

Research and Practice in Teaching Second Language Skills to Young Learners

Editor: Zeynep AMLIBEL-ACAR

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**RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN TEACHING SECOND LANGUAGE SKILLS TO
YOUNG LEARNERS**

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Contact

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PREFACE

In the early 90s, the four-year English Language Teaching programs in Turkey did not include any specific courses on teaching young learners. So, like all teacher trainees back then, I was not able to receive any specialized training on teaching languages to young learners during my undergraduate education. At that time, English as a foreign language was not offered at primary level in Turkish schools either. My first experience with young learners occurred after I graduated from my department in the late 90s. This was due to a law introduced and implemented in 1997, which made learning English as a foreign language obligatory in Turkey at elementary school level grades 4 and higher. As there were no qualified teachers with specific training or experience in teaching this age-group when this law was implemented, English language teachers who had been teaching older students were appointed to young learner classes.

The curriculum was consequently revised and 'Teaching English to Young Learners' was integrated into teacher education programs, with some departments (including at Marmara University) offering an additional course in the subject. While I have not taught young learners for many years, I have been educating pre-service teachers in the department of English Language Teaching at Marmara University for over 16 years, offering Teaching English to Young Learners I and II with great enthusiasm. My interest in teaching languages to children increased after the birth of my daughter in 2014. As I observed her language development, while also lecturing on young second language learners, I began to admire children more and more.

Who are 'young learners'? Various terms are used in the field and this book, including young learner, child learner, early language learner, primary age learner, primary school student, and young person. In my courses and in this book, I use these terms interchangeably to refer to learners between the ages 0 and 12, which is within the age range of childhood and distinct from teenagers and adults.

When inexperienced teachers are employed, they are usually first appointed in young learner classrooms. Yet, despite popular beliefs, teaching young learners is not a simple task and should not be taken for granted. It requires a special kind of professionalism, and necessitates content and pedagogical knowledge, child development information, management skills, first and second language competence, as well as personal skills and abilities. Indeed, for inexperienced teachers, the demands of working with young learners can be quite intimidating. Many have concerns about teaching at this level or feel they are not adequately qualified and would prefer teaching older students. Most often, the main issue is a

lack of familiarity with young learners and their characteristics, and therefore an uncertainty about an appropriate pedagogy. But after learning more about young learners, their perceptions, ideas and beliefs start to change direction.

This book aims to familiarize teachers with young learners and prepare them to become their language teachers. With an understanding of the characteristics of young learners, teachers will be able to develop and refine suitable methods and techniques. It will also provide teachers, future teachers and academicians with theoretical knowledge, present data on children and second language learning and, on the basis of these, offer practical pedagogical suggestions.

The main contribution of this book is its focus on the four language skills. Children learn and use language holistically. It is best, therefore, if the second language skills are presented to them in an integrated manner. However, in the language classroom, an instructor's objectives will usually focus more on one particular skill at a time. This book therefore presents chapters on the four language skills separately. It should be noted that none of the skills is considered more important or more vital than the other.

Each of the following chapters is valuable and contributes to the field; each aims to develop and enhance current knowledge and practices. Chapter 1, written by Çamlıbel-Acar, offers general background information on child cognitive and linguistic development, characteristics of young learners, and material and activity ideas to develop language skills of young learners. In Chapter 2, Derin Atay and Erhan Gülşen explore the listening skill in young learner classrooms and present the use of digital tools in the pre-listening stage of a task, as experienced by students and teachers. Chapter 3, written by Eurydice Bouchereau Bauer, Cori Salmerón and Lydia Carnesale, takes a close look at three studies to examine peer and teacher mediation during literacy instruction in primary grade bilingual classrooms. Chapter 4, written by Evrim Eveyik-Aydın, presents the findings of a case study on fourth graders' selection of reading and writing strategies through think-aloud protocols. In Chapter 5, Georgia Earnest Garcia and Chaehyun Lee demonstrate cases of Korean-American first-graders' home-language use and written translanguaging and provide implications for EFL/ESL contexts. Chapter 6, written by Kamile Hamiloğlu, documents speaking as a productive skill in young learners' language acquisition journeys by visiting significant SLA theories and factors. In Chapter 7, Tuba Kıvanç-Contuk and Belma Haznedar present a study that explores the relationship between writing activities, graded readers and vocabulary learning in the Turkish context. Chapter 8, written by Gökçe Kurt and Şükriye Senger, illustrates a group of young EFL students' and elementary English language teachers' perceptions of Automated Writing Evaluation by Write &

Improve in a private school in Turkey. Chapter 9, written by Joanna Rokita-Jařkow, presents ways of developing speaking skills in a foreign language by young and very young learners, and provides pedagogical guidelines for teaching speaking. Finally, Chapter 10, written by amlibel-Acar, includes various types of skills-related activities for young learner teachers and teacher educators.

I wish the reader an enjoyable read through the chapters and lots of success in teaching and/or researching young second language learners. Teaching languages to young learners is tough but exciting, difficult but fun!

Zeynep AMLIBEL-ACAR
ORCID No: 0000-0002-0382-4852

CHAPTERS AND AUTHORS

Editor: Zeynep ÇAMLIBEL-ACAR

Chapter 1: Children Learning a Second Language and Second Language Skills

Zeynep ÇAMLIBEL-ACAR, Marmara University
ORCID No: 0000-0002-0382-4852

Chapter 2: Use of Digital Tools in Pre-Listening Stage for Young Learners in EFL Settings

Derin ATAY, Bahçeşehir University
ORCID No: 0000-0002-4147-7177
Erhan GÜLŞEN, Bahçeşehir University
ORCID No: 0000-0002-4250-9679

Chapter 3: Peer Mediation During Primary Grade Literacy Instruction in Bilingual Classrooms

Eurydice BOUCHEREAU BAUER, University of South Carolina
ORCID No: 0000-0003-0479-5835
Cori SALMERÓN, Georgia State University
ORCID No: 0000-0003-3334-7783
Lydia CARNESALE, University of South Carolina
ORCID No: 0000-0002-7106-0962

Chapter 4: Elementary School Children's Use of Language Learning Strategies in Reading and Writing

Evrin EVEYİK-AYDIN, Yeditepe University
ORCID No: 0000-0003-3375-4442

Chapter 5: Case Studies of Korean-American First-Graders' Home-Language Use and Written Translanguaging: Pedagogical Implications for EFL/ESL Contexts

Georgia EARNEST GARCIA, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
ORCID No: 0000-0003-4786-7106
Chaehyun LEE, Southeastern Oklahoma State University
ORCID No: 0000-0002-4670-4519

Chapter 6: Speaking as a Productive Skill in Young Learners' Second Language Acquisition Journeys

Kamile HAMİLOĞLU, Marmara University
ORCID No: 0000-0001-5094-8383

Chapter 7: Effects of Writing and Graded Readers on Vocabulary Learning

Tuba KIVANÇ-CONTUK, Bahçeşehir University
ORCID No: 0000-0003-1322-3740
Belma HAZNEDAR, Boğaziçi University
ORCID No: 0000-0002-7025-0158

Chapter 8: Automated Writing Evaluation in Elementary Education

Gökçe KURT, Marmara University

ORCID No: 0000-0002-9022-1258

Şükriye SENGER, Bahçeşehir University

ORCID No: 0000-0003-0649-1608

Chapter 9: Developing Speaking Skills in a Foreign Language By Young and Very Young Learners

Joanna ROKITA-JAŚKOW, Pedagogical University of Cracow

ORCID No: 0000-0002-6272-9548

Chapter 10: Skills-Related Activities for Young Learner Teacher Development

Zeynep ÇAMLIBEL-ACAR, Marmara University

ORCID No: 0000-0002-0382-4852

CONTENTS

Preface.....	iii
Chapters and Authors.....	vii

CHAPTER 1

CHILDREN LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE AND SECOND LANGUAGE SKILLS

Introduction.....	1
Child Development.....	2
Cognitive Development Theory.....	3
Social Interaction Theory.....	4
Moving from L1 to L2.....	4
Characteristics of Young Language Learners and Related Pedagogy.....	6
Use of Language.....	6
Interest in Formulaic Phrases.....	7
Disinterest in Grammar Explanations.....	8
Focus on Meaning.....	8
Desire for Play and Enjoyment.....	9
Being Active and Enthusiastic.....	10
Need for Rules and Guidance.....	11
Need for Balance Between Novelty and Routines.....	11
Second Language Skills for Young Learners.....	12
Listening and Speaking.....	12
Reading and Writing.....	15
Conclusion.....	19
References.....	20

CHAPTER 2

USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS IN PRE-LISTENING STAGE FOR YOUNG LEARNERS IN EFL SETTINGS

Introduction.....	25
Definition of Listening.....	25
Listening in L2 Young Learner Classes.....	26
Intensive Listening.....	27
Selective Listening.....	27
Reactive Listening.....	27
Responsive Listening.....	28
Interactive Listening.....	28

Extensive Listening	28
Stages in a Listening Task	28
Pre-listening.....	28
While-listening.....	29
Post-listening.....	29
The Importance of Pre-listening.....	30
Use of Digital Tools in L2 Listening Activities	32
Online Wall and Presentation Platforms for Songs and Podcasts	33
Video and Voice Sharing Platforms.....	36
Digital Stories	38
Conclusion	40
References.....	42
Appendix A: Use of Padlet for Providing Linguistic Support	45
Appendix B: Use of Mentimeter for Activating the Necessary Background	45
Appendix C: Use of Voicethread for Activating Background Knowledge	46
Appendix D: Use of Writing Exercises or Establishing the Purpose of the Main Activity.....	47

CHAPTER 3

PEER MEDIATION DURING PRIMARY GRADE LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN BILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

Introduction	49
Theorizing Bi/Multilingual Speakers	50
The Early Years: Language and Literacy Learning	52
Taking a Closer Look at Three Studies	55
Discussion	58
Pedagogical Implications.....	59
References.....	60

CHAPTER 4

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN'S USE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN READING AND WRITING

Introduction	63
What are Language Learning Strategies?	64
LLS Research with Elementary School Children	66
A Case Study in Turkish EFL Context.....	69
Training for Think-Aloud Interviews.....	70
Tasks Used to Elicit Data and Data Analysis.....	70
Strategies Observed in the Study.....	71

Strategies Used in Reading Tasks	71
Strategies Used in Writing Tasks	77
Implications for Developing Children's Use of Reading and Writing Strategies	79
References	81

CHAPTER 5
CASE STUDIES OF
KOREAN-AMERICAN FIRST-GRADERS' HOME-LANGUAGE USE
AND WRITTEN TRANSLANGUAGING: PEDAGOGICAL
IMPLICATIONS FOR EFL/ESL CONTEXTS

Introduction	83
Purposes and Research Questions	84
Research Related to Young Bilingual Students' Written Translanguaging	85
Bilingual Students' Translanguaging for School Writing	85
Pedagogical Issues Related to Bilingual Students' Use of Written Translanguaging	86
Translanguaging and Language Support in Bilingual Students' Homes	87
Methods	88
Participants	89
Research Context	89
Data Collection Sources and Procedures	90
Data Analysis	90
Case Studies of Two Students' Home Language Use and Written Translanguaging ...	91
Joon's Home Language Context: Importance of Future Korean and Korean Identity	91
Joon's Written Translanguaging for Communicative Purposes at the Korean HL School	93
Rena's Home Language Context: Prioritized Korean Culture, not Korean Language	96
Rena's Written Translanguaging and Bilingual Identity	97
Discussion and Pedagogical Implications	102
Reflections on the Students' Home Language Use and Written Translanguaging	102
Pedagogical Implications	103
References	105

CHAPTER 6**SPEAKING AS A PRODUCTIVE SKILL IN YOUNG LEARNERS'
SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION JOURNEYS**

Introduction	107
Speaking as a Language Skill.....	109
Children and Early Speaking	111
Speaking from the Perspective of Pedagogical Research	112
Speaking in the EFL Classroom	114
Speaking and Methodological Applications	119
Speaking and Meaningful Input (Meaning-focussed Input).....	119
Speaking and Project-based Learning	120
Speaking and Task-based Language Teaching	121
Speaking and ICT.....	122
Conclusions.....	122
Implications	123
References.....	124

CHAPTER 7**EFFECTS OF WRITING AND GRADED READERS ON
VOCABULARY LEARNING**

Introduction	127
Literature Review.....	128
Writing and Vocabulary Learning	128
The Use of Graded Readers in Vocabulary Learning	131
The Current Study	132
Method.....	133
Participants	133
Instruments.....	133
Data Analysis	136
Results.....	136
Discussion	139
Conclusion	142
Acknowledgements	144
References.....	144

CHAPTER 8
AUTOMATED WRITING EVALUATION IN ELEMENTARY
EDUCATION

Introduction	149
Literature Review	150
Approaches to L2 Writing	150
Feedback in Writing	152
Automated Writing Evaluation	152
Purpose of the Study	153
Methodology	153
Participants and Context	153
Procedure	154
Data Collection and Analysis	157
Findings	157
Students' Perceptions of AWE by Write & Improve	157
Teachers' Perceptions of AWE by Write & Improve	159
Discussion of the Findings	162
Pedagogic Implications and Limitations	165
Conclusion	165
References	166

CHAPTER 9
DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE BY
YOUNG AND VERY YOUNG LEARNERS

Introduction	169
Child Language and Communication Development in L1 and What it Means for L2	169
Cognitive and Affective Limitations in Child Foreign Language Learning	172
Expected L2 Production of Very Young and Young Learners	174
Pedagogical Solutions	178
Games	178
Songs and Chants	179
Stories and Story Apps	180
Role-playing and Communicative Tasks	181
Child-initiated Play	182
Summary	182
References	183

CHAPTER 10
SKILLS-RELATED ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG LEARNER TEACHER
DEVELOPMENT

Task A: Chapter Elaboration.....	185
Chapter 1	185
Chapter 2	186
Chapter 3	186
Chapter 4	187
Chapter 5	187
Chapter 6	188
Chapter 7	188
Chapter 8	189
Chapter 9	189
Task B: Finding Solutions to Problems.....	190
Example	190
Listening Problems	190
Speaking Problems.....	191
Reading Problems	192
Writing Problems	193
Task C: Judging Oneself as a Young Learners Teacher	193
Willingness to Teach Language (Skills) to Young Learners.....	194
Readiness/Competence to Teach Language (Skills) to Young Learners	195
Task D: Developing Action Plans.....	196
Example	196
Writing Worksheet.....	197
Action Plan Sheet	198
Aims	199
Task E: Evaluating Students in L2 Skills	200
Example	200
Student Evaluation Sheet.....	201
Task F: Building a Repertoire of Authentic Resources for Children	202
Authentic Children’s Songs That I Know How to Sing.....	202
Authentic Children’s Books That I Have Read and Can Tell	203
Authentic Children’s Games That I Know How to Play	203
About the Editor and Authors	205

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Zeynep Cumhuri ÇAMLIBEL-ACAR

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CHAPTER 1

CHILDREN LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE AND SECOND LANGUAGE SKILLS

Zeynep ÇAMLIBEL-ACAR, Marmara University
ORCID No: 0000-0002-0382-4852

Introduction

A new language can be gained at any age. In the field of second language (L2) acquisition, the term ‘learning’ is used to refer to formal, systematic, conscious and planned instruction that occurs mostly in classroom contexts, and the term ‘acquisition’ is used for informal, naturalistic, subconscious and unstructured attainment experienced mostly in nonacademic contexts (Johnson, 2001; Krashen, 1982). The original differentiation between acquisition and learning is mainly for highlighting the differences between contexts, but in the young learner classroom, the two concepts are quite intermingled. In this chapter, I will therefore use these terms interchangeably to refer to the process of gaining a new language, and where necessary, specify the intended meaning by describing the context. A further distinction is made between ‘second’ and ‘foreign’ language. Second language refers to a widely spoken or official language in a specific context, whereas foreign language refers to a language that does not have a secondary or official status but is mostly studied as a school subject (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In this chapter, I will generally use the term ‘second’ to refer to any language (second or foreign), learned subsequent to the first language (L1) and, where necessary, specify the intended meaning by describing the context.

There is a wide range of factors influencing the L2 acquisition process, such as motivation, aptitude, social background or attitude. Research in relation to the age of acquisition shows that both adult and child language learners have advantages, in differing ways. However, when all neurological, cognitive, affective and linguistic abilities are compared, young learners seem to outperform adults (Brown, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Munoz & Singleton, 2011; Nunan, 2010).

Given its advantages, the teaching of other languages to young learners has increased significantly throughout the world over the past 20 years (Haznedar & Uysal, 2010; Kırkgöz, 2007; 2010). English is the most widely learned L2 in the world today, and Rich (2019) has described this trend towards younger age language learning as “One of the most significant worldwide reforms of ELT in recent years” (p. 44). Today, the number of children throughout the world learning English in schools as part of their compulsory education exceeds five hundred million (Knagg & Ellis, 2012; Uysal, 2020) with an “unprecedented popularity of teaching foreign languages to young learners in public and private sectors globally” (Rokita- Jaśkow, 2021, p. 2).

Children learn a second language in many different contexts and in various ways. In terms of formal, academic contexts, they may be taught in a public or private classroom by a teacher; they may take private lessons from a personal tutor; or they may acquire the language in a mainstream classroom where it is used as the medium of instruction. Children can also learn a new language in informal, nonacademic contexts. They can hear, use and acquire a new language as they participate in play or communication situations with others who speak that language (most often other children); or they may acquire the language through exposure to media and other materials in their own country or abroad.

Currently, researchers are concerned about how to improve practices in relation to introducing and teaching new languages to young learners in these various contexts. Recent research shows that not all situations are equally advantageous to young learners (Murphy, 2014). Beginning second language education early is not enough: the learning process has to be designed carefully and supported well (Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019). This chapter will present an overview of basic information on young learners, while serving as a general introduction to the book as a whole. It will cover the major theoretical perspectives on child development; first and second language acquisition processes; the main characteristics of young learners; as well as material and activity ideas that help to develop language skills of young learners.

Child Development

There are two directly related and highly influential theories on the understanding and education of young learners; Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory and Vygotsky’s Social Interaction Theory, both of which will be briefly summarized below.