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Parents and Educational Change – the Need for Reculturing Parents In Lowering the Starting Age of Foreign Language Learning

Abstract

Many countries across the world have been lowering the starting age of foreign language learning (FLL) to an earlier age. While the roles of learners and teachers have mostly been studied from a variety of perspectives, learners' parents have often been examined for their opinions of FLL, but not as real partners who need the same amount of 'reculturing' as other involved stakeholders.

In the presented case study, parents were involved in the planning and implementing of lowering the FLL starting age from age 9 to age 6. The results of the questionnaire and the teachers' interviews show that 'recultured' parents' attitudes to lowering the starting age can differ greatly from those of 'non-recultured' parents if the most important variables for the successful implementation of an educational change have been fulfilled. The 'recultured' parents' model can be of great help to decision makers and other stakeholders involved in teaching foreign languages.

Keywords: *young learners, foreign language learning, parent and teacher attitudes.*

Introduction

In the last two decades, many countries across the world have lowered the national compulsory starting age for foreign/second language learning to the start of compulsory schooling. As argued by Johnstone (2009: 33), this can be identified as "a truly global phenomenon and possibly the world's biggest policy

development in education". While issues related to the teacher and the learner have come under close scrutiny and their role in successful foreign language learning (FLL) is undisputed, out-of-school factors in FLL have not been a major concern of policymakers (Lindgren & Muñoz 2013). The presented paper argues that parents' 'reculturing' is of vital importance for such a change to be successful.

The role of parents in educational change

The role of parents in education in general has been widely researched. Parent participation has been observed as a critical variable in determining the child's success at school. Many studies have shown that parents' perceptions have a stronger influence on children's perceptions than children's own perceptions of their achievements or even grades. Furthermore, research shows that parental behaviour and parental orientations have a clear impact on children's behaviour. A large body of research suggests that the way parents raise their children may be more important than the parents' occupation, income or education level (e.g., Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman & Hemphill 1991; Lindgren & Muñoz 2013).

The relationships between parents' attitudes and language learning have been frequently examined. However, parents' influence on their children's FLL is not directly observable, but it is manifold, and therefore of key importance when an educational change, such as lowering the starting age of FLL, takes place. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003: 91) point out that it is the home involvement of parents with their children that matters than any other factor, because it is within this environment that the child builds a positive social and learning self-concept and develops his/her high educational aspirations. More specifically, Young (1994: 85, as cited in Lindgren & Muñoz 2013) observes different ways in which parents can affect their children's FLL in a positive way, from encouraging participation in foreign language (FL) exchange programmes and helping their children with homework, to making the target language country the destination for a family holiday and thus providing opportunities for their children to interact in the foreign language environment. Another variable that has been the focus of parental involvement research is related to the FL proficiency level of the parents. Hewitt (2009) observed several factors that influenced children's listening and writing skills in the FL. The results show that the most significant factors influencing children's language skills are parents' perceived knowledge of English, parents' perceived help with English and the perceived number of times the father and mother helped the child. This study (Hewitt *ibid.*) also highlighted the effects of children's perception of parents' involvement

and proficiency levels on children's FL (English) listening and writing. It is possible that parents who use the foreign language professionally are also more inclined to use it at home when watching TV/films, listening to music or using the internet, or with international visitors and contacts. In such contexts, the use of the foreign language is a natural component of children's everyday life, and something the children would also be inclined to do. Another comprehensive longitudinal study, ELLiE (Enever 2011), provides more evidence of the importance of the parents' role in FLL, demonstrating that parents' use of the FL at work is a significant predictor of children's achievement in listening and reading skills, while their educational level only contributes to the understanding of reading results.

Educational changes have commonly been introduced top-down, whereby the underlying documents and the rationale for the change and its outcome are usually prepared centrally. It is, however, of paramount importance that the educational change is understood and supported by the most important stakeholders. We have been able to follow some less successful attempts to lower the age of FLL, in which the low level of success has been attributed to the lack of teachers with an appropriate level of foreign language proficiency, the lack of teacher training in early FLL methodology, the lack of material resources, discontinuity between the primary and secondary school levels, etc. (Driscoll & Frost 1999; Garton, Copland, & Burns 2011). However, parents have received very little attention in this process.

To a certain extent, it is interesting that the role of parents in lowering the starting age of FL has not been the subject of broad research, as the fact is that if an educational change is to be successful and effective, it must rest on the basic principles of sustainability and partnership, or, in Hargreaves and Shirley's words: "What ultimately bears the weight of sustainable educational change is not an overarching set of government policies and interventions, but people working together as partners around shared and compelling purposes" (Hargreaves & Shirley 2009: 23). Fullan (2011: 70) points out that many educational changes have concentrated on paper changes without considering what the stakeholders actually did and how they interpreted the change. The fact is that parents' actions and their interpretation of lowering the starting age of FL learning has not been the subject of research.

Educational changes may have different forms and may affect larger or smaller areas of education systems. Whatever their scale, they necessarily involve various stakeholders. It is usually teachers and learners who get most attention, while parents are likely to be considered at the initiation stage, when "hot public debates" are likely to fill national media, but seem to be "forgotten" when the educational change starts to be implemented. As Wedell (2009) rightly points out, it is not just a matter of teachers changing their beliefs and practices, or new materials

and equipment being provided; there are other stakeholders at the local level who also need to be taken into account. If this is true, why is it that in most countries decision makers are prepared to hand out questionnaires to parents, asking for their attitudes towards early FLL, yet fail to monitor what happens later in the actual implementation phase?

Method and sample

The case study included parents of pupils from 45 schools (N=1,966), whose children were participating in the two-year project *Implementing Foreign Languages and Intercultural Awareness in the First Triad of the Slovene Primary School (2008–2010)*¹. At the end of the project, a questionnaire (Q1) of 19 closed questions and 1 open question was administered to the parents to investigate their attitudes to FLL, and especially to lowering the starting age of FLL. Data was also gathered using research journals kept by the project leaders, a motivation questionnaire for children, a language progress test, lesson observation and teachers' portfolios. Parallel to this case study, an evaluation study was designed within the project of developing *The White Paper on Education*. It investigated the attitudes of teachers, head teachers and parents to various school issues – the number of lessons per week, the choice of optional subjects, FLL, the languages of migrant students, etc. (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2012) – by means of a questionnaire (Q2), which was administered to 4,138 parents of primary school pupils (age 6–14). For the purpose of comparison, only the parents with children in the first triad (age 6–9) were taken into account in the presented study (38.4%; N=1,560).

Model rationale

According to Wedell (2009), the process of planning and implementing educational change needs to be viewed as a medium to a long-term process whose success, in terms of real changes to the outcomes of student learning, may demand significant changes from participants' practices and beliefs. While ultimately people's beliefs strongly influence their behaviour, people often find it difficult to talk about their beliefs to others without reference to actual practices. Any systems developed to support the many people involved in a change process, therefore, need to be able to provide participants with opportunities to experience new behaviours in action. Only when people have experienced these new behaviours, and hope-

fully seen some evidence that persuades them that they do in fact result in better outcomes, will they seriously question their pre-existing beliefs. Belief change is therefore usually a result of noticing visible positive effects of change.

The educational context of the case study can be described as a small country where foreign languages are very important for the country's economy, tourism and research, but are also perceived as a threat to the survival of the mother tongue. Tensions between the protectors of the mother tongue and more innovative approaches to FLL, such as CLIL, have been present for a number of years (Lipavic Oštir & Jazbec 2009). Therefore, an educational change, such as more FLL instruction in the compulsory curriculum and earlier commencement of FLL, is potentially an issue of heated debate. Furthermore, the case study developers were aware that many parents may be worried about lowering the FLL starting age, as their own FLL experience could differ vastly from the principles and good teaching practice of foreign language learning. Most of the parents started learning a foreign language when they were about 10 or even older, and the teaching approach was predominantly grammar-oriented. Many of them may still feel uneasy about their experience of learning grammar rules and memorising short texts, and of not actually understanding much of what was going on during the lessons or, even worse, being told off for each grammar mistake. We therefore believed that the parents involved in the case study would need a certain degree of 'reculturing' for this large-scale educational change to have any hope of leading to visible differences in actual learning (cf. Wedell 2009).

The process of 'reculturing' involves developing confidence in new practices, which demands an ongoing investment in making the educational change seem worthwhile and relevant to the stakeholders. The 'reculturing' model was based on working with all of the stakeholders involved in the educational change simultaneously. First, foreign language experts from the local and international contexts worked closely with the teacher trainers and in-service practising teachers to plan and implement FLL to 6-year-old children in 45 schools across the country. The FL teachers had been thoroughly trained in teaching FLs to young learners, had participated in regular national and regional meetings to discuss open issues, and had been provided with an interactive platform with a number of teaching resources (visual, audio and video). In addition, two resource books were published during the project. The young learners were regularly observed, and their motivation and FLL progress were investigated.

Before joining the project scheme, each school had to obtain parents' permission. Most of the schools organised a teacher-parent meeting at which the FLL teachers explained the rationale for lowering the starting age in detail, including the inter-

national and national experience of FLL for young learners, the main principles of foreign language teaching (FLT) to young learners, snapshots from classroom practice, links to various FLL resource websites, etc. At some point during the school year, the parents were able to participate in one or more FL lessons and experience the actual learning process. Furthermore, a number of reader-friendly articles on teaching and learning FLs at a very young age were published in various national newspapers and magazines, most of which were intended for parents and the general public.

At the end of the project, a questionnaire (Q1) was distributed among the parents whose children had participated in the project and the results were presented at the teachers and principals' regional meetings across the country and later published in a free e-book.

Findings

The parents' attitudes to introducing FLL in Year 1 (age 6) was measured by two questionnaires (Q1 and Q2), with one group representing the parents involved in the case study (the 'recultured' parents) and the other involving parents who were not part of the case study (the 'non-recultured' parents).

Table 1. The 'recultured' parents' attitudes to the age when their children should start learning a foreign language as a compulsory subject (Q1)

	Class	1	2	3	4	5-9	Total
	Age	6	7	8	9	10-14	
First Triad Parents	Number	1082	157	250	276	52	1966
	%	55.0	8.0	12.7	14.0	2.6	100%

Table 2. The 'non-recultured' parents' attitudes to the age when their children should start learning a foreign language as a compulsory subject (Q2)

	Class	1	2	3	4	5-9	Total
	Age	6	7	8	9	10-14	
First Triad Parents	Number	327	149	314	481	289	1560
	%	21.0%	9.6%	20.1%	30.8%	18.5	100%

Tables 1 and 2 show that there is a significant difference between the two groups regarding the parents' attitudes towards when their children should start compul-

sory FLL. While 55% of the 'recultured' parents believe that their children should start FLL in Year 1, only 21% of the 'non-recultured' parents share this opinion.

When the parents participating in the case study were asked to express their attitude towards whether FLL at the beginning of schooling should be integrated into other school subjects, 60% agreed with this statement, with 13.2% being undecided and 27.4% disagreeing.

Furthermore, 74.2% (N=1,422) of the parents agree that their children should be able to use one more foreign language in addition to English, while 12.1% (N=232) were undecided and 13.7% (N=263) disagreed (Q1). When the same question was asked to the 'non-recultured' group of parents (Q2), only 40.2% (N= 632) agreed with the statement. Of the parents who were part of the 'reculturing' study, 94.3% (N=1,821) believed that they encouraged their child with regard to FLL and 84% (N=1,616) stated that they would like to learn another FL themselves.

The last question in Q1 was an open question inviting parents to express their opinions, suggestions and attitudes with regard to FLL in the first triad of primary school. Responses were received from 185 parents (9.4%), 98.7% of whom gave positive feedback. The parents focused on two issues: the teaching approach and the factors that influence FLL. They supported the following features of the teaching approach:

- learning by playing;
- absence of testing;
- gradual implementation of FLL in existing instruction;
- teachers' adequate consideration of children's interests;
- a variety of activities that help children to develop an ear for languages;
- learning through music, nursery rhymes, songs, cartoons and stories;
- learning vocabulary before grammar;
- FLL as a 'language bath', whereby the teacher only uses the FL;
- learning about English-speaking countries, their lifestyle and customs;
- FLL integrated in other school subjects;
- learning useful language elements, not just, e.g., tenses;
- learning to use simple computer programmes for FLL.

The factors that the participating parents perceived as influencing and enabling the appropriate FLL of young learners are as follows:

- teaching methods and approaches should fit the age of the learners;
- well-qualified teachers;
- ensuring unbroken continuity of FLL from kindergarten onwards;
- FLL as a compulsory, cost-free subject;
- a wider selection of foreign languages.

Parents who were reluctant to lower the starting age of FLL expressed the following fears:

- children would be overburdened;
- children should learn their mother tongue thoroughly first.

Discussion and conclusion

Wedell (2009: 41–42) provides a number of variables that need to be considered when implementing a large-scale educational change. In the following discussion, we will try to evaluate whether some of the factors concerning parents participating in the case study have been considered, and, if so, to what extent.

The first variable relates to the behaviour and attitudes of a very wide range of individuals. Although parents, unlike learners and teachers, are not actually the major stakeholders in lowering the FLL starting age, they may have a strong influence on FLL. Within the present case study, parents have been given serious consideration and their attitudes have been measured and taken into account.

The second variable refers to the fact that there should be as many people as possible who understand the rationale and the main aims of the change. The ‘recultured’ parents, who participated in the case study and therefore had an opportunity to become thoroughly informed about the theoretical and practical background of the educational change, have a much more positive attitude towards lowering the FLL starting age than the parents who did not participate in the case study. It also seems that the ‘recultured’ parents understood the importance of multilingualism in the global world, as two thirds of them agree with the formula $M+2$.

The next variable emphasises the importance of awareness-raising and communication between the various levels of the change process. In lowering the starting age of FLL, it is important to make parents aware of the principles of FLT for young learners, i.e., which approaches, methods and techniques are appropriate for young learners. Communication between FL teachers and parents was frequent, well-supported and open, as confirmed by the parents’ suggestions in the open question in Q1.

The next aspect to consider is that people do not respond to change in a purely rational way, but rather with their emotions. The participating parents were able to express their fears and unresolved issues at the parents’ meetings and through communication with FL teachers. Furthermore, the introduction of new practices requires support over time, and the ‘recultured’ parents not only received a great

deal of support from FL teachers, but also from the special resource materials developed within the period of the case study.

The teaching approach developed by the case study expert team and the in-service teachers was based on widely accepted principles of FLT for young learners, such as the multi-sensory approach, CLIL, TPR, etc. In the current educational setting, CLIL is not appreciated because of its potential 'danger' to mother tongue proficiency, and is not practised at schools due to the constitutional requirement that instruction must take place in Slovene (except in the case of the two recognised ethnic minorities). Therefore, it is interesting and promising to note that the 'recultured' parents do not seem to feel threatened by the CLIL approach, as 60% of them believe that FLL in the first three years of primary school should be integrated into other school subjects.

Another variable refers to new practices, which need to be in harmony with the available teaching and learning materials, and, most importantly, with national high-stakes assessment. The participating parents were able to experience different kinds of teaching materials. Most of the FL teachers in the case study used or adapted materials from other school subjects or created their own special materials and real materials. The exclusive use of FLL textbooks was not favoured.

We know that when people are expected to change their existing visible behaviours and, eventually, the less visible assumptions/beliefs on which these behaviours are based, they may find this threatening, because it may affect other familiar aspects of their lives. As with all educational changes, lowering of the starting age of FLL will succeed only if all of the stakeholders, including parents, are willing to play an active role in helping it happen.

The successful implementation of educational changes is an ongoing process and should not become merely an example of 'symbolic triumphalist action' (Wedell 2009: 18). This means that the change should be seen as a national issue rather than a governmental issue, (Cox & Lemaitre 1999). Unfortunately, this was not the case with the current case study, in spite of its promising results manifested by a new socio-culturally appropriate implementation model of lowering the FLL starting age. A change in government put a stop to the implementation process and, once again, politicians showed that they are not able to put educational investment beyond their own need for political survival (cf. Fullan 2007). However, despite the government's formal termination of the implementation process, an informal network of highly qualified FL teachers, FL experts and advisors, as well as nearly 2,000 recultured parents, have continued their collaborative work using newly created materials and are disseminating their newly acquired knowledge and skills to new cohorts of learners and their parents.

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