and pedagogical strategies, especially the choice of classroom activities. It has been concluded that Serbian teachers' pedagogical practices are consistent with the accepted current approaches for teaching a foreign language to children, but that there is a discrepancy between curriculum requirements and the actual practice in state schools. The study has implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education and development.

**Key-words:** teachers' beliefs, early foreign language learning, education policy, intercultural awareness, teaching practice.

## Introduction

English continues to spread as the most significant language of international communication, causing a constant proliferation of early English as a foreign language (EFL) learning programmes around the globe (Enever, 2011, 2016; Enever & Moon, 2009; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). Moreover, the children's age of starting formal EFL learning keeps being lowered to the beginning of primary education (age 6-7) or even pre-primary (age 3-5) (Enever, 2011, 2016; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Pinter, 2011). The success of such programmes has been studied for several decades now, resulting in evidence of a number of individual and contextual factors that determine children's achievement in EFL (Enever, 2011, 2016; Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011; Murphy, 2014, 2016; Nikolov, 2009; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006; Pinter, 2011; Rixon, 2013; Savić, 2014; Savić & Stanojević, 2016). As contexts and policies vary across the world, there is a need to ensure that early EFL programmes are sustainably and effectively applied in the language classroom (Enever & Moon, 2009) by providing at least the following five critical preconditions: 1. well-prepared and qualified teachers; 2. well-designed curricula; 3. appropriate quality resources; 4. well-thought out policies; and 5. supportive parents (Enever, 2011; Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016).

A major factor that considerably affects the effectiveness of foreign language learning in the early years of compulsory education is a language teacher. An EFL teacher who possesses appropriate pedagogical knowledge and skills, as well as attitudes and beliefs that favour this age group and promote children's foreign language proficiency and overall development can have a lasting positive impact on children's motivation

for FLL and their FL development (Edelenbos et al., 2006; Enever, 2011, 2016; Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Pinter, 2006, 2011; Savić & Shin, 2016). Studies highlight teacher's roles in the classroom from acting as a role model for a FL, a facilitator of the development of children's language self-confidence and motivation, and an expert in integrating meaningful and purposeful language in everyday language practice (Tragant Mestres & Lundberg, 2011).

Starting from the premise that research which focuses on FL teachers enables us "to develop a better understanding between learning and teaching" (Pinter, 2011, p. 135), the chapter aims to shed more light on Serbian primary EFL teachers' beliefs and attitudes, focusing on their cognition and pedagogical practices shaped by the country context and by their experience. Teachers' beliefs are generally found to affect their pedagogical practices and to play a significant role in teaching decisions. First, the chapter presents a background of the study by reviewing literature related to teaching English to young learners (TEYL), then it describes the Serbian TEYL context, next it explains the study and discusses the results, and, finally, it draws conclusions, proposing pedagogical implications and future research directions.

## **Background of the Study: Literature Review**

Young learners (YLs) are generally referred to as school children aged 5-12 (Shin & Crandall, 2014), 6-12 (Pinter, 2011), or 7-11 (Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011), while very young learners (VYLs) are considered to be pre-school children aged 3-5 (Pinter, 2011) or 0-7 (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). There has been ample literature on TEYL published in the first two decades of the 21st century describing the basic principles of the field drawn mainly from research in educational psychology, psycholinguistics and foreign or second language learning/acquisition pedagogy related to this age group (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2004; Cameron, 2008; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2016; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009, 2013, 2019; Moon, 2005; Nikolov, 2009; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011; Pinter, 2011; Shin & Crandall, 2014).