

Early Foreign Language Learning from the Children's Perspective

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Abstract

Many European children begin to learn a (foreign) language at a very early age, and early foreign language learning has thus evolved into a paradigm that seems to have settled as a steady companion of everyday school life. The aim of this contribution, which addresses the topic of early foreign language learning from the participant's, i.e. the student's, point-of-view, is to determine students' reasons for learning a foreign language, as articulated by the students themselves. The research analysis will investigate the motivational aspects that influence learning, and will also illustrate and interpret the research results of a study in which approx. 300 students aged 6–10 years from 9 different countries participated. The analysis will not be country specific, but will highlight common motivational features that recur in all the students' replies and reveal – as expected – not a linguistic, but a decisively pragmatic focus in the process of language learning.

Keywords: *foreign language learning, children, internal motivation, external motivation*

Introduction

Recent discussions regarding education policies and foreign language didactics held in various European countries have come under the influence of globalization, rapid media development and the EU's responsibility to foster a successful

language and education policy that promotes multilingualism (the formula $M + 2$, i.e. mother tongue + two additional languages) (European Commission, 1995; Guide for the Development of Language Policies in Europe, 2007). These influences also find expression in a common topic: early language learning. Within pedagogic discourse, this subject is highly complex and sensitive, since it is mutually influenced by a range of factors: the learning and teaching processes, individual countries' concepts of (foreign) language learning and, of course, by the learners, i.e. children, themselves.

The aim of this contribution, which addresses the topic of early foreign language learning from the participant's, i.e. the student's, point-of-view, is to determine the reasons for learning a foreign language, especially English and German, as articulated by the students themselves. The research analysis will investigate the motivational aspects that influence learning, and will also illustrate and interpret the research results of a study in which 309 male and female students participated – aged 6–10 years from 9 different countries. The study intentionally sampled male and female students whose mother tongue, i.e. first language (Bulgarian, Croatian, Polish, Slovene, Serbian, Czech, Turkish, Lithuanian or Hungarian), does not belong to the group of foreign languages most commonly taught in Europe. Even though the study participants originate from different countries and even though the reasons for learning a (foreign) language are heavily influenced by both parents and classroom practices, the results reveal similar tendencies.

Early Language Learning

One can state that early language learning is well established in regard to theory, research and ongoing discussion. There are multiple projects, project reports, scientific papers, professional articles, monographs and other documents that thoroughly research and discuss early language learning. Most of these are written in English and address the learning of English at an early age, but their findings can also be transferred to other languages. Noteworthy sources are, e.g., the following: the journals *Early Language Learning* and *Frühes Deutsch* (transl. *Early German*), the FMKS Association (*Verein für Frühe Mehrsprachigkeit an Kitas und Schulen*; transl. *Association for Early Multilingualism in Day Nurseries and Schools*), two major international projects – *ELLiE* (2007–2011) (<http://www.elliresearch.eu/>) and *CLIL-LOTE-START* (2008–2011) (<http://clil-lote-start.ecml.at/>) – as well as a multilingual portal, the *Piccolingo Campaign* (<http://piccolingo.europa.eu>), which was established in 2010 within the framework of the P.A.U. Education project.

Early foreign language learning is already noticeable in practice, i.e., in the Europe-wide implementation of one or even two foreign languages in primary education (cf., European Union, 2012). As noted in *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe, 2012*, in some countries the first foreign language is introduced at a very early age: e. g., in Belgium at the age of 3, in Cyprus and Malta at the age of 5, and in many other countries like Italy, Croatia, Poland, France, Hungary, etc. between the ages of 6 and 9 (cf., European Union, 2012). On the level of language policy, policymaking and teacher education, i.e., on the macro-level, early foreign language learning is uncontentious. The situation on the micro-level, where early foreign language learning occurs, is, however, more complex, since it is more (or less) strongly affected by additional (arguable) influences: e.g., the choice of (foreign) language, didactic approaches, learning and teaching traditions, etc. There are also many other factors, which are as diverse as the individual countries and their respective education systems. Even the prevailing aspects favored by certain countries and their underlying debates differ in intensity. Hence, the study of early foreign language learning remains an important and complex field of research.

The didactics of early foreign language learning is committed to fostering, expanding and optimizing the didactic repertoire, as well as to rejuvenating old didactic approaches with newer, more effective and up-to-date methods (cf., Ellis, 2008; Enver, 2011; Hedge, 2011; František, Pišová, 2013; Bausch, Christ, 2016). Although the current didactic repertoire is governed by methodological eclecticism, Chighini and Kirsch offer a clearer view of how children learn. The authors contend that there are three paths to learning (foreign) languages: narration, immersion and play (cf., Chighini and Kirsch, 2009, pp. 30–42). It is clear that these pathways are child appropriate, and that they utilize children's inherent potential: their joy for learning, natural inquisitiveness, ease of mimicry, expressiveness, zest for action, creative enthusiasm, openness, positive emotiveness and love of movement.

Early Foreign Language Learning and Motivation

Motivation is a factor which greatly influences all forms of learning. According to Mihaljević Djigunović (2012), children's motivation is a "fluid variable"; however, open discussions of this variable lead to important and didactically relevant insights.

In pedagogical discourse, motivation is divided into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. These are two constructs that are difficult to separate, yet are pivotal for the theoretical framework. Intrinsic motivation is mankind's continuous inner

impulse to learn (Oldfather, McLaughlin, 1993, p. 3), which strongly influences a human being's social and cognitive development. Extrinsic motivation is, on the other hand, defined by external factors, which might be self-serving, practical, relevant, wanted or even unwanted. Additionally, motivation can be categorized into instrumental and integrative motivation, too (cf., Gardner, 2001; Gardner, Lambert, 1985; Gardner, Tremblay, 1994). This contrast is another attempt to reduce motivation, which is a complex phenomenon in its own right, into merely two constructs. Consequently, instrumental motivation represents pragmatic, i.e., utilitarian, reasons for learning, whereas integrative motivation reflects an individual's personal interest in learning in order to integrate themselves into society more efficiently.

These two classifications are combinable. Hence, we differentiate between intrinsic instrumental, extrinsic integrative, intrinsic integrative and extrinsic instrumental motivation for learning.

Since the underlying theory of motivation, especially concerning instrumental and integrative motivation, was predominantly defined in the framework of adult learners, the empirical part of this contribution attempts to differentiate only between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational aspects of foreign language learning.

Empirical Research

Research Questions

This contribution sheds light on the reasons given by the participants in the empirical study, i.e., the students, for learning a foreign language, including German, at an early age. The study was inspired by a four-decade old assumption that children are not interested in languages, but in what they can achieve through languages (Halliday, 1973).

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- Which foreign languages are the study participants learning? How prominent are English and German?
- Why are the study participants learning foreign languages? Can the participants' replies be conceptualized and divided into certain categories?

Research Method and Sample

The empirical part was carried out according to the descriptive method. The research sample was non-random (purpose) and consisted of 309 students aged

6–10 years from 9 different countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Slovenia, Serbia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Turkey and Hungary. These countries had been intentionally chosen, since the students' mother tongue, i.e., their first language, does not belong to the group of foreign languages that are most commonly taught in Europe, e.g., English, French, Spanish and German. The replies of English, German, French and Spanish students would be – considering the differences in language status, the speakers' attitude towards other languages, prevalent concepts in language policy and also in regard to the prestige of certain languages – very interesting and most likely different in comparison to these results; however, such research remains (for now) a topic for future study.

It needs to be stressed that the data was gathered in the countries that differ greatly regarding their language policy, teaching and learning traditions. However, the data gathered will not be analyzed in a country-specific manner, since the research sample in the individual countries is too small for that purpose.

Data Collection Procedure

The data was collected in the aforementioned 9 countries and at the schools where the participants (the students and the teachers who were organizationally involved) were willing to participate in the study. The contact in the respective country chose a teacher and a class with students aged 6–10 years. It was required that the students be learning foreign languages and that they be serious about filling in the questionnaire.

A high response rate of inadequately completed questionnaires was taken into account, since children of this age group are not always able to explain their reasoning, and since they have only limited and developmentally varying metacognitive abilities. They are also unable to reply to questions asked in a foreign language, which is why the contacts translated the questionnaires into their native tongues: Bulgarian, Croatian, Lithuanian, Polish, Serbian, Slovene, Czech, Turkish and Hungarian. The contact then translated the children's responses from their native tongue into English.

Measurement Instrument

The study was carried out by means of a questionnaire, which was – regarding the form and number of questions – adapted to the age and perspective of the participants. The questionnaire consisted of two closed-ended questions, a semi-open-ended and an open-ended question with three sub-questions. The measure-

ment instrument was designed according to the measuring characteristics and (especially) according to the participants, i.e., children aged 6–10 years.

Data Processing Procedure

The research results will be presented in the form of tables and discussion. The former expresses frequencies in absolute numbers (f) and percentage (f %), whereas the latter ranks and interprets the study results. The gathered replies form—from a quantitative and topical point of view – a very broad spectrum, which is why individual categories with similar replies were derived.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Participating Children and Their Foreign Languages

Table 1. Frequency (f) of participating male and female students from 9 countries concerning foreign language learning

Countries	No. of par-ticipants	Male	Female	Age (aver-age)	Learners of English Learners of German Learners of English and German Other*	
Bulgaria	35	16	19	10 years	English	34
					German	0
					Eng. + Ger.	0
					Other	1
Croatia	33	13	20	8.6 years	English	16
					German	0
					Eng. + Ger.	11
					Other	6
Poland	31	23	8	7.7 years	English	24
					German	0
					Eng. + Ger.	4
					Other	3
Serbia	31	14	17	9.2 years	English	31
					German	0
					Eng. + Ger.	0
					Other	0

Countries	No. of participants	Male	Female	Age (average)	Learners of English Learners of German Learners of English and German Other*	
					English	German
Slovenia	38	16	22	8.1 years	English	2
					German	16
					Eng. + Ger.	18
					Other	2
Czech Republic	35	19	16	9.7 years	English	24
					German	0
					Eng. + Ger.	5
					Other	6
Turkey	31	12	19	8.5 years	English	0
					German	0
					Eng. + Ger.	29
					Other	2
Lithuania	39	17	22	7.9 years	English	12
					German	16
					Eng. + Ger.	6
					Other	5
Hungary	36	15	21	9.3 years	English	0
					German	30
					Eng. + Ger.	3
					Other	3
Total	309 (100.0 %)	145 (46.9 %)	164 (53.1 %)	8.8 years	English	143 (46.3 %)
					German	62 (20.0 %)
					Eng. + Ger.	76 (24.6 %)
					Other	28 (9.1 %)

Other*: The category "Other" includes participants who are learning a language combination other than English, German or English and German.

As evident from the table, there are 309 participants, 46.9 % male and 53.0 % female, taking part in the study, with an average age of 8.8 years. The comparable figures regarding gender are purely incidental, and even though this factor is an interesting variable in foreign language studies, it will not be investigated further in this study. The table also illustrates the exact figures for the participants from

individual countries—their numbers amount to approx. 30–40 students per country. The languages and figures listed under the different countries depend on the school (public or private) where the study was carried out, on the countries' language policy (first English, then German – if at all – or both languages), etc. A country-specific analysis would be interesting; however, it would require a more differentiated research sample and a different research focus.

The table reveals the following regarding the initial question of which foreign languages the study participants are learning and the prominence of English and German: All the participants are learning foreign languages; most of them are learning English (46.3%), 20.0% are learning German, 24.6% are learning two languages, i.e., English and German or German and English, and 9.1% of the participants are learning a language combination consisting of two or more foreign languages other than English, German or English and German. These other foreign languages, which usually occur in isolation – but which nonetheless influence the participants' language profile – are numerous and interesting. A few examples (as stated by the participants) are: “Brazilian” (the expression was copied from the filled-in questionnaire), Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese, Croatian, Latin, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Slovakian, Slovene, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese. The spectrum of foreign languages being learned by the participants is broad, but the most dominant language is English, followed by German.

Reasons for Foreign Language Learning

The participants were asked to complete the sentence “*I am learning English/ German because ...*” in the questionnaire. The replies were categorized.

Table 2. Ranking and categorization

	Rank	Categories
Motivation	Internal	1 FOREIGN LANGUAGE: (1) English is seen as an important and essential global language. (2) German is seen as a geographically important language.
		2 COMMUNICATION: (1) ... which is understood as interaction between people of the world. (2) ... which is understood as interaction for a certain (work-related) purpose.
		3 LANGUAGE which is deemed pleasing, interesting or beautiful.
	External	1 INSTITUTION which facilitates foreign language learning.
		2 AUTHORITIES which demand foreign language learning.
		3 MEDIA which influence the everyday lives of the participating children.

The individual categories were divided into two major categories: external and internal motivation. Replies which cited external factors (*my mother, the schedule, English as lingua franca, etc.*) as the reasons for learning foreign languages were allotted to external motivation. Replies which relate to the participants or are considered personal (*I want to communicate with many people, I want to travel, I like the language, the language is important for my future, etc.*) were, on the other hand, allotted to internal motivation.

The categories were then ranked according to the occurrence rate: from high- to low-frequency categories. The table shows that the “internal” categories are the most important ones, whereas the “external” categories rank second; after all, “internal” categories comprise two-thirds of all the replies, while “external” categories make up the remaining third.

The replies reveal that the most important reason for foreign language learning is the foreign language itself. Numerous statements emphasize that foreign languages are considered important, essential, decisive and profitable for both the present and the future. Replies that stress foreign languages as means of communication and interaction rank second, whereas replies that emphasize foreign language learning because the learners like the language and deem it beautiful come in third. The latter category applies to English – as expected – more often than to German.

Moving on to external categories, the most dominant of these refer to the *Institution*. Foreign language learning is thus predominantly connected to an institution that offers or demands foreign language learning. The category of *Institution* is followed by *Authorities* (parents, siblings, grandparents and friends) who initiate foreign language learning. At the end of the table and at a much lower frequency rate than the previous two categories is the category *Media* (computer games, movies and music). These findings are a surprise, since the media were expected to have a greater impact on foreign language learning; this assumption was, however, rejected by the data obtained.

The most important findings of the study are, however, neither the rankings, nor the categories, nor the identified foci, but the contents of the categories themselves. The following table (Table 3), thus, illustrates each category with three selected sample statements.

The question “Why are the study participants learning foreign languages?” cannot receive a conclusive answer, since the participants gave a broad range of replies. These cover a range of aspects, and some even combine multiple ones, which is why some statements had to be addressed under two or more categories.

Table 3. Categories along with the participants' word-for-word statements

Category	Example statements: <i>I am learning English/German because ...</i>
FOREIGN LANGUAGE: 1) English is seen as an important and essential global language.	- ... <i>it is spoken/understood everywhere around the world.</i> - ... <i>it is an important/useful/popular language.</i> - ... <i>it is an international language.</i>
2) German is seen as a geographically important language.	- ... <i>German is spoken in Germany/Austria/Switzerland.</i> - ... <i>nowadays one needs to speak more than one language (more than just English).</i> - ... <i>it is a necessity.</i>
COMMUNICATION: 1) ... which is understood as interaction between people in the world.	- ... <i>when I travel with my parents, I can talk about things all by myself.</i> - ... <i>when I travel abroad, I can talk to other people.</i>
2) ... which is understood as interaction for a certain (work-related) purpose.	- ... <i>I will work in England/Austria/Germany.</i> - ... <i>English/German will be important for my future.</i>
LANGUAGE which is deemed pleasing, interesting, beautiful.	- ... <i>I like this language (a lot).</i> - ... <i>it is fun/interesting.</i> - ... <i>it is a very beautiful language.</i>
INSTITUTION that facilitates the learning of English.	- ... <i>I have it on my schedule.</i> - ... <i>my whole class is learning it.</i> - ... <i>it is one of my school subjects.</i>
AUTHORITIES that demand the learning of English.	- ... <i>my father wants me to.</i> - ... <i>my mother said so.</i> - ... <i>I was registered.</i>
MEDIA that influence the everyday lives of the participating children.	- ... <i>I play computer games.</i> - ... <i>I like Disney movies.</i> - ... <i>so I can watch English movies.</i>

Nevertheless, in summary it can be said that: (1) The participants view foreign languages (mostly English rather than German) as a universal means of communication and interaction; (2) Many participants like foreign languages; (3) Foreign languages are being learned for system-related (institutional) reasons; (4) Learning foreign languages is often a matter of authorities; (5) Foreign language learning is (also) influenced by media.

Conclusion

In the theoretical section, early foreign language learning was presented as an important paradigm. Even though its macro-level offers interesting insights for research analysis and language policy, this paradigm is most influential at the micro-level of pedagogical discourse. The implementation of early foreign language learning is rarely discussed; however, the way its aims are implemented in practice – in all its complexity – remains an open, flexible and dynamic field.

The focus of this contribution was directed at early foreign language learning, but this focus was approached from the perspective of the study participants, i.e., children who come from 9 different countries and are learning foreign languages at an early age. The data was statistically processed, analyzed and interpreted in order to enrich this particular research field from their perspective as well. However, this was carried out despite the doubts that the children's statements about early foreign language learning could be (at this age) arguable, easily influenced by their environment and adults. It is worth mentioning that the gathered data—despite the differing countries of origin – was so similar that the students' statements were virtually interchangeable.

Irrespective of their home country, all the participants are learning a foreign language – mostly English followed by German – and many of them are already learning two, generally English and German. There are also some children who at this age are learning three or four languages. From the theoretical and the researcher's point-of-view, one can say that they are making use of the natural potential offered by this particular age.

The children's replies, which were investigated in order to determine the reasons behind and motivational aspects of early foreign language learning, are inclined towards internal motivation. These statements support learning according to the participants' point-of-view and personal reasoning, even though some quite obviously feature influences from “significant others” (*I have to speak other languages and First I have to learn German, then I can learn English, etc.*). The most dominant reasons for learning foreign languages are those which stress the omnipresence of English and emphasize the importance of German. The second group of reasons stems from the simple fact that English is a language which children like. This argument applies to German and other languages as well, although more rarely. The study did not identify the reasons for the huge popularity of English, which is why it remains a field for future study. One could, however, argue that English is more “likable” for the following reasons: it is often featured in the media; the environment advocates its importance; the English didactic materials on offer

are more abundant; linguistic progress is (compared to German) initially much steeper; English sounds “softer” than German, etc.

External motivation is featured in another important yet less sizable group of statements. Although the individual categories of external motivation were nothing unexpected, i.e. institutions, parents and the media, their ranking was nonetheless surprising. Institutional reasons as motivational influences superseded parents, and the media proved to have little impact on foreign language learning. One could, however, speculate that media influence was insignificant because the participants considered English in the media as a means of communication, not an aim—especially not for foreign language learning.

To sum up, the results of the analysis show some common and representative motivational features of early foreign language learning, which are, however, not linguistic, but pragmatic and utilitarian. These findings encourage didactic approaches that promote linguistic functionality – in accordance with the recommendations of the European Council. However, shortcomings still exist and are to be found in practice and in the reality of early foreign language learning, where traditional, language-oriented methods and methodology are firmly rooted.

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