

Vera Savić  
Faculty of Education,  
University of Kragujevac, Serbia  
verasavic035@gmail.com

UDC 37.016:811.111-028.31  
373.2

## CURRENT ISSUES IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT PRESCHOOL: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

**Abstract.** The paper aims to study recent research findings and literature on learning English as a foreign language in kindergarten. It has been a worldwide trend in the present century to lower the age of children’s foreign language learning, and it is now common that children begin learning English as a foreign or a second language even before they start their formal primary education, at the age from zero to 7. Although there has been proliferation of research on preschool English language learning, it remains an under researched field globally. Nevertheless, the most recent studies are shedding more light on this significant area of children’s language learning. These studies deal with the issues of the age factor in English language learning, type of exposure, challenges of bilingual education, teacher qualifications, availability of resources, parents’ role, curriculum development, appropriateness of methods and approaches, and learners’ motivation and attitude. As the field of learning English as a foreign language at the preschool level is developing fast, the paper concludes that more research and experience sharing is needed to help overcome the challenges and enhance the prospects of early language learning for preschool children.

*Key words:* preschool education, preschoolers, Preparatory Preschool Programme, English as a foreign language, challenges and prospects.

### INTRODUCTION

It has been a worldwide trend in the present century to lower the age of children’s foreign language learning, and it is now common that children begin learning a language that is not their native language even before they start their formal primary education, at the age from zero to 7 (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). As a global language, with the largest number of speakers worldwide (calculated at 1.5 billion, of whom only 375 million are native speakers<sup>1</sup>), English now prevails as a foreign language

<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/266808/the-most-spoken-languages-worldwide>

in schools all over the world (Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011), testifying of “a global revolution in education” (Graddol, 2006, p. 70). Moreover, together with literacy in the native language, numeracy, and information technology, English is becoming a basic skill, not just a foreign language that is part of the primary curriculum (Graddol, 2006). Preschool curricula are increasingly following this trend, and in some European countries like Spain, Cyprus, and Poland, English is formally part of the preschool curriculum (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016).

The contexts in which English is taught to children differ greatly (Cameron, 2003). In some parts of the world, such as Great Britain, the United States of America, Canada and Australia, where English is the official language of the community, it is taught to immigrant preschool children as a second language, relevant to their everyday life and as a language of instruction in their future primary-school education. English is also taught as a second language to non-English speaking children in kindergartens in countries like India or Hong Kong, where it is the official language and the language of higher education. But, in many parts of the world English has no immediate relevance for children, and is therefore taught as a foreign language, both formally and informally. This is the case of Serbia as well, where English is not part of the formal preschool curriculum, but is often taught to various preschool age groups.

Preschool education in Serbia became compulsory from the school year 2006/2007 as the programme known under the title Preparatory Preschool Programme (PPP) (UNICEF, 2012). It involves “approximately 90% of children aged 5.5 to 6.5” (UNICEF, 2012, p. 9). In the report on early childhood education in Serbia, UNICEF (2012) stresses the importance and value of preschool education for children’s development and for improving “health, success in education, labour productivity and even the nation’s prosperity and competitiveness in the long run” (p. 21). However, the Preparatory Preschool Programme does not involve compulsory foreign language study, nor does the non-obligatory kindergarten programme for children aged 3 to 5.5 (Nacionalni prosvetni savet, 2006). Nevertheless, optional preschool foreign language courses have been offered for decades by preschool institutions in Serbia, both by the state and private ones. The modern foreign language offered most often is English, though German and French can also be learned by children. Such courses seem to be popular with parents and children, as are a number of bilingual programmes offered mostly by privately owned kindergartens. However, so far there have been no published studies of either the methods used or the effectiveness of these programmes in Serbia.

Although there has been proliferation of research on preschool English language learning, it remains an underresearched field globally. Nevertheless, the most recent studies are shedding more light on this significant area of children's language learning. These studies deal with the issues of the age factor in English language learning in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings (Murphy and Evangelou, 2016), type of exposure, challenges of bilingual education, teacher qualifications, availability of resources, parents' role, curriculum development, appropriateness of methods and approaches applied, and learners' motivation and attitude. The paper explores recent studies dealing with these current issues of learning English as a foreign language at the preschool level.

## CURRENT ISSUES: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

### Learners' age

The appropriate age of starting foreign language learning has remained controversial in research studies. There has been a common belief that the earlier children start learning a foreign language, the better. It was supported by the 'critical period hypothesis' which argued that in order to achieve native-like proficiency, children have to start learning a foreign language before puberty. Although there has been evidence showing that adult learners are also able to attain native-like proficiency, and that variables like cognitive aptitude and beliefs about oneself correlate with success in second or foreign language learning more strongly than age (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000), the belief that children will benefit from an early start is still very powerful. Pinter (2006) suggests several benefits from early foreign language learning, such as development of children's basic communication abilities in English and native-like pronunciation, encouragement of enjoyment, motivation, learning about other cultures, 'learning to learn', as well as the development of children's cognitive skills and metalinguistic awareness. For Rosembuch (1995), one of the benefits indicated by research is development of positive attitudes towards diversity. However, Nunan (1999) warns that there are disadvantages and pitfalls of an early start. He expresses doubts that 'younger equals better', drawing attention to a number of factors that affect foreign language learning at young age, such as careful planning, supporting, monitoring and evaluation of the language programmes. Furthermore, the policy of early language introduction should be supported by high-quality materi-

als, adequately and appropriately trained teachers, and favourable public attitudes (Nunan, 1999). In conclusion, early start is beneficial under certain conditions, making the context of early language learning more important than the learners' age. This is in line with the conclusions of the report by Evangelou and colleagues (2009), who have reported that contextual factors, i.e. supportive environments, cultural and social context, have been found crucial for a child's development and learning.

In the most recent publication on preschool foreign language learning, Murphy and Evangelou (2016) point out that "that there is no research carried out in the instructed foreign language learning context that unequivocally demonstrates advantages for younger over older learners" and conclude that "it is indeed interesting to note increased numbers of countries introducing English as part of pre-school provision" (p. 7). The reasons for the increase of numbers of children's English language programmes (Enever, 2011; Enever& Moon, 2009) are explained in several recently published papers. For example, de Mejia (2016) accounts for preschool and primary school English-Spanish bilingual and immersion programmes introduced both by state and private schools in Mexico, Argentina, Colombia and Ecuador, stating a number of reasons, such as improving foreign language proficiency of the population, raising disadvantaged social groups' education standards. On the other hand, in Europe the prevailing reason for ECEC has been the prospect of improving academic achievement, as has been documented by research relating learners' ECEC to their success in two programmes: 1. Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA); and 2. Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS) (Murphy, Evangelou, Goff, &Tracz, 2016). In India, the purpose of pre-primary programmes, offered only in the private sector, is to benefit from the children's ability to acquire native-like proficiency if they have the opportunity to start English language learning as early as possible, and thus secure a better social status and education and job opportunities (Shankar &Gunashekar, 2016). Similarly, in Tanzania, Africa, proficiency in English is seen as high quality education and better social status (Mrutu& Rea-Dickins, 2016), as is true of Australian indigenous children (Gawne, Wigglesworth, & Morales, 2016).

### Teacher qualifications

The role of individual teachers seems to be crucial to success in working with children English, especially teacher's confidence and willingness to use the language naturally in the classroom and thus provide the neces-

sary exposure to the language (Pinter, 2006). Pinter (2006) rightly mentions motivation as a crucial factor in learning other languages, especially the intrinsic one that comes from the enjoyment created by the process of learning English. It mostly depends on individual teachers and their ability to provide necessary exposure to English, design engaging, varied and purposeful activities, use English naturally, and inspire and sustain children's interest and motivation. If they can make children's experience of learning English as very positive and valuable (Pinter, 2006), they have succeeded. Cameron (2003) emphasizes the teacher qualities such as "an understanding of how children think and learn [and] skills and knowledge in spoken English to conduct whole lessons orally, and to pick up children's interests and use them" (p. 111). Obviously, a very high level of fluency is necessary as well as a broad knowledge of vocabulary (Cameron, 2003), putting great demands on teacher preservice and inservice education. Appropriate teacher qualification and professional development is seen as a major challenge globally, with countries having different standards and guidelines (de Mejia, 2016; Enever, 2011; Murphy et al. 2016). Poor teacher English language proficiency (below B2 level of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) can have a negative effect on ECEC, while low qualification requirement "sends a message about the extent to which ECEC is perceived as being an important part of a child's development, particularly for younger children" (Murphy et al. 2016, p. 59). In case of immersion and bilingual preschool education in Latin America, research of teacher education programmes has shown that ECEC teachers acquire only part of the necessary knowledge and skills, such are knowledge of content, languages and pedagogical approaches, as the programmes lack cultural knowledge and knowledge of principles of bilingual education (de Mejia, 2016).

## METHODS AND APPROACHES

Cameron (2008) argues that:

There are important links between what and how children are taught, and what they learn. Within the ZPD, the broader and richer the language experience that is provided for children, the more they are likely to learn. Foreign language lessons often provide all or most of a child's experience of the language in use; if we want children to develop certain language skills, we need to ensure they have experiences in lessons that will build those skills. (p. 20)

Foreign language input is a key factor of children's success in learning a foreign language. It involves both the quality of exposure and its extent inside and outside school. Early exposure to authentic language can play a significant role in children's later levels of listening, reading and communication skills, as shown by Lefever's (2010) research conducted with children in Iceland. Lefever's (2010) results showed that large exposure to English through different media outside school at preschool age contributed to children's basic literacy skills development, with very little gender difference, i.e. the children with the longest exposure to English achieved the best linguistic results. A significant result of the study related to beginning reading, and children at the age of seven were beginning to comprehend written English, with very high results obtained at the word recognition level and matching a word to a picture, which indicated that children were becoming literate in English although they had had no formal instruction in reading (Lefever, 2010). As "one of the important roles of ECEC is to set up a successful foundation upon which further learning can proceed" (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016, p. 14), preparing preschool children for the complex task of reading, prescribed by the primary English language curriculum, is critical. However, the needs of an individual child must come first, as "[t]he difference in maturity among very young children of the same class can be enormous" (Roth, 1998, p. 21).

Alexiou (2009) studied preschoolers' cognitive skills and found significant connections between children's aptitude and their L2 vocabulary development. Aptitude was defined as a special skill comprised of several subskills, independent of motivation, personality type, learning environment and the opportunity to learn, but affecting the speed of learning: people who learn quickly have high aptitude, while those who learn slowly and with difficulty, have low aptitude (Alexiou, 2009). The study showed that children possessed several kinds of memories that facilitated language learning, and that their language achievement was strongly influenced by their memory abilities and by other aptitude components, such as inductive learning ability, visual perception, reasoning ability and spatial ability (Alexiou, 2009). The researcher concluded that cognitive tests of aptitude can be useful in predicting children's literacy problems (Alexiou, 2008).

A great number of studies have identified play as the principal learning strategy at preschool age (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). The basic learning principle identified by experts is the fact that children should learn, i.e. acquire a foreign or second language almost in the same way they have learnt and are still learning their mother tongue (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010; Pinter 2006, 2011; Roth, 1998; Shin & Crandall, 2014).

Classroom activities should involve action games, total physical response (TPR) activities, rhymes, songs and role play, focusing mainly on developing listening, pronunciation, speaking, and communication skills, with no explicit explanation of grammar (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010; Pinter 2006, 2011; Roth, 1998; Shin & Crandall, 2014).

## RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

Teaching resources are closely related to methods and approaches, as well as to teacher qualifications. Preschoolers benefit from using visuals, such as pictures, flashcards, video material, picture books (big books), to contextualize the language presented and practiced, while mime, gestures, and facial expressions should be used to support meaning making. However, research studies report a critical lack of resources for carrying out preschool programmes. For example, in some parts of Africa there is no access to appropriate materials for children's language learning (Mrutu, Rea-Dickins et al., 2016). Studies of the effectiveness of using the appropriate materials in working with preschool children have shown their critical contribution (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). However, Evangelou and colleagues' (2009) report stresses that quality is crucial, both of the resources and of their application.

## CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Curriculum development is closely related to teacher education and the use of resources. Some studies have highlighted inadequacy of the preschool curricula, due to the fact that they overstress the importance of memorisation and imitation (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). Another challenging trend that is typical of Asia, is the fact that some curricula are guided by the market, while the others are not closely linked to the education policy (Shing, 2016). The curriculum should provide enough time for different activities and tasks, not leaving the allocation of time only to the teacher (Evangelou, 2009). Moreover, the ECEC curriculum should help children make connections between English language learning and the preschoolers' own world in order to enhance the effectiveness of the programme.

## CONCLUSIONS

This brief overview of the current issues of preschool learning of English as a foreign or a second language has pointed to the greatest challenges in the field: the young age of preschoolers and the persistence of belief that 'younger is better', not respecting fully the fact that the children of this age are a rather heterogeneous group and should be approached from the point of their specific needs. More information is needed from different parts of the world about the effectiveness of methods and materials applied, as well as of the curricula designed to cater to specific contexts. It can be concluded that ECEC programmes are seriously challenged with the need for engaging teachers with appropriate qualifications, demanding introduction of stricter standards and more precise guidelines for teacher education and professional development. Moreover, as learning English at preschool has been initiated both in state and private sectors to serve a variety of purposes of specific contexts, the interplay of individual and contextual factors should be studied for getting a deeper insight into the field. Present studies into the achievement of the goals of preschool foreign language learning can serve as a basis for similar studies in different contexts.

## REFERENCES:

- Cameron, L. (2003). Challenges for ELT from the expansion in teaching children. *ELT Journal*, 57(2), 105–112.
- Cameron, L. (2008). *Teaching languages to young learners* (11<sup>th</sup> printing). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Curtain, H. & Dahlberg, C. A. (2010). *Languages and children – Making the match: New languages for young learners*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- deMejía, A. M. (2016). Early childhood bilingual education in South America. In V. Murphy & M. Evangelou, *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages* (pp. 43–56). London: British Council.
- Edelenbos, P., Johnstone, R., & Kubanek, A. (2006). *The main pedagogical principles underlying the teaching of languages to very young learners*. Languages for the children of Europe: Published research, good practice and main principles. Retrieved June 20, 2012 from: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/youngsum\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/youngsum_en.pdf).
- Enever, J. (2009). Can today's early languagelearners in England become tomorrow's plurilingual European citizens? In M. Nikolov (Ed.), *Early learn-*



- ing of modern foreign languages: Processes and outcomes (pp. 15–29). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Enever, J. (Ed.) (2011). *ELLiE: Early language learning in Europe*. London: The British Council.
- Enever, J., & Moon, J. (2009). New global contexts for teaching primary ELT: Change and challenge. In J. Enever, J. Moon, & U. Raman (Eds.), *Young learner English language policy and implementation: International perspectives* (pp. 5–21). Reading, UK: Garnet Education.
- Evangelou, M., Sylva, K., Kyriacou, M., Wild, M. & Glenney, G. (2009). *Early years learning and development: Literature review*. Oxford: University of Oxford.
- Gawne, L., Wigglesworth, G., & Morales, G. (2016). In V. Murphy & M. Evangelou, *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages* (pp. 111–136). London: British Council.
- Genesee, F. (2016). Rethinking early childhood education for English language learners: the role of language. In V. Murphy & M. Evangelou, *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages* (pp. 21–42). London: British Council.
- Graddol, David (2006). *English next*. British Council.
- Kopas-Vukašinić, Emina (2014). *Priprema dece za nastavu početnog pisanja*. Jagodina: Fakultet pedagoških nauka.
- Lefever, S. (2010). English skills of young learners in Iceland: “I started talking English when I was 4 years old. It just bang... just fall into me.” *Ráðstefnurit Netlu – Menntakvika 2010*. Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands. Retrieved July 23, 2014 from <http://netla.khi.is/menntakvika2010/021>.
- Marinova-Todd, S. H., Marshall, D. B., & Snow, C. E. (2000). Three misconceptions about age and L2 learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(1), 9–34.
- Mrutu, N., Rea-Dickins, P., Bakuza, F., & Walli, S. (2016). Beyond ABC: the complexities of early childhood education in Tanzania. In V. Murphy & M. Evangelou, *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages* (pp. 91–110). London: British Council.
- Murphy, V. A. (2014). *Second language learning in the early school years: Trends and contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Murphy, V. A. & Evangelou, M. (Eds.) (2016). *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages*. London: British Council.
- Nacionalni prosvetni savet [Serbian National Board of Education (SNBE)] (2006). *Pravilnik o Opštim osnovama predškolskog programa [Rules book on basic preschool education programme]* Available at [http://www.zuov.gov.rs/dokumenta/CRPU/dokumenta/Pravilnik\\_o\\_opstim\\_osnovama\\_predskolskog\\_programa.pdf](http://www.zuov.gov.rs/dokumenta/CRPU/dokumenta/Pravilnik_o_opstim_osnovama_predskolskog_programa.pdf)
- Nunan, D. (1999). Does younger = better? *TESOL matters*, 9(3), 3. Retrieved from [http://davidnunan.com/presMess\\_99Vol9No3.html](http://davidnunan.com/presMess_99Vol9No3.html)

- Pinter, A. (2006). *Teaching young language learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pinter, A. (2011). *Children learning second languages*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robinson, P., Mourao, S. & Kang, N. J. (2015). *English learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: An investigation of their effectiveness*. London: British Council.
- Rosembuch (1995). Guidelines for Starting an Elementary Foreign Language Program. National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center, Iowa State University.  
Retrieved from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/rosenb01.html>
- Shankar, P. & Gunashekar, P. (2016). Early childhood education in English in India. In V. Murphy & M. Evangelou, *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages* (pp. 75–90). London: British Council.
- Shin, J. K. & Crandall, J. A. (2014). *Teaching young learners English: From theory to practice*. Boston, MA: National Geographic Learning/Cengage Learning.
- Shing, R. W. K. (2016). Do Hong Kong pre-school teachers of English engage in learning and teaching activities conducive to young children's vocabulary development? In V. Murphy & M. Evangelou, *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages* (pp. 195–206). London: British Council.
- UNICEF (2012). *Investing in early childhood education in Serbia*. Belgrade. Available at [http://www.unicef.org/serbia/Booklet\\_Investing\\_in\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Education\\_in\\_Serbia\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/serbia/Booklet_Investing_in_Early_Childhood_Education_in_Serbia_FINAL.pdf)
- Zhou, Y. & Ng, M. L. (2016). English as a foreign language (EFL) and English medium instruction (EMI) for three- to seven-year-old children in East Asian contexts. In V. Murphy & M. Evangelou, *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages* (pp. 137–158). London: British Council

Vera Savić

## KLJUČNA PITANJA UČENJA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA NA PREDŠKOLSKOM UZRASTU: IZAZOVI I PERSPEKTIVE

**Apstrakt.** U radu se istražuju stručna literatura i rezultati najnovijih istraživanja u vezi sa učenjem engleskog jezika kao stranog na predškolskom uzrastu. Svetski trend u učenju stranog ili drugog jezika u 21. veku pokazuje da deca sve ranije počinju da uče strane jezike, čak i pre polaska u školu, na uzrastu koji obuhvata period od rođenja do sedme godine. Iako postoji proliferacija istraživanja o učenju engleskog kao stranog jezika na predškolskom uzrastu, ova oblast je i dalje nedovoljno istražena u globalnim okvirima. Ipak, najnovije studije daju

bolji uvid u ovu značajnu oblast učenja. Te studije se bave ključnim pitanjima učenja engleskog jezika na predškolskom nivou, kao što je faktor uzrasta, vrsta izloženosti jeziku, izazovi bilingvalne nastave, kvalitet obrazovanja nastavnika engleskog jezika, dostupnost nastavnih sredstava, razvoj predškolskog programa, adekvatnost primenjenih pristupa i metoda i, najzad, motivacija i stavovi dece prema učenju engleskog jezika. Kako se ova oblast veoma brzo razvija, u radu se zaključuje da su neophodne nove studije i razmena iskustava kako bi se prevladali izazovi i osnažile perspektive učenja stranog jezika na predškolskom uzrastu.

*Ključne reči:* predškolsko obrazovanje, deca predškolskog uzrasta, *Osnove predškolskog programa*, engleski kao strani jezik, izazovi i perspektive.