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Early English language acquisition: how early is early enough?

Foreign language acquisition has been introduced to a younger population of children than in years past. However, the justification of this trend has been recently questioned because of the lack of evidence for a critical period in second language acquisition (Singleton and Pfenninger 2018a) and research findings that call into question the presumed advantages of starting to learn a foreign language at the primary level (Baumert et al. 2020). Nevertheless, some countries have introduced mandatory foreign language learning, mostly EFL learning, for children at the kindergarten level. In Croatia, optional and non-formal learning of English is offered in early childhood education and care institutions, but the short and long-term effects of such programmes remain unknown to us.

The language achievement of young EFL learners (N = 147) was investigated regarding the participants' age at the beginning of EFL learning and their length of exposure to organised instruction. A significant relationship was found between the age at the start of students' learning and early achievement; however, it was not confirmed in the long run. Moreover, very young and young learners achieved language results equally well after five years and three years of EFL instruction, respectively. The findings of this study point towards pre-primary EFL learning not ensuring long-term advantages and raise important questions about the role of environment, continuity, and the intensity of instruction in supporting the process of early multilingual development in children.

1. Introduction

Globalisation and technological progress have positioned English as the language of international communication, so English language proficiency is increasingly viewed as capital that affords better education and opportunities in the global labour market. Besides, starting to learn a second language (L2) early is traditionally believed to guarantee successful acquisition in the long run. Unsurprisingly, as a form of investment in their children's future, parents want to make sure that their offspring start with English language learning as early as possible. Since the

early 1990s, we have been witnessing a global lowering of starting age for second language acquisition (SLA) due to parental pressure on educational institutions (Enever 2005; Murphy and Evangelou 2016) and their layman belief that there are advantages to starting early, which is probably a reflection of long-standing but dubious beliefs about the relationship between age and SLA (Singleton and Pfenninger 2018a). Moreover, the faith people have in the benefits of early multilingual development of an individual and a community as a whole is evident in the European Union's regulations pertaining to European language policy that fosters introduction of early foreign language (FL) learning programmes to children below the age of six – that is, at pre-primary level (European Commission 2011). Although the increase in research on FL acquisition in primary and secondary¹ education has resulted in insights that contribute to our understanding of success factors, not enough is known about long-term effects of starting at the primary versus secondary level (at the age of 10/11 or later). Much less is known about processes, mechanisms, outcomes, and long-term effects of an even earlier onset: kindergarten age. Therefore, we report here on a study that compares the language achievement of participants who started formally learning English as a foreign language (EFL) before school (pre-primary beginners or very young learners) with the achievement of participants who began learning EFL formally at school entry (primary beginners or young learners). The critical period hypothesis and different learning mechanisms in the process of acquisition of any new language as well as their relevance for FL learning in *at home* contexts are discussed in the theoretical part of the paper. Next, the paper summarizes European trends in the introduction of FL study in early childhood education and care institutions. The presentation of the study is followed by a discussion of the findings as well as emerging questions. In the concluding part, recommendations are provided for further research, which we find essential in the Croatian context of EFL acquisition. A strong emphasis is placed on the synergy between age and other factors important for multilingual development.

2. The relationship between age and early second language acquisition

Successful L2 development is traditionally associated with the age factor, that is, with an early/earlier onset of SLA as a necessary condition for achievement of high levels of L2 competence (Singleton and Ryan 2004). Recently, however, different views have been developed alongside the slogan *the earlier, the better*, such as *the older, the better* and *the younger, the better in some respects* and/or *a qualitative change*

1 In line with many education systems, the term *primary education* (as used in recent literature) refers to education which starts from Grade 1 (most often at the age of 5 or 6) and lasts until Grade 4–7 (depending on the system of a particular country). Secondary (lower and upper) education refers to later grade levels, with upper secondary education generally starting at the age of 15–16. In the Croatian education system, early FL learning refers to the first four years (Grades 1–4) of primary school, i.e., to children aged 6.5–7 to 10.5–11 (labelled as *young learners* in Croatia).

view between early and later acquisition of a new language (Rokita–Jaśkow 2013). The different views point to the complex role of age in SLA, which is now interpreted as a macrovariable (Flege 2009), and interactions arising from the relationships established between individual (cognitive, affective, social, and physical) traits in the maturational process and the learner age are becoming increasingly important for our understanding of the course of SLA. Apparently, age and different traits are in constant mutual interplay; at the same time, they interact with contextual variables that, in turn, shape them, all of which affects the trajectory of L2 development (DeKeyser 2012; Erk 2021; Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović 2019). What guided this shift in the understanding of the role of age in SLA is explained later, as a closer look at the mediating role of context in SLA (Muñoz 2014) is needed first.

Irrespective of the age of the learner and their individual factors, there are contextual factors that include the wider community, language policy, education system, and formal, non-formal and informal² (Smith 2002) opportunities for L2 development available inside and outside of the family circle. Collentine and Freed (2004) distinguish between three fundamental SLA contexts: *at home context*, where the new language is studied as an FL; *immersion context* characterized by immersion in the language of the environment; and *study abroad context*, which is only temporary in comparison to immersion context, but, as a rule, takes place in the L2 setting. To understand the role of age in SLA, it is crucial to differentiate between FL context, where FL is acquired, and L2 context, where L2 is acquired.

An early start has a long-term positive effect on the acquisition of a new/L2 in the target language (TL) environment (e.g., Lambelet and Berthele 2015; Muñoz 2014). Until recently, the reasons for younger starters' better success in comparison with adolescent and adult populations in TL environments were attributed to the assumed critical period for language acquisition (Lenneberg 1967) and lateralisation of brain functions. In other words, it was presumed that innate and/or developmentally stipulated abilities had to be exploited at a (very) young age to achieve the goal of L2 proficiency of a native speaker. Although experts generally agree that there is a critical period for first/native language acquisition, its role and relevance for successful L2 development are questionable (when L2 acquisition is preceded by normal first language development). The existing disagreement about the beginning, duration, and end of the proposed critical period, with a variable range spanning from the first year of life to puberty, diminishes the significance traditionally awarded to the critical period in SLA (Singleton 2005). Likewise, we know now that the brain retains plasticity throughout life (Raz and Lindenberger 2013), and neurobiological research has failed to confirm the association between different activation patterns and different language proficiencies (Muñoz and Sin-

2 Formal and non-formal activities are educational by nature. They are oriented towards planned and structured study and different from informal activities, which are experiential and unstructured. While formal education takes place in mainstream education, non-formal education happens outside of it, e.g., through FL courses in (private) language schools and private classes.

gleton 2011). Thus, Singleton and Pfenninger (2018a) conclude that the assumed critical period and specialization of the hemispheres cannot explain outcomes of earlier or later SLA.

Differences in child and adult L2 acquisition are further attributed to different learning mechanisms. For example, theorists and researchers advocating for the significance of general learning mechanisms and cognitive and experiential maturation processes (Ellis and Wulff 2015) provide strong opposition to the advocates of full or partial availability of universal grammar that acts as a mechanism influencing SLA differently at different ages (White 2015). This means that different characteristics of the acquisition of new language knowledge are brought into connection with age and cognitive maturity from fundamentally diverse perspectives. Children are credited with the ability to acquire knowledge implicitly, which is a trait that declines with maturation and leads to development of explicit abilities. Over time, these explicit abilities take the leading role in the process of acquisition of new knowledge and skills. However, research by Lichtman (2013, 2016) demonstrated that each age group is more inclined to learn in the way which dominates the teaching process. In the case of children, the teaching is most often implicit, whereas it is explicit in the case of adults. Hence, the teaching proved to be just as important or more important than limitations in the abilities of children and adults. When it comes to learning rates, older students are faster learners than younger learners due to their greater cognitive, strategic, and experiential maturity. It is particularly challenging to explain the fact that children are more successful L2 learners despite being slower initially in TL contexts, which is crucial, as it points to important interplay between age and circumstances in which children and adults acquire a new language. The reasons for child superiority in SLA have been traditionally explained by a young(er) age at start, but nowadays, it is increasingly brought into connection with different language learning experiences and varying personal orientations. In the TL environment, children need a common language for play, making friends, and education. This is generally not the case with (more) mature populations who already have an established linguistic and cultural identity in their native language, which can significantly affect the strength of their motivation and desire to fit into the new culture. Hence, young learners in TL settings are by default exposed to TL input of better quality, larger quantity, and variety as well as to numerous opportunities for conversational interaction in the new language, all of which influences SLA favourably (Singleton and Pfenninger 2018b). In other words, younger learners are more successful because their language experiences are different from the experiences gained by more mature learners, which clearly points to the possibility that their experiences can be significant enough to influence learning trajectories and outcomes of L2 development in different ways.

TL input of large quantity, high quality, and diversity as well as an abundance of opportunities for interaction with fluent and accurate speakers of the TL are hardly available in settings where children and adults learn an FL. This means that qualita-

tive and quantitative experiences of FL learners in FL environments are markedly different from experiences of L2 learners in the TL environment. Does it, then, on the basis of research findings conducted in TL settings, stand to reason that younger learners would perform better than older ones in an FL context? The answer to this question is extremely important because of the EU's recommendations to introduce FL learning programmes at both the pre–primary and primary level as part of implementation of the European multilingualism policy (Council of Europe 2008). Studies have demonstrated that an FL start at the lower primary level fails to lead to assumed long–term advantages compared to a later start, i.e., at the upper primary or secondary level (García Mayo and García Lecumberri 2003; Mihaljević Djigunović, Nikolov and Otto 2008; Myles and Mitchell 2012; Pfenninger 2014). This led Murphy (2014) to conclude that earlier is not better in settings of minimal contact³ with the TL where the learning is limited to formal instruction of the language as a school subject. Nevertheless, limited but positive effects of an earlier start have been confirmed in some studies, demonstrating that faster learning of more mature learners cannot entirely cancel out effects of longer contact that is achieved through an earlier formal start (Baumert et al. 2020; Muñoz 2006; Wilden and Porsch 2016, 2019). In Croatia, EFL learning unfolds through interactions between formal, non–formal, and informal opportunities (Bogunović and Jelčić Čolakovac 2019; Cergol Kovačević and Matijević 2015; Erk 2021; Josipović Smojver 2007; Mihaljević Djigunović and Geld 2003; Mihaljević Djigunović, Cergol and Li 2006). Moreover, a long–term study on the influence of age on SLA confirmed longitudinal advantage of early EFL, from Grade 1, which was compared to a later start in Grade 4, at the end of mandatory 8–year long primary education (Mihaljević Djigunović and Vilke 2000). The comparison of early (N=88) and late beginners (N=98) on pronunciation and orthography, reading, lexical, grammar, culture, and integrative tasks showed that early beginners outperformed late beginners overall and on most tasks (except for grammar and English culture tasks). The finding in this study is particularly significant, because the authors reported that a high percentage of late beginners studied English non–formally. Hence, can earlier non–formal EFL learning in a Croatian context ensure long–term benefits for pre–primary beginners? After all, what is happening with FL acquisition at the level of early childhood education and care (ECEC), globally and locally?

2.1. Foreign language acquisition at pre–primary age

Murphy et al. (2016) warned about the lack of systematic and reliable information in the European Union on ECEC and the development of early multilingualism. In 2011, the European Commission recommended the introduction of an FL programme in ECEC institutions with the aim of activating children's potential for the development of multilingualism. Data from 2017 show that, on average,

3 Contact encompasses exposure and use of the FL language (Muñoz 2020).

95.4% of children aged 4 participated in ECEC in EU countries (Europska komisija/EACEA/Eurydice 2019). In institutions that implement programmes for teaching FLs, the goals are set not only towards the development of FL competence, but also on the development of linguistic awareness and intercultural understanding. However, considerable diversity is found among EU member states in the organisation and teaching of FLs in ECEC (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2017). Teaching FLs (mostly English) usually begins at primary level, at the age of six (for example, Austria, France, Italy, and elsewhere), or later (for example, at age seven in Denmark, age eight in Switzerland, and age nine in Hungary). In some countries, it is possible to start learning the first FL at different ages. Hence, teaching English as an FL must start between the ages of six and twelve in the Netherlands and between the ages of seven and ten in Sweden. Some countries have opted for an earlier start. Poland introduced mandatory formal learning of EFL to all children aged five in institutions of ECEC from 2015–2016 and lowered the starting age to the third year of the child's life in 2017. Similarly, formal learning of EFL in Cyprus has been mandatory for all three-year-olds since September 2015. The first FL is also learned as a compulsory subject from the age of three in four autonomous communities in Spain, and in other two communities from the age of four. In the German part of Belgium, three-year-olds start learning French; however, French is the second official language there, the same as English in Malta, which is mandatory from the age of five. Clearly, required FL learning in ECEC is a less frequent phenomenon in EU countries, but there is a tendency to lower the age of onset, as already established at the global level (Rixon 2013). Experts increasingly warn about the lack of research on the outcomes of pre-primary programmes of FL learning (Mourão and Lourenço 2015; Murphy and Evangelou 2016) and about divided opinions on the benefits of their introduction to children in ECEC (Murphy et al. 2016; Rixon 2013). However, in countries where EFL learning starts at the primary level, private and state-funded ECEC providers offer FL learning programmes from the earliest age, and parents pay extra for them (Edelenbos et al. 2006; Rixon 2013). This earlier beginning of FL learning is enabled via courses with modest time allocation (mostly one to two school hours per week) and attended by children of different ages and abilities, which renders comparisons unsuitable. As an illustration, FL projects in Portugal set up by state-funded and private ECEC providers are most often conducted with three-year olds, once a week, from 30 to 45 minutes, but there are also bilingual projects in which children are exposed to EFL on a daily basis, mainly for an hour (Mourão and Ferreirinha 2016). Further, in the neighbouring Slovenia, an FL (predominantly English) is offered at the pre-primary level as a non-formal afternoon activity with additional payment required (Vidmar et al. 2017), and Brumen (2011) points out that the programmes implemented are diverse and carried out by professionals of heterogeneous profiles. In settings where children are exposed to an FL once or twice a week, the language contact available is restricted, modest, and generally reduced to the language in-

put provided by only one teacher whose language competence may be questionable (Johnstone 2018). Consequently, in some European countries, there is an increase in the number of bilingual kindergarten programmes directed at early development of bilingualism (de Houwer 2011; Kersten and Rohde 2015; Van Gorp and Moos 2014), which means that they differ greatly in quantity, quality, and diversity of contact with the TL from FL courses for children of kindergarten age. In bilingual programmes, everything is done in two languages following the principle of one teacher–one language, and the pre–school teachers are either native speakers or possess native speaker competence, which is extremely important for credibility of modelling the TL and culture (Kersten and Rhode 2015).

In Croatian primary schools, the first FL, mainly English, has been a mandatory subject since the 2003/2004 school year, hence early FL learning refers to the pupils in Grades 1 to 4 who usually have English language lessons twice a week (2x45 minutes). They are taught by non–native English teachers, and instruction is organized around state–mandated textbooks that follow a nationally prescribed EFL syllabus. At the pre–primary level, the EFL is taught mostly in urban areas and mainly on a language course (twice a week, each lesson 45 minutes long), which is implemented through certified FL schools and paid separately by the parents. There is also a possibility of attending Helen Doron school once a week in one of 29 centres in Croatia. According to the report by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2019), 9% of children in ECEC attended a low–intensity English language course (twice a week) at the beginning of the 2018/2019 pedagogic year. Only 2% of children attended a bilingual programme in English and Croatian. As already mentioned, we are not familiar with research on short or long–term outcomes of these programmes on a global or local (Croatian) scale.

The unbalanced offer of FL programmes at the pre–primary level contributes to inequality in education (Brumen 2011; Enever and Moon 2009), and due to the lack of evidence that justifies earlier initiation of multilingual development in contexts where the new language is foreign, it is necessary to learn about the effectiveness of an earlier, pre–primary start of FL acquisition. The study that follows is a longitudinal study on the effects of earlier (pre–primary) and early (primary) starts of organised and structured FL learning during the initial stages of EFL development in young learners in Croatia.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Rationale, aims and research questions

The popular belief in *the earlier, the better*, parental pressure, and findings of SLA research on the association between age and better proficiency in the long run achieved in TL settings have resulted in moving the age at the start of FL learning to pre–primary level. The research presented in the current paper was therefore meant to obtain insight into the outcomes of earlier (pre–primary) and early (pri-

mary) learning of EFL in Croatia. It contributes to discussions on the role of age in the process of SLA by exploring the relationship between very young and young learners’ EFL achievement. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Is there a long-term relationship between age and achievement on tasks of language reception and production in early EFL development of very young and young learners in Croatia?
2. Is there a significant difference in the achievement of learners with different length (number of years) of EFL instruction? In other words,
 - a) do very young learners develop longitudinally better comprehension of EFL than young learners?
 - b) do very young learners achieve better regarding lexical production?

Based on the findings of research on the relationship between early age and formal learning of EFL, we assumed that beginning to learn English at the start of primary school (Grade 1) would ensure successful language development of Croatian young learners and that they would not lag behind very young learners of EFL in the long run.

3.2. Sample

The convenient sample of participants in this study comes from a sample of participants (N = 175) in the five-year-long project of the Croatian Science Foundation: *Problem behaviours in elementary school-aged children: The role of executive functioning, individual, familial and genetic factors* (ECLAT)⁴.

Participants	N	Grade 1	Grade 3
Girls	72 49%	70 50%	69 50%
Boys	75 51%	71 50%	70 50%
Total	147	141	139

Table 1. Distribution of participants by gender at the end of Grades 1 and 3

The number of children in this study is different from the Project participants, as the children who began learning German as their first FL in primary school could not be included. Hence, a total of 147 children with an average age of 8.21 (SD = 0.62) at the end of Grade 1 and 10.33 (SD = 0.59) at the end of Grade 3 participated in the study. The number of boys and girls was balanced, but its longitudinal nature affected the number of participants tested after Grades 1 and 3 (Table 1). Eight par-

4 IP-2016-06-3917, head of the project: Silvija Ručević, PhD, Associate Professor. Details of the representative sample obtained through the multi-stage random sampling procedure with children born between May 2009 and May 2010 are provided in Vučković et al. (2020).

ticipants performed the task at the end of Grade 1 but not the tasks at the end of Grade 3. There were six new participants at the end of Grade 3. All of these children live in a Croatian town with a population of a little over 100,000 people. They attended 16 different kindergartens, and, later, 17 different primary state-funded schools in different parts of town. Hence, a preliminary statistical analysis was conducted to check the suitability of the planned comparisons. No statistically significant differences were found between very young and young EFL learners with reference to their parents' self-perceived socio-economic status, the level of maternal education, and the level of paternal education. There were also no significant gender-related differences in this respect.

Ninety very young learners (64%) were taught EFL before school. Their age spanned from 2 years and 11 months to 7 years. Fifty-one young learners (36%) who began learning EFL upon arrival at school were 6 years and 3 months to 7 years and 8 months old.

Variables		N	%
Type of non-formal EFL learning before school	FL course in ECEC	69	77
	FL course in an FL school	13	14
	bilingual programme in ECEC	1	0.01
	different types combined	7	0.08
Frequency of non-formal EFL learning before school	once a week	17	19
	twice a week	68	75
	three or more times a week	6	0.07
Number of years of learning EFL before school	1	22	24
	2	59	65
	3–4	9	10

Table 2. Descriptive data about very young learners (N=90)⁵

In the town where the study was conducted, kindergartens are run by the central ECEC institution which gives an exclusive right to one FL school to organize the EFL courses for their children. This was favourable for the design of the present study since the similarity of teaching approach and classroom practices (focus on aural skills and vocabulary development in communicatively-oriented activities) was ensured for most of the pre-primary beginners. Table 2 shows that the majority of the very young participants (77%) attended organized EFL classes in these kindergartens. Their EFL courses are delivered by teachers with a minor in English or specialist English teachers who underwent induction training in teaching Eng-

5 Since parents of very early and early beginners completed the same questionnaire, questions about the details of EFL learning prior to school were not made mandatory. Thus, some answers were missing and the sum of answers per each variable does not always match the total number of very young learners.

lish to very young learners; include 60 English language lessons in one year (45–minutes each lesson); and rely on textbook use (i.e., *Cookie and Friends* and *Pockets*). A much smaller number of the participants⁶ took an EFL course in an FL school (14%), whereas only one child (0.01%) attended a bilingual programme. Seven children (0.08%) took part in a combination of different types of non–formal EFL learning over the years. The EFL instruction was most often implemented twice a week in the form of 45–minute lessons (75%), much less frequently once a week (19%), and six of the pre–primary learners (0.07%) were taught the EFL more than twice a week. The very young participants attended non–formal classes most frequently over a period of two years (65%), less frequently over one year (24%), and rarely over a period of three to four years (10%).

Due to heterogeneous characteristics of the very young learners of the EFL group, comparisons excluded those learners who attended several different types of pre–school English (N=7), those who had EFL classes more than twice a week (N=6), the learner who attended a bilingual kindergarten programme, and the small group of very young learners who started learning English three to four years before school (N=9). Thus, group comparisons were run on the subsample of 131 very young and young learners.

3.3. Language tasks

The listening comprehension skills of the young participants were examined because they are essential for FL development (Mihaljević Djigunović 2019). To this end, listening comprehension tasks developed through the project ELLiE were used (<http://www.ubgral.com/ellie-research-instruments.html>). The listening task at the end of Grade 1 was turned into digital audio–visual format. On a tablet, participants selected one of three illustrations for each task item (19 items altogether) that matched what they could hear twice from a recording played in English. In the ELLiE listening task used at the end of Grade 3, participants listened twice to short exchanges (question–and–answer) in English (16 items). While looking at the picture of a family of five in a room where different family members perform various activities, participants marked each exchange as correct (tick/plus) or incorrect (cross/minus) in a table provided next to the picture. On both occasions, two sample items were done with the examiner before the participants would start working on the task.

As early learning of FLs puts an emphasis on vocabulary acquisition, regarding words as *building blocks* in the process of SLA (Milton 2009), a verbal fluency task was administered to measure lexical knowledge at the end of Grade 3. Verbal fluency tasks are used to measure verbal ability, including lexical knowledge and lexical retrieval ability as well as examine the impact of bilingualism on cognition (e.g., Ar-

6 Ten participants took the EFL course at the same FL school that runs the courses at kindergartens because the number of children interested in an EFL course in their kindergarten was not large enough to form a group.

dila et al. 2019). In one minute, participants generated as many unique English words as possible for animals, a topic taught in both formal and non-formal EFL courses. The participants' production was recorded, transcribed, and scored by awarding points for each correctly named animal. Points were not awarded for repeated animals or different word forms (singular and plural) for animals already mentioned.

3.4. Procedure and data analysis

Research ethical approval and written parental consent for child participation in the project were obtained (Vučković et al. 2020). Three examiners following an agreed-upon and uniform procedure participated in the implementation of the tasks, which took place during summer of 2017 and 2019. Data about the pre-primary non-formal EFL learning was collected through a detailed, electronically administered survey completed by the participants' parents at the end of grades 1 and 3. The response rate to this survey was 96%.

The data were analysed with the statistical package SPSS v.20. The verification of the distribution of results and homogeneity of variance on the language tasks showed that they met the criteria for parametrical statistical procedures (Howell 2012; Kline 2010). In agreement with these findings, correlational analysis was complemented by analysis of variance (ANOVA).

4. Results

Results of the statistical analyses are presented in the order of the research questions asked.

4.1. Correlation between age and language tasks at the end of Grades 1 and 3 at primary level

Correlational analysis was conducted with the purpose of determining if there was an association between the participants' age in months at the start of instructed EFL and results achieved on FL comprehension and production tasks. Numbers next to task types in Table 3 stand for the grade level at which they were administered. At the same time, these numbers are identical to the number of formal years of EFL learning in school.

	Language task	M (SD)	Age (months)
1	listening comprehension 1	15.58 (2.571)	-.220**
2	listening comprehension 3	14.12 (2.335)	-.143
3	lexical production 3	9.86 (3.568)	-.256**

**p<.01

Table 3. Correlation between learners' age and language comprehension and production tasks at the start of instructed EFL learning (N=140)

Statistically significant correlations were found between a younger age of EFL start and better achievement on a listening comprehension task 1 [$r(137) = -.22, p = .010$] and lexical production task 3 [$r(107) = -.26, p = .008$]. The long-term association between earlier age and listening comprehension was insignificant after three years of formal EFL learning.

4.2. Differences in achievement of very young and young EFL learners on receptive and productive language tasks

The data collected about years of learning EFL before school enabled comparisons of results between very young and young learners (Table 4). The descriptive data about the result of different groups on the achievement tasks show that the very young learners who learned English two years before coming to school did slightly better than the other groups of learners. However, a one-way analysis of variance revealed no statistically significant difference in the results of these groups on the listening comprehension 1 ($p = .161$), listening comprehension 3 ($p = .427$), and lexical production tasks ($p = .436$).

Beginning of EFL study	<i>Listening comprehension 1</i>			
	N	Min	Max	M (SD)
in school	47	10	19	14.85 (2.476)
1 year before school	22	7	19	15.50 (2.739)
2 years before school	59	8	19	15.80 (2.483)
Beginning of EFL study	<i>Listening comprehension 3</i>			
	N	Min	Max	M (SD)
in school	46	6	16	13.74 (2.516)
1 year before school	22	7	16	13.86 (2.356)
2 years before school	55	4	16	14.35 (2.343)
Beginning of EFL study	<i>Lexical production 3</i>			
	N	Min	Max	M (SD)
in school	35	2	17	9.11 (3.160)
1 year before school	18	3	14	9.50 (3.222)
2 years before school	47	5	20	10.06 (3.467)

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the results on the achievement tasks at the end of grades 1 and 3 (N=131) for groups with different years of EFL study

In summary, the relationship between age and achievement on the language tasks was significant on two language tasks, and the correlation was missing on one language task. Further statistical analysis revealed that a very early beginning of

EFL learning had no significant influence on pre–primary and primary beginners' performance on the language tasks administered after one and three years of formal instruction in mainstream education.

5. Discussion

In Croatian primary schools, the first FL, usually English, is taught as a mandatory school subject from Grade 1. Do Croatian children achieve better in school if they start learning EFL before they enter compulsory education and thanks to their pre–primary experience with English instruction? This is a question of great importance, as the answer not only provides a better understanding of the issue at hand that will help us determine the optimal starting age in settings of limited contact with the TL, but it can also contribute to uncovering the significance of other factors affecting the trajectory of FL development. In addition, parents who cannot afford to pay fees for EFL courses at the pre–primary level or who live in settings where pre–primary EFL learning opportunities are unavailable may feel that their children are unfairly deprived of the experience and that their child will lag behind pre–primary learners once they begin learning English in school⁷. So, does the earlier (pre–primary) learning of EFL lead to better results in the long term than the early (primary) learning, and are the children who start English in school at a disadvantage in the Croatian context of EFL acquisition? We believe that the findings of our study refute this and bring into question the rationale behind pre–primary EFL in low–intensity courses.

One hundred and forty–seven children who started EFL learning before coming to school or upon school entry were tested on language reception (listening comprehension) after one and three years of formal EFL (Grades 1 and 3 in the Croatian education system). They were also tested on lexical production (retrieval of English words on a semantic category) after three years of EFL learning in school. The correlation between age at start (in months) and the listening comprehension result was statistically significant after Grade 1 and insignificant after Grade 3. Another significant association was established for age at start of EFL learning and lexical production task. These results led us to believe that starting EFL earlier in the Croatian education system would ensure benefits that would reflect themselves on the earlier starters' achievement. However, group comparisons revealed that learning English for a year or two at pre–primary level failed to lead to better outcomes longitudinally, both after one and three years of (more) English in school. More precisely, very young learners with four or five years of EFL and young learners with three years of EFL learning experience did equally well in our study, failing to provide evidence for the superiority of an earlier start. The finding about significant association between age and achievement and the lack of significance in group

7 Actually, this would contradict recommendations of the European Commission (Europska komisija / EACEA / Eurydice 2019) which emphasise that investment in ECEC is useful when inclusive and equally accessible to all.

comparisons based on the length of learning provides support for treatment of age as a variable that, on its own, cannot explain FL progress in settings of low TL contact unless its interactions with other factors are examined, as already explained (see section 2.). The reasons for the lack of a long-lasting impact of an earlier start on learners' development can be sought in several important learner-internal and learner-external factors. On one hand, very young learners in Croatia continue EFL learning with young learners, that is, from scratch, and, in this way, may be deprived of potential progress they could have made if they had continued where they left off at the pre-primary level instead of returning to the start. Inadequate transition from lower to upper grades of primary school and the lack of continuity have already been recognized as problematic and a possible cause for the lack of the expected effect of early FL learning (Baumert et al. 2020; Bolster et al. 2004; Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović 2019). Consequently, it is quite likely that the same phenomenon was at play in our study. On the other hand, Croatian children of kindergarten age encounter English mostly during two 45-minute lessons per week. Their attention capacities are limited, and they are exposed, as a rule, to different topics of interest in their first/native language outside of kindergarten (child-directed multimedia in Croatia is dubbed). Moreover, at kindergarten age, children learn quickly but also forget quickly when frequent repetition and high-intensity exposure to a new language is not provided (Rokita 2007). This means that young learners have a developmental advantage over very young learners. Therefore, it is logical to question what can be rightfully expected from this very young population in the domain of linguistic development in an FL. For a long time, it has been highlighted that the minimal drip-feed exposure over two school lessons a week is a form of insufficient contact with an FL and that it cannot lead to the development of high-level FL skills (e.g., Collins and White 2012; Larson-Hall 2008; Piske 2007; Spada and Lightbown 1989). It is the huge amounts of FL input which are considered necessary for a long-term positive effect of an early SLA (Dekeyser 2000; Muñoz 2012). Thus, Pfenninger and Singleton (2019) conclude that early exposure to a new language has proven useful only in the case of simultaneous bilingual and biliteracy development with intensive parental support. In the sample of our study participants, only one child attended a bilingual kindergarten. We believe that this is where future research on the effectiveness of EFL study should turn to in FL environments of limited contact. The profile of practitioners to carry out such programmes is likely to emerge as problematic since they should possess the proficiency of a native speaker for children to benefit from the programme (Kersten and Rhode 2015). Currently, pre-primary teachers working in Croatian ECEC institutions that offer bilingual programmes need to present proof of B2 level language proficiency, which we find inadequate, and it is an imperative to investigate if these programmes ensure high-quality language input, i.e., the core requirement for optimal FL development. Nonetheless, very young learners first/native language development requires careful attention, too, as the (significance of) impact of interac-

tions that arise between languages at phonological, lexical, or syntactical level when FL is introduced at very early age are still unknown. Since longer FL learning aims to contribute not only to linguistic development but also the development of a positive attitude towards FLs and cultures, better understanding and tolerance, motivation, language awareness and intercultural competence of pre–primary beginners should be explored in comparison to primary learners. Surely, this should be done in a longitudinal study because an earlier start can lead to changes in motivation that are not always positive (Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov 2019; Nikolov 2016; Pfenninger and Singleton 2019). Encouraging are the results of the study by Brumen (2011) in which she interviewed 120 children aged 4–6 about their experience of FL learning and motivation to learn. The children were positively oriented and intrinsically motivated because they enjoyed the learning process, had a positive attitude towards FL and culture, and were satisfied with their progress. The author concluded that learning which is fun and intellectually stimulating leads to feelings of satisfaction and personal success. She stressed the importance of developing and maintaining intrinsic motivation at kindergarten age. Affective development of very young learners was not the focus of this study, but we recognize that it should be addressed in future studies with pre–primary and primary beginners, as this is where explanations could be found for associations between age and achievement. In addition, learners who started learning English three or four years before school were excluded from group comparisons in the present study due to a small group size. The question that remains unanswered is whether this longer experience with learning English at the pre–primary level can activate children’s very early potential for multilingual development (Edelenbos and Kubanek 2009), leading to significant differences between earlier and early beginners. Nonetheless, it is important to notice that the FL context of the participants failed to adequately support their EFL development in the long run. Consequently, it would be interesting and relevant to conduct research about the efficiency of teaching other FLs in the Croatian context (Italian, German and French) and, hopefully, overcome the limitations of this study. They relate primarily to the sample size and the number of tasks administered. The participants’ age and the fact that these learners are at the initial stages of their FL development imposed certain limitations on the duration of testing and the selection of language tasks. Additionally, the children were brought to the research site, and the testing conducted for the purposes of the project ECLAT was extensive. Consequently, the selection of tasks was determined by these circumstances, resulting in a limited amount of time allocated to their implementation. Next, pronunciation of very young and young learners could not be compared as the participants produced different *animals* words, but looking into this component of FL development would be an endeavour worth the attention of researchers. In that case, data on EFL teachers’ pronunciation skills and a qualitative research design would probably provide inter-

esting results as important relationship has been established in research on teachers' English language competence and learners' outcomes (e.g., Graham et al. 2017).

We find practical implications of the study at hand extremely important. There are parents unable to provide for their children's earlier learning of an FL at kindergarten age because they live in small and/or rural settings where such opportunities are rare. They may also be unable to provide this resource due to financial reasons, so they may justifiably wonder whether their children are deprived of equal opportunities in comparison to other children. The findings of the study described here clearly suggest differently. Likewise, the findings are directly relevant in shaping social, especially parental, expectations related to the FL development of young children. Knowledge of English as capital and investment in the future of one's offspring is certainly a logical parental response to globalisation, but awareness of empirically established facts different from popular and impressionist ideas is important for all involved in the process of FLs acquisition, including children, parents, teachers, national language policy makers, and authorities responsible for its implementation. Moreover, early FL learning is connected to thoughtful and planned long-term investments in educational infrastructure (ECEC institutions, tertiary education, and institutions in charge of lifelong learning and continuous professional development). Hence, it is crucial to know about the (lack of) verification for pre-primary EFL effectiveness.

6. Conclusions

How early is early enough to start learning EFL for optimal development in the local/Croatian context when we are aware that FL contexts fail to provide the same affordances as TL environments, that FL contexts vary (see Muñoz et al. 2018), and that different FLs have different status, all of which can have a significant impact on the process of SLA? As mentioned above, in some European countries, research systematically shows that an early start in school does not automatically ensure faster and better progress of young learners. In other words, long-term benefits of an early start are hardly reaped in the contexts of limited TL contact. The dominant type of pre-primary delivery of EFL in Croatia (through low-intensity FL fee-paying courses) contributes to a lack of equal education for all as learners who have and have not studied English at the pre-primary level are placed together in the same FL classroom in Grade 1. At the moment, there is no evidence to confirm that the low-intensity EFL programmes at pre-primary age lead to a lasting positive impact on EFL acquisition in Croatia. Neither can we answer the question about the optimal age to start, because not enough is known about programmes implemented with ECEC children and how they relate to the fact that the transition to primary level and continuity of learning are not ensured. However, awareness of the developmental limitations of children in early childhood, the fact that FL is learned in an environment which is clearly monolingual, and the findings of our research point

to the conclusion that the local circumstances of EFL study failed to lead to significant gains for very early learners of EFL in comparison to young learners. The fundamental problem behind the discrepancy between common beliefs about *earlier = better* and empirical reality seems to be in the unrecognized and insufficiently explored role of the local context and its affordances for SLA. Fortunately, it seems that we are on the way to explain this disparity.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions. The authors also wish to thank other members of the project ECLAT (IP–2016–06–3917) for their technical support and contribution in carrying out the research.

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Rano ovladavanje engleskim jezikom: koliko rano je dovoljno rano?

Od ranih 90-tih godina prošlog stoljeća do danas svjedoci smo spuštanja dobnе granice za početak formalnog učenja inog jezika (drugog, stranog, novog) iako noviji pogledi na odnos dobi i inojezičnog razvoja upućuju na problematična uvjerenja i nepotvrđene dobrobiti ranijeg početka učenja stranih jezika (Baumert et al. 2020; Singleton i Pfenninger 2018a). Štoviše, u Europskoj se uniji potiče uvođenje programa učenja stranog jezika djeci mlađoj od 6 godina, na razini ranog i predškolskog odgoja (European Commission 2011). Međutim, jako se malo zna o procesima, mehanizmima, ishodima i dugoročnim učincima ranijeg početka učenja stranog jezika, u vrtičkoj dobi. Stoga smo istražili uspjeh djece mlađe školske dobi (N=147) u ovladavanju engleskim kao stranim jezikom s obzirom na dob na početku učenja i na dužinu izloženosti organiziranom poučavanju. Ispitanici su učili engleski formalno tijekom tri godine u redovnoj nastavi, pri čemu je 91 dijete učilo engleski i u vrtiću, prije dolaska u školu. Testiranja su provedena na kraju prvog i trećeg razreda. Korelacijskom analizom utvrđena je statistički značajna povezanost dobi i uspjeha na zadatku razumijevanja slušanjem na kraju prvog razreda, međutim, povezanost je izostala na zadatku razumijevanja slušanjem na kraju trećeg razreda. Također, značajna je povezanost dobi i leksičke proizvodnje na kraju trećeg razreda. Usporedba skupina ispitanika koji su učili engleski kao strani jezik tijekom jedne ili dvije godine prije polaska u školu i ispitanika koji su počeli s učenjem u školi nije pokazala statistički značajnu razliku između ovih skupina, što znači da su ispitanici koji su učili engleski jezik tri, četiri ili pet godina postigli ujednačen rezultat nakon tri godine učenja u redovnoj nastavi. Nalazi istraživanja ukazuju na dugoročnu neučinkovitost predškolskog učenja engleskog jezika u podupiranju stranojezičnog razvoja, ali istovremeno otvaraju važna pitanja o ulozi sredine, kontinuiteta i intenziteta poučavanja u procesu ovladavanja engleskim jezikom.

Keywords: very young learners, young learners, foreign language acquisition, English as a foreign language

Ključne riječi: učenici vrtičke dobi, mladi učenici, usvajanje ino jezika, engleski kao strani jezik