Foreign language at the pre-primary level: a review of theory and research

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Abstract

By presenting the theoretical framework and several examples of relevant studies regarding very early foreign language acquisition in the world and in Croatia, the aim of the paper is to raise awareness of the positive effects of learning English in pre-primary education. The theoretical background for early foreign language learning and acquisition is provided and complemented by descriptions of contemporary teaching methods which are based on play, environment, literature, and culture (as the key components).

The paper further offers an overview of research, encompassing eight recent studies on early language acquisition in pre-primary education. The primary focus is on exploring the sample of participants, research methodology, and findings of these studies. The selection criteria for these studies are based on their relevance to the language learning domains outlined in the theory section. Through analysis, it becomes evident that researchers employ a combination of age-appropriate and child-friendly quantitative and qualitative

methods. Although the studies may not support generalization due to small sample sizes, their results consistently demonstrate a positive impact of Total Physical Response (TPR), music, literature, integrated and project-based learning, as well as digitalization on vocabulary acquisition and the emergent literacy skills of pre-primary children.

Keywords: early language acquisition; English as a foreign language; pre-school education

Introduction

In recent decades, extensive research has been conducted and published on the topic of foreign language learning within formal educational settings. However, there is a growing trend toward children starting to learn a foreign language at a very young age, in pre-primary education[1]. In the European context, English is part of the pre-primary curriculum in countries such as Armenia, Georgia, Northern Cyprus, and Sweden (cf. Mikulec & Rogulj, 2023) whereas in many other countries it is offered, but not mandatory, in both state and private ECEC institutions[2]. However, unlike the abundant research literature dedicated to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in formal educational settings, there is a scarcity of research and literature addressing foreign language learning in pre-primary settings.

In Croatia, learning a foreign language has been mandatory from the first grade of primary school since 2003, and English is the most represented. On the other hand, although kindergartens in Croatia offer some form of foreign language learning programs[3], the idea of extending the same regulation to pre-primary is still being considered. Vilke (1999; 2019) wrote about the increasing trend of children learning FLs in kindergartens, but she felt that making such practices mandatory might not be feasible considering that not all children attended kindergarten. Presently, programs

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[1] In this paper the term pre-primary education will be used. According to UNESCO pre-primary is a stage in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) that focuses on children from three to the start of primary school.

[2] For an extensive overview of foreign language policies in ECEC in some European countries, see Mikulec & Rogulj, 2023.

[3] Several examples from different regions in Croatia:
    https://vrtic-precko.zagreb.hr/default.aspx?id=51;
    https://vrtic-radost.zagreb.hr/default.aspx?id=50;
    https://vrapcic-djecji-vrtic.hr/kraci-program-engleskog- jezika/; https://www.rivrti-ci.hr/sites/default/files/datoteke/letak_za_engleski_program.pdf;
    https://www.djecji-vrtici-sb.hr/2017/03/14/engleski-jezik-u-vrticu/

incorporating foreign languages in pre-primary education in Croatia are well-accepted by both children and their parents. Consequently, a significant number of first graders are familiar with foreign languages which has implications for primary language teachers when developing teaching materials and strategies.

This paper aims to outline the theoretical framework and pertinent research on early foreign language acquisition. It gives an overview of theory and the teaching practices that include the relationship between language and culture, learning through play, environment, and literature. The second section introduces eight studies on foreign language acquisition in pre-primary settings, aligning them with the theoretical framework. It provides a concise overview of participant demographics, methodologies, instruments used, key findings, and recommendations for further research and English language teaching practices.

Review of theory

In the realm of language acquisition and learning, understanding the intricate processes through which individuals acquire language skills has been a longstanding and multifaceted pursuit. This section gives an overview of key aspects of language learning, drawing insights from the influential developmental psychology theories of Jean Piaget, the distinction between language learning and language acquisition, and the concept of the Critical Period Hypothesis.

Piaget's theory of cognitive development

With respect to early childhood development and language, research often builds upon or challenges the theories of Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist known for introducing the concept of cognitive development. Piaget outlined four stages of a child's brain development in his book "The Language and Thought of the Child" (1923): the sensorimotor stage (birth to two years), pre-operational stage (two to seven years), concrete operational stage (seven to eleven years), and formal operational stage (eleven years onwards). In this paper, we focus on the pre-operational stage, where Piaget suggested that children between two and seven years had not yet reached the developmental stage to apply logical rules. During this stage, children begin to use language and imagery as meaning-making systems and make progress in their intellectual development. However, Piaget describes this stage largely focussing on deficiencies rather than achievements (Pinter, 2011, p. 24). Repetitive games, make-believe play, and other kinds of play situations contribute to the cognitive, social and emotional development where children learn about feelings and points of view of others. During play activities, they participate in different culturally and contextual-

ly appropriate linguistic routines. They enjoy spontaneous language play (Nicholas & Lightbown, 2008) and simple, repetitive tasks, games and stories. Games and drama activities can stimulate these children's creative imagination and willingness to take on playful roles. According to Donaldson (1978), pre-operational children may be able to think in logical ways, but only if the tasks are made meaningful and the instructions are clear and unambiguous. Donaldson also criticizes Piaget's research, suggesting that the questions were unclear and lacked context. This limitation, according to Donaldson, hindered children's ability to provide accurate answers.

Language Acquisition vs. Language Learning

Young children's acquisition relies on the integrated use of senses which are functioning already at birth and help them to explore and gain experience. Through the interaction with the environment, a child will develop integration with different sensorial modalities and the attribution of meaning and appropriate response to the environmental input. At the neurological level, sensory development creates support and is an important factor for early language acquisition (Daloiso, 2007).

According to Daloiso (2007), a child's brain regions develop in the same stages, in the same order, but at slightly different moments. Maturation is considered complete when neuron density, metabolic activity, and dendrite length reach typical adult levels, usually around the age of three or four with the completion of myelin formation. However, the frontal lobe, responsible for complex cognitive tasks, action planning, and attention control, does not fully mature until around the age of seven. This information suggests that a child requires a specific methodological approach, focusing on a child's attention to acquire a second language.

Maslo (2007) confirms that language acquisition is based on neuro-psychological processes, and Kramina (2000) states that it is opposed to language learning because it is a subconscious process that is more similar to acquiring the first language (but not the same). Consequently, language learning is considered a conscious process – the product of either formal learning or a self-study programme (Kramina, 2000). However, Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2006, pp. 234-235) state that "it has been widely assumed that young children rely more on memory-based processes, whereas adults are more characterized by rule-based learning". Based on these insights, contemporary teaching methods emphasize achieving the effect of acquiring the second language, especially when working with young children, rather than a more formalized learning approach.

Daloiso (2007, pp. 23-24) states that "if a child acquires two languages between the ages of zero and eight, the representation of both languages is located in the same cerebral regions". If a child acquires the second language between the age of

three and eight, the knowledge can be excellent, but it is represented partially in the same regions as the mother tongue. Moreover, if a child starts to learn the second language after the age of eight, it will be represented in different regions than the mother tongue (Daloiso, 2007).

It is important to clear out the common misconception that learning a second language from an early age can intrude on learning the first language. Alexiou (2020) points out that a child's confusion by two different languages cannot happen since exposure to a second language is limited and the child is offered linguistic stimuli but is not formally taught. Moreover, Łockiewicz and colleagues (2018) suggest that foreign language teaching should include more explicit differentiation between a mother tongue and a foreign language on multiple levels: phonological, morphological, syntactic, and orthographic to "prevent later consolidation of early errors and promote correct linguistic habits" (p. 9).

The Critical Period Hypothesis

Singleton and Pfenninger (2019) explain that a great number of researchers rely on the fact that there is a so-called *Critical Period Hypothesis* according to which it is impossible to fully acquire a new language after the critical age. Although the hypothesis was originally applied to the first language, in the last decades, the discussion is connected to the acquisition of the second language.

DeKeyser and Larson-Hall (2005) describe it as the "the younger, the better" phenomenon, which continues to captivate experts due to practical and theoretical considerations. They note that some authors prefer terms like "sensitive" or "optimal" over "critical." While there is a global push for early English language learning, studies show no evidence that early beginners outperform those starting later. This lack of advantage could be attributed to teaching approaches that may not adequately prepare early learners. Recognizing that social, psychological, and contextual factors are integral to second language learning, DeKeyser and Larson-Hall (2005, p. 88) caution against overinterpreting the hypothesis and advise its application to specific types of learning. They claim that critical period research suggests adapting instructions to the learner's age rather than emphasizing teaching at a young age.

Although it is argued that a child's brain is flexible, that children can absorb any language almost effortlessly, and that they can be successful in acquiring vocabulary, phrases, and structures, this could only be achieved with continuous exposure to the right kind and with appropriate guidance of an educated person. It indicates that it is important to realize that language is not to be "picked up" or effortlessly "absorbed" (Alexiou, 2020).

An early start can offer considerable advantages for children by activating such natural language acquisition mechanisms as they possess, by affording them more time overall and by providing them with a linguistic and intercultural experience which can have a beneficial formative influence on their cognitive, social, cultural, acoustic, linguistic and personal development (including qualities of persistence and participation) and on their sense of self. An early start by itself however guarantees nothing; it needs to be accompanied minimally by good teaching, by a supportive environment and by continuity from one year to the next, taking children smoothly from pre-primary to primary, and from primary into secondary education (Edelenbos et al., 2006, p. 147).

With respect to teachers, Alexiou (2020) states that the teachers' language proficiency and fluency need to be high to be the right role model for language learners. Another crucial factor in the role of a teacher is being a motivator and having a strong pedagogic background since motivation is extremely important at the stage when attitudes are shaped among young learners. Having that in mind, the teachers' job is far from easy, as it is thought, but requires talent, imagination, and creativity to fulfil the children's need to keep their minds active and alive.

Overview of language teaching approaches and practices in pre-primary education

The language teaching approaches and practices in pre-primary education generally revolve around child-centered aspects which imply play, learning from the environment, language and culture, literature (through picturebooks, poetry), and storytelling and drama.

Play

Mourão (2014) delves into Vygotsky's theory of play, emphasizing its dramatic and make-believe nature. Play serves as a developmental source, creating a zone of proximal development where children act beyond their current abilities. According to Mikulec and Rogulj (2023, p. 122), the fundamental principle of play is related to a child's learning during playtime that takes place in various situations and places with a certain continuity. Mourão (2014) advocates for an interchange between child-initiated and adult-led learning which she refers to as *The play spiral*. The author claims that the play spiral leads to practice, repetition, acquisition, reconstruction, and adaptation of language which leads to the fusion of a child with the English language through play, with adults acting as planners or mediators.

Within the realm of natural language learning processes which are effective and enjoyable for young learners, we come across the Total Physical Response method

(TPR), defined as "a language teaching method which is built around the coordination of speech and action" (Shi, 2018, p. 1088). The method was introduced in 1969, by James J. Asher who carried out a great number of experiments to conclude, according to Duan (2021), that "TPR followed the learner's natural process of language learning, which made learning easier and more effective by not forcing the students to speak in a target language they are not yet familiar with" (p. 1323). Asher (1981) highlights the importance of extracting the stress factor while learning a second language to create a relaxed atmosphere which will later help to support long-term retention in acquiring another language and avoid negative emotions among the students toward the language.

After the experiment with young learners using the TPR method, Duan (2021) concludes that the TPR method should be applied in preschool English teaching. Her research results show significant improvement in children's attitudes toward learning the English language when using TPR. Research has also shown that it attracts children's attention, eliminates tension, and improves their enthusiasm for learning a foreign language. Mourão (2014) finds that TPR in preschool English teaching has a positive impact on children's attitudes and attention.

Learning from the environment

The concept introduced by Zimmer (1984) known as the situational approach refers to learning that is related to real-life situations and close to children's everyday lives, habits, social relationships, etc. He emphasizes that the learning process should be centred on the "now", that is, situations that children can take advantage of from the earliest age and not prepare them for potential situations in the future. Zimmer accentuates the need for flexible planning and creating of activities from present activities, spontaneity, and teamwork. Creating a conducive learning environment involves incorporating real-life scenarios through activities like play, projects, discussions, daily routines, and organized visits. From a child's perspective, this learning environment encourages social interactions, decision-making, collaboration, and personal initiative, guided by preschool teachers with pedagogical guidance and subtle supervision.

The approach is closely linked to the cross-curricular approach where language teaching connects language learning with various subjects, fostering holistic development. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as defined by Coyle et al. (2010) is "an educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (p. 1). Ellison (2019) sees it as a complex phenomenon that can be used to develop positive attitudes toward the language and create opportunities to express knowledge in another language, which

is cognitively challenging but engaging and rewarding. CLIL integrates four areas of learning known as the 4Cs – content, communication, cognition, and culture. However, Mair (2021) concludes that there is insufficient empirical research on CLIL in preschool settings, and she invites researchers to engage in studying the benefits of CLIL, along with the question of teacher education and competences in that area.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an instructional approach resembling real-life situations. Grossman et al. (2019) concluded that there is no precise definition of project-based learning but agreed on some basic characteristics of the approach which include: "giving students opportunities to study a challenging problem, engage in sustained inquiry, find answers to authentic questions, help choose the project, reflect on the process, critique and revise the work, and create a public product" (p. 44).

Many European kindergartens are involved in collaborative eTwinning projects revolving around project-based work which is oftentimes delivered in English since many such projects are international. As eTwinning is the largest community of teachers in Europe, it facilitates collaboration and professional development. In addition to the participating teachers, such networking directly affects children as second language learners because it contributes to the development of communication skills, teamwork, creativity, and other skills and qualities that contribute to the wholesome development.

Moreover, Grossman et al. (2019) conducted a study for the purpose of exploring and a better understanding of what student-centred active learning involves. Based on the examination, which included experts in PBL and teachers, they have established four primary goals of PBL: "supporting deep disciplinary content learning, engaging students in authentic work, supporting student collaboration, and building an iterative culture where students are always prototyping, reflecting, redesigning, editing, and trying again" (p. 44). PBL is, in their view, disciplinary (elicit higher-order thinking, orient students to subject-area content, engage students in disciplinary practices), authentic (supports students to build personal connection to the work, make a contribution to the world), iterative (supports students to reflect and revise, give and receive feedback, progress and provide feedback), and collaborative (supports students to collaborate and make choices).

Language and culture

Driscoll and Simpson (2015) explain culture as "an all-encompassing and complex concept with a wide range of different types of definitions" (p. 169). By examining the definitions from the early 1950s, they conclude that since then we have developed the concept and that we now know that culture is everywhere. It can be presented and seen in a form of visual arts, music, and literature. Moreover, the cul-

ture can be seen in everyday behaviours, routines, and rituals. Culture influences our beliefs, way of life and perceptions. Through active and passive experiences, people learn about attitudes, values and beliefs of different groups, and adapt to different macro-cultures within a society. Children learn how to adapt, interact and modify their behaviour in different settings, which is an important factor associated with learning a second language to avoid miscommunication (Driscoll & Simpson, 2015).

The approach that focuses on setting up communicative activities for practical communication is the communicative language teaching approach (CLT) aimed at fluent communication to achieve the most important goal of language learning. It encourages the learners to talk about their interests, in authentic and meaningful contexts and creates real-life situations that can be used outside the classroom for communicating in the target country. In that, and many ways, culture can exist in the classroom through the teacher, and interaction with others but also using technology which nowadays can interpret a great variety of cultural images and scenes of inter-action (Driscoll & Simpson, 2015). The European Commission recommends expos-ing children to the target language in meaningful and authentic settings for sponta-neous language acquisition (European Commission, 2011, p. 17). This spontaneous acquisition involves learning through culture, as culture shapes how people express ideas, feelings, opinions, wishes, preferences, and more. Children's literature, such as poems and picturebooks, is recognized for enhancing vocabulary, pronunciation, creativity, and collaboration in young learners (discussed further in the next section).

Learning through literature

Picturebooks. Picturebooks are special in their interdependence on both pictures that show, and words that tell (Mourão & Ellis, 2020). That interdependence makes them a multimodal text which transfers the complete information to a reader. More precisely, multimodal texts are described as a combination of multiple modes such as written language, spoken language, visual images (still or moving), audio content, gestural representation, and spatial representation (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Picturebooks play a significant role in children's education and language devel-opment, and they are key to emergent literacy development. The picturebook enables the context through which children understand the application of new words but also for acquiring language through repeated words and phrases (Mikulec & Rogulj, 2023, p. 110). The repetitiveness in picturebooks contributes to what Cameron (2001) refers to as incidental learning or acquisition. Mourão and Ellis (2020) observe that picturebooks have an impact in expanding the foreign language vocabulary, phono-logical awareness and provide numerous possibilities for repeating language expres-sions.

In ELT, selecting picturebooks with a clear picture-word relationship and synchronized illustrations is vital for a supportive learning context. Choosing the right picturebook or story involves considering linguistic, psychological, cognitive, social, and cultural criteria (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Wright, 2009). These encompass aspects like level, language complexity, literary devices, content, illustrations, educational potential, motivation, values, and global issues. This classification provides teachers with diverse criteria for effective picturebook selection, facilitating an enriching language learning experience.

Poetry. Songs, rhymes, chants, poems are a part of every culture and are often part of children's everyday lives which are transferred from generation to generation (Mourão & Ellis, 2020). Numerous research indicated their indispensable contribution in various areas of early foreign language learning. For example, they are recommended due to their rhythmic and repetitive nature (Brewster et al., 2002). Zentner and Eerola (2010) report that children from their earliest age react to rhythm through body movement. They are particularly important in acquiring the English language as rhythm contributes to word stress and pronunciation particularly in reported speech (Narančić Kovač & Andraka, 1999). Traditional songs can be used in learning about other cultures (Mourão & Ellis, 2020; Narančić Kovač & Andraka, 1999). They enable individual participation, poems are seen as mini stories, which makes children familiar with the narrative concept, children acquire appropriate language rhythm and intonation in the foreign language, oral skills, fine motor skills and coordination, they contribute to children's sense of belonging to a group and collaborating (clapping, dancing) (Andrews & Baker, 2019; Mourão & Ellis, 2020). Linguistic patterns and grammar templates can be learned through the experience of a playful poetry language which children acquire through repetition and performance. Bland (2015a) highlights the importance of repetition for its characterization of the child's environment, language relying on repeated patterns, supporting functional literacy, and connection with the play that is endlessly repeated

Furthermore, Bland (2015a) explains the term *protoconversation* as a child-direct speech that is chant-like, engaging, and full of exaggeration, repetition, movement, and prosodic features. Young children respond well to it and enjoy this interaction, enabling them to learn effectively and with pleasure. The echo technique and its variations are recommended for memorizing poems. The teacher can invite children to repeat in different volumes, chant rhythmically, etc. Including drama routines, body language, gestures and facial expressions are advisable for young learners.

Boyd (2009) defines all kinds of art as *patterned cognitive play* and states that "an unpredictable combination of patterns repays intense attention and can yield rich inferences, although finding how to ascertain all the patterns and all the mean-

ing they imply may not be easy" (p. 90). Narrative art, such as poems and nursery rhymes, encourages human ability for "pattern-matching neural processing" (Boyd, 2009, p. 134). That is the reason why they appeal to young children, providing them with playful rhythm, rhymes and personification. They fulfil the children's cognitive need for patterns, which turns into learning through familiar lines and melodies.

According to Bland (2015a), creating mental images while listening or reading will be an important factor for further reading. Children will be able to create a mental model of a storyworld, which allows them to be able to read literature meaningfully.

Storytelling and drama. To effectively meet children's need for rich and high-quality language and approach that can be used is to expose them to well-written stories that facilitate experiential learning. Research has extensively examined the advantages of storytelling, revealing benefits such as enhanced listening comprehension, vocabulary expansion, improved organizational skills for narrative thinking, and heightened intellectual development (Speaker et al., 2004). Miller and Pennycuff (2008) showed that storytelling positively impacts students' oral language proficiency, reading comprehension, and writing skills. One of the qualities of storytelling lies in its flexibility — the storyteller can tailor the presentation to the audience, capturing attention and maintaining focus. However, it is crucial to exercise caution with the modes of oracy and orality (Bland, 2015b), foundational elements in teaching language to young learners.

Acting out or dramatizing and retelling a story empowers children to claim ownership of a specific story, fostering a deeper understanding. During this process, they become more acquainted with the characters, the story's structure, and its underlying themes (Mourao & Ellis, 2022). Bland (2015b) describes drama in the classroom as "a magical box of tools; the more you take out of it, the more you find inside for future use" (p. 219). She shares the experience directly from the classroom of young learners. Their teacher has created a warm-up activity where children use all different kinds of finger puppets to interact with each other. If this activity is regularly repeated, it can be meaningful for language learning by using formulaic sequences, and practicing the social, physiological and affective dimensions of language (Bland, 2015c).

The above-stated is a type of unscripted drama, while scripted drama contributes to language learning by children's motivated reading among the readers and becoming acquainted with the sound patterns and meanings of a script among non-readers. The children who are not yet readers first guess or predict, then question, and then clarify the meaning (Bland, 2015c).

Research methodology

This section of the research paper is devoted to examining a series of studies focused on the early acquisition of foreign languages, specifically addressing the case of English as a foreign language in early childhood and preschool education settings.

Objective and research questions

Eight papers illustrating the EFL teaching practices and recommendations in pre-primary education have been selected using the available scientific search engines, metadata services, and digital libraries (ScienceDirect, ERIC, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar). Another criterion was that the study involves preschool children as participants since one of the purposes of this paper is to explore the research methodology options with children at such a young age[4].

Following the main objective of this paper, two research questions were formed, and they will be used as the overall guideline in this overview:

RQ1: What research approaches and instruments are used in the area of early learning and acquisition of English, primarily in preschool children?

RQ2: What are some of the main findings coming from contemporary research on early learning and acquisition of English as a foreign language?

A selection of studies is listed in Table 1, showing the main information about each research. More detailed descriptions are available in the following subsections.

Outlines of selected studies

This section presents the research methodology, participants, and findings of the selected studies. They are organized according to the selection of topics and teaching approaches explained in the theoretical part of this paper. In other words, they are presented as examples of empirical research in the area of early foreign language acquisition. One study represents TPR and songs, one represents the combination of literature, culture, and digital learning environment, two studies investigate reading, storytelling and songs, while three studies belong to the area of integrated teaching. The final part of the section summarizes and discusses the presented research designs and the most significant findings.

TPR and songs. In 2001, Ernst Suni Magnussen and Apisak Sukying reported on their research titled *The Impact of Songs and TPR on Thai Preschoolers' Vocab-*

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[4] The research described in this paper is part of a study conducted in the process of writing the first author's graduation thesis.

Table 1. Itemization of studies selected for analysis

Year	Author(s)	Title	Participants	Research instrument(s)
2007	Andreja Silić	Creating a stimulating environment for foreign- language communication in kindergarten	19 (3-6 years old) 9 boys 10 girls	action research with elements of ethnographic approach and case study: participant observation, video and audio recordings
2015	Penelope Robinson, Sandie Mourão & Nam Joon Kang	English learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: an investigation of their effectiveness	total number -unknown 16 – Portugal (5-6 years old) X – South Korea (preschool age)	a naturalistic and mainly qualitative approach: non-participant observation children's drawings photographs and video recordings and registers
2017	Fatma Kimsesiz, Emrah Dolgunsöz & M. Yavuz Konca	The effect of project-based learning in teaching EFL vocabulary to young learners of English: the case of pre-school children	28 (5-6 years old) 14 – experimental group 14 – control group	weekly vocabulary tests, observation checklists
2018	Sara Albaladejo Albaladejo, Yvette Coyle, & Julio Roca de Larios	Songs, stories, and vocabulary acquisition in preschool learners of English as a foreign language	17 (2-3 years old)	pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test design
2019	Ketevan Kara & Evrim Eveyik-Aydın	Effects of TPRS on very young learners' vocabulary acquisition	19 (4 years old)	pre-test-treatment-immediate post-tests-and delayed post-test design, receptive and productive picture tests in one-to-one sessions
2020	Carmen Lucas, Philip Hood, & Doreen Coyle	Blossoming in English: Preschool Children's Emergent Literacy Skills in English	15 (3-5 years old)	field notes, research diary, recordings, learners' portfolio of evidence
2021	Eleni Korosidou & Eleni Griva	"Listen to my story, play and interact": Greek preschool children learning English in a digital environment	26 (avg. 5.5 years old) 16 boys 10 girls	mid-term evaluation and post-test on vocabulary, teacher/researcher's journal, semi-structured interviews with the children
2021	Ernst Magnussen & Apisak Sukying	The impact of songs and TPR on Thai preschoolers' vocabulary acquisition	72 (4-5 years old) 22 – TPR group 22 – song group 28 – TPR + song group	mixed method research: quantitative data (2 vocabulary knowledge tests), qualitative data (video recordings)

ulary Acquisition. Their goal was to examine the participants' receptive and productive vocabulary through the effects of songs and TPR, as well as the contribution of participants' reactions to the accompanying teaching methods. The participants were 4 to 5-year-old preschool children in north-eastern Thailand. There was a total of 72 children divided into three groups: the TPR group, the singing group, and the TPR and song group (TPR&S). The instructor, who was also a researcher, was an experienced English preschool teacher.

The study collected both quantitative and qualitative data as it was designed as mixed-method research. The quantitative data included two vocabulary knowledge tests, while the qualitative data was a result of video recordings. Over the course of six weeks, for 30 minutes per day, children were expected to learn 12 target words using TPR, songs, and a mix of both methods, divided into those three groups. The results showed a positive effect among young learners. Researchers state that "the participants developed their receptive vocabulary knowledge more than their productive vocabulary knowledge throughout the intervention" and that "no teaching approach was significantly better than the others" (Magnussen & Sukying, 2021, p. 89). However, the authors imply that the mixed method of both TPR and songs seems as the best approach as it has the benefits of both methods and had the best scores on the productive vocabulary test. The qualitative data collected during the study revealed that the activities helped achieve the vocabulary. They were also welcoming and engaging, and children were willing to participate without the factor of stress. To conclude, TPR, songs, and TPR&S are recommended methods in early language teaching.

Literature, culture, and digital environment. An innovative longitudinal study, *"Listen to* my story, *play and interact": Greek preschool children learning English in a digital environment* was conducted by Eleni Korosidou and Eleni Griva in 2021. It was designed to meet the growing requirements for alternative teaching methods to compete with the needs of technologically literate young children. The study was part of a project that lasted two school years and included 26 pre-schoolers with no previous knowledge of the English language. The selected study focuses on the first year while the participants were still in preschool. The participants were 26 pre-schoolers in an urban area in northern Greece, and their average age was 5.5 years. The main objectives were to establish whether digital storytelling (DS) and educational technology can have an impact on pre-schoolers' receptive language skills and vocabulary development and to identify both the opportunities for interaction and potential difficulties in multimodal and gamified learning environments.

A special syllabus with an emphasis on raising children's awareness of multiculturalism and respecting different identities was designed and implemented for the

purpose of the research project. The syllabus consisted of 52 lessons intended to last 27 weeks. The teaching units included colours, numbers, family, animals, food, the weather, face and body parts, and clothes. In combination with typical teaching materials and methods, the program introduced multimodal stories with audio-visual content, animations, songs, links, educational robotics, and QR codes.

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using the following research instruments: mid-term evaluation and post-test on vocabulary, a teacher/researcher's journal, and semi-structured interviews with the children. The results of the mid-term and post-test on vocabulary imply that the children effectively acquired vocabulary, although the difference in results was not statistically significant. The qualitative data collected by the teacher/researcher's journal reveal that "DS[5] and educational tools employed in the current study had an important impact on pre-schoolers' language skills" (p. 17). By analysing the interview transcripts, researchers found that children enjoyed learning the English language through the activities involving DS, and liked the stories. The engaging content encouraged their active participation, while play-based digital learning activities attracted their interest. The researchers conclude that by integrating DS and gamification techniques and using engaging and motivating content, the study proved that it is possible to make a positive impact on effective language learning and develop positive attitudes towards foreign language learning (Korosidou & Griva, 2021).

Reading, storytelling, and songs. The study *Effects of TPRS on Very Young Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition* was conducted by Ketevan Kara and Evrim Eveyik-Aydın and published in 2019. Inspired by the importance of acquiring the English language in Turkey, and the Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), researchers conducted a study with 19 four-year-old children who previously attended English classes for 6 months in a private school in Istanbul. They advocate the TPRS approach and state that "some scholars agree that TPRS provides the right theoretical framework for very young learners to acquire a language by following the principles of Natural Approach and Total Physical Response" (Kara & Eveyik-Aydın, 2019, p. 136).

The main objectives were to establish whether the TPRS produces a short-term and a long-term effect on very young learners' L2 receptive and productive vocabulary acquisition and to determine which type of lexical knowledge benefits from the

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[5] "Digital storytelling combines the art of telling stories with a mixture of digital media, including text, pictures, recorded audio narration, music, and video. These multimedia elements are blended together using computer software, to tell a story that usually revolves around a specific theme or topic and often contains a particular point of view" (Robin, 2016, p. 17).

TPRS instruction more in the context of very young learners' L2 vocabulary acquisition. The TPRS treatment was carried out in the spring semester of the school year 2016/2017 and lasted for seven weeks during which the English language was taught 13 hours a week. Pre-test and post-test were administered. After carefully selecting the literature for the procedure, the researchers followed the three main steps for the implementation of storytelling with TPRS principles: (1) establishing meaning, (2) asking a story, and (3) reading.

The information was collected through 5-minute individual sessions with the participants. After collecting the data, the researchers found that "the mean scores of both receptive and productive immediate post-tests are considerably higher than those of corresponding pre-tests in all weeks" (p. 140) and that results show that TPRS had both a short-term and a long-term effect on L2 receptive and productive vocabulary acquisition. They could also confirm that the receptive type of lexical knowledge benefits more from TPRS instruction. However, there are a few limitations to be acknowledged, such as a small sample, limited target vocabulary, absence of a control group, a relatively short duration of a study, only four-year-old participants, and exclusively high-frequency vocabulary. To conclude, the authors advise that all mentioned limitations should be considered in future research on the effects that the TPRS methodology could have on very young English language learners (Kara & Eveyik- Aydın, 2019).

Another study, *Songs, stories, and vocabulary acquisition in preschool learners of English as a foreign language* was conducted by Sara Albaladejo Albaladejo, Yvette Coyle, and Julio Roca de Larios (2018). They emphasize that songs and stories are becoming more and more "popular and effective resources in the preschool classroom" (p. 116). The main goal of their research is to examine the effect of the exposure to target language input in the form of a story, a song, and a combination of a story and a song on the acquisition of lexis by young preschool EFL learners. Apart from that, they studied children's behaviour during storytelling and song sessions and its effect on the acquisition of new L2 vocabulary.

The participants were 22 preschool children aged between 2 and 3, attending a state school in Spain. Due to absences, there was a final of 17 children who fully participated in the study. The procedure lasted for 6 weeks and was conducted by the researcher Sara Albaladejo Albaladejo, who is also a qualified English teacher. The target vocabulary consisted of a total of 15 words. The research included a pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test with the following conditions:

> "i) story, in which the children are told a brief story ii) song, in which they are exposed to a traditional children's song and iii) song and story, during which

they first listen to a new story and then to a related song" (Albaladejo Albaladejo et al., 2018, p. 119).

Some of the data were collected with the use of video recordings of the sessions to examine children's engagement during the activities. The processing of the collected data resulted in statistical significance. The authors revealed that participants improved in developing the ability to recall the target vocabulary and that the input presentation modes had a positive effect on children's scores during the testing period. The results have shown that the most effective method for learning the vocabulary was through a story, and a combination of stories and songs. However, the results for a song as a teaching method were surprisingly low, which could be attributed to a non-relevant word choice that was presented in the chosen song.

The authors advocate using stories as a teaching resource due to their ability to provide a "meaningful and comprehensible context, motivational characters and events, and opportunities for teachers to use linguistic and paralinguistic support" (p. 125). They also recommend incorporating songs in classrooms but advise teachers, based on their findings, to make adjustments before playing songs, such as contextualizing the target vocabulary.

In their conclusion, Albaladejo Albaladejo and her colleagues advocate for more detailed future research involving a larger number of participants and English teachers familiar to children. This approach would facilitate research into productive lexical acquisition, types of songs and stories, and children's behavioural features during learning sessions.

Integrated teaching and project-based learning. Carmen Lucas, Phillip Hood, and Doreen Coyle conducted what they believe to be the first research on young native Portuguese speakers (3-5 years old) in the process of foreign language learning with an EFL pedagogic approach. The research *Blossoming in English: Preschool Children's Emergent Literacy Skills in English* was published in 2020. The main objective was "to explore to what extent the English as a foreign language (EFL) pedagogic approach is effective as defined as positively impacting emergent literacy skills" (p. 2).

The participants were 15 preschool children 3 to 5 years old in Portugal, attending a preschool institution that follows the National Guidelines for the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum. The materials for the study were prepared by following the principles of

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The study lasted for a whole academic year through 33 English lessons that took place every Friday and lasted for 45 minutes. The data was collected by taking field notes, writing a research diary, taking recordings of the lessons, and collecting learners' portfolios of evidence.

The results have shown that "introducing English as an additional language in a Portuguese preschool setting has a positive effect on children's emergent literacy in English" (p. 14). By providing children with positive surroundings that support learning, they showed interest in reading as well as in writing a new language. This study suggests that "young children – even in limited L2 environments, as is the case in Portugal – can develop emergent literacy in English and can indeed learn much about print before formal instructions begin" (p. 22). The researchers propose early English language instruction through innovative methods like CLIL. Based on the study's positive outcomes, they recommend further exploration in diverse national settings, emphasizing the need for a larger sample size to ensure the generalizability of findings.

Fatma Kimsesiz, Emrah Dolgunsöz, and M. Yavuz Konca (2017) conducted a study called *The effect of project-based learning in teaching EFL vocabulary to young learners of English: the case of pre-school children* in Turkey. Their research was based on the following questions:

> "What are the common techniques used in English classes in pre-schools in Turkey? Do teachers of English use PBL?
> Is there a relationship between motivation (observation scores) and learning gains (exam scores) of the PBL instructed group and the traditionally instructed group? If so, is there an effect of PBL instruction on learner motivation?
> Is there an effect of PBL on vocabulary learning performance of young learners at the end of an 8-week period?" (p. 429)

A total of 28 participants, aged between 5 and 6 years, were involved in the study conducted at a Turkish preschool institution. None of the participants had received English lessons before the study. The participants were evenly distributed into two groups: the experimental group and the control group. The study spanned 8 weeks, with sessions lasting 35 minutes each day. Throughout this period, both groups underwent weekly assessments through exams and observer checklists.

The experimental group received treatment with the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) without traditional methods. The same teacher conducted lessons in the control group by using traditional materials such as TPR, songs, games, and flashcards.

The findings indicate that "PBL instruction positively affected both learner motivation and EFL vocabulary learning gains" (p. 435). In contrast to traditional methods, children were more focused and active during PBL-instructed lessons. PBL offered quality language input, influenced motivation, and promoted peer cooperation. The researchers highlight survey results revealing the infrequent use of PBL

in preschool curricula. They aim to raise awareness of its positive effects on young children if well-planned. Educators are advised to explore and incorporate PBL, applicable to all grade levels, providing an active process fostering cooperation among children (p. 436).

Another study in this area*, English learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: an investigation of their effectiveness* was conducted by Penelope Robinson, Sandie Mourăo, and Nam Joon Kang and published in 2015. It is based on the guiding principles proposed by Mourão (2001), focusing on the one which states that "pre-primary English language teaching should include a classroom space and resources that will stimulate the use of the target language during child-initiated, free play activity" (Robinson et al., 2015, p. 7). By conducting a study that attempts to assess the value of English learning areas (ELAs) in pre-primary classrooms, the researchers were guided by the following questions:

> "1. Do ELAs, which are resourced to reflect the content of teacher-led EFL activities, have an impact on the children's learning of English?
> 2. What conditions or features in the ELA are most effective in stimulating target language use?
> 3. What evidence is there of English language learning?" (p. 9)

The participants were 16 preschool children from 5 to 6 years old in their second year of English in Portugal, and a group of preschool children in South Korea. The study started in October 2013 and lasted for 12 months including an orientation phase, an implementation phase, and data analysis phase, such as carrying out non-participant observations, examining children's drawings, taking photographs and video recordings, and keeping registers of how many children played in the ELAs and how often. The results suggest that "an approach to teaching English to pre-primary children that integrates teacher-led activities with an ELA that stimulates the use of the taught language, can have a positive effect on children's language development" (p. 21). They also show that the positive environment encouraged the children to use the English language. Children felt comfortable with each other and had fewer peer disagreements while they were engaged in free play activities in the ELA than in the other areas. There was a reported number of children who played by themselves but would also occasionally vocalize English words of relevance for their play. To conclude, a well-organized English learning area that contains teacher-led activities can create an effective and age-appropriate environment for early English language learning.

A study pertinent to the Croatian context titled *Creating a Stimulating Environment for Foreign Language Communication in Kindergarten* was conducted by

Andrea Silić and published in 2007. This research was motivated by the significance of early education and the need for a positive, natural setting for acquiring a second language in preschool. The study aimed to establish an environment that promotes communication in both the mother tongue and foreign language among preschool children (Silić, 2007).

The participants were 19 children from 3 to 6 years old attending a preschool institution in Zagreb. The study was carried out as action research with elements of an ethnographic approach and as a case study at the same time. The researcher had opted for a systematic participant observation approach to establish, observe, understand, evaluate, and eventually alter the conditions to make changes in education regarding early language learning. During the process, the need for communication in English was encouraged in different ways such as greeting, getting to know each other, expressing feelings, giving suggestions, etc. Children were exposed to audio and video materials, songs, TPR, and games in English (Silić, 2007).

By examining the materials collected through video and audio recordings, the researcher has come to the following conclusions. Children were able to acquire and separate the two languages without the negative effects of the exposure. Practicing how to communicate unrolls in parallel with practicing and learning how to adjust to different situations. Children learn by exploring those situations which interest them. That is why it is of great importance to create a positive and engaging environment to raise the child's attention by creating natural and practical real-life situations for them to have the need for communication (Silić, 2007).

Discussion

Most of the selected studies deal with the effects of various teaching methods and materials on vocabulary acquisition in preschool children. Apart from vocabulary, children's emergent literacy skills are studied. That can be attributed to the fact that other areas of language acquisition might be more challenging to research at such a young age: the selected studies include children between 2 and 6 years of age. Furthermore, the sample sizes range from 14 to 72 (see Table 1), which is usually not sufficient for determining statistical significance or other statistics-based conclusions.

The presented studies predominantly use the mixed method for collecting data, that is, quantitative and qualitative data are combined to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (see Table 1). Research instruments used to collect information from preschool children need to be age-appropriate, but at the same time, sufficiently precise so that the data is valid and suitable for fur-

ther analyses. The presented studies rely on *classroom observation* (e.g., Kimsesiz, Dolgunsöz, & Konca, 2017; Robinson et al., 2015; Silić, 2007), *semi-structured interviews* (e.g., Korosidou & Griva, 2021), picture-based *vocabulary tests* (e.g., Albaladejo Albaladejo et al., 2018; Kara & Eveyik- Aydın, 2019; Kimsesiz et al., 2017; Korosidou & Griva, 2021; Magnussen & Sukying, 2021). Along with that, some studies include *children's drawings* (e.g., Robinson et al., 2015), *video recordings* (e.g., Albaladejo Albaladejo et al., 2018; Magnussen & Sukying, 2021; Robinson et al., 2015; Silić, 2007), *photographs* (e.g., Robinson et al., 2015), *journal notes* (e.g., Korosidou & Griva, 2021; Lucas et al., 2020), *learners' portfolios* (e.g., Lucas et al., 2020), and *field notes* (Lucas et al., 2020). Understandably, conducting research with large samples of young children could be operationally demanding. For example, commonly used research instruments intended for adults, such as questionnaires, are easily administered and processed even with larger samples, but are not suitable for young children.

To sum up, the area of early learning and acquisition of English in preschool children requires mixed research methods and child-friendly approaches and instruments, which answers the *first research question* referring to the research approaches and instruments used in the area of early learning and acquisition of English. Apart from the child-friendly research instruments and methods, it is important to note that in some studies, preschool or English teachers were involved as researchers (e.g., Albaladejo Albaladejo et al., 2018; Magnussen & Sukying, 2021), which can be beneficial while gathering data from children who might be more relaxed during the process because they are interacting with a familiar person.

The eight selected studies reveal that effective L2 vocabulary acquisition in preschool children can be achieved with the use of *TPR* and *songs* (e.g. Magnussen & Sukying, 2021), multimodal digital *storytelling* and *gamification* techniques (e.g., Korosidou & Griva, 2021), *traditional storytelling* and songs (e.g., Albaladejo Albaladejo et al., 2018; Kara & Eveyik-Aydın, 2019), and creating real-life learning situations through *integrated learning techniques* (e.g., Robinson et al., 2015; Silić, 2007) and *project-based learning* (e.g., Kimsesiz et al., 2017). Apart from that, the early introduction of English as a foreign language through CLIL creates a constructive and stimulating environment for the development of emerging literacy skills (Lucas et al., 2020).

The abovementioned conclusions answer the *second research question* related to the main findings coming from contemporary research on early learning and acquisition of English as a foreign language. They are mostly in line with earlier studies, some of which are mentioned in the theoretical part of this paper. However, all these findings should be taken tentatively because they are coming from several examples

of empirical research attempting to investigate early L2 acquisition. As most of the study authors suggest, further research needs to be carried out to confirm and expand the significance of their findings.

Conclusion

This paper presented an overview of relevant theoretical aspects related to foreign language learning and acquisition in the pre-primary context. Despite ongoing debates and a lack of consensus among theoreticians regarding the Critical Period Hypothesis, it remains a contentious subject for linguistics researchers. Those advocating for the "the younger, the better" approach argue that children can effectively learn a foreign language early without it interfering with their mother tongue. The theories and research discussed here support the idea that introducing a foreign language, particularly English, in preschool, before it becomes mandatory in primary education, is beneficial. On the other hand, conducting research with pre-schoolers requires careful planning, typically involving methods such as observation, picture-based vocabulary tests, short semi-structured interviews, and data collection through video and audio recordings, children's portfolios, drawings, journal notes, etc.

The examined studies indicate a positive impact of age-appropriate, enjoyable, and educational language teaching methods on young learners. Specifically, children demonstrate enthusiasm for learning when exposed to approaches involving songs, literature, and physical activities. It is advisable to incorporate these teaching materials into project-based, integrated, and digitalized activities to create realistic and life-like learning conditions. This approach enhances children's active participation, fosters improved peer relationships, and facilitates English language learning throughout the process, benefiting their ongoing learning. However, further research, ideally with a larger participant pool, is essential to better understand the learning needs of contemporary pre-schoolers as foreign language learners. This need is particularly significant in the context of the prevalent use of modern technology and digitalization, now considered standard in language teaching.

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Strani jezik u ranom i predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju: pregled teorije i istraživanja

Sažetak

Prikazom teorijskog okvira i primjera relevantnih istraživanja o vrlo ranom usvajanju stranog jezika u svijetu i u Hrvatskoj, cilj je rada podizanje svijesti o pozitivnim učincima učenja engleskog jezika u ranom i predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju. Teorijska podloga za vrlo rano učenje stranog jezika nadopunjena je opisima suvremenih metoda poučavanja koje su utemeljene na učenju kroz igru, okolini, književnosti i kulturi (kao ključne komponente). Nadalje, rad daje pregled istraživanja obuhvaćajući osam studija o vrlo ranom usvajanju jezika u ranom i predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju. U fokusu analize jest uzorak ispitanika, istraživačke metode i rezultati tih studija. Kriteriji odabira tih studija temelje se na njihovoj relevantnosti za jezična područja spomenuta u teorijskom dijelu. Analizom postaje očito da istraživači koriste kombinaciju metoda prilagođenih dobi i djetetu prijateljskih kvantitativnih i kvalitativnih metoda. Iako zbog malih uzoraka ispitanika spomenuta istraživanja možda ne podržavaju generalizaciju, njihovi rezultati dosljedno pokazuju pozitivan utjecaj metode odnosno pristupa Potpuni tjelesni odgovor (engl. *Total Physical Response*), glazbe, književnosti, integriranog i projektnog učenja, kao i digitalizacije na usvajanje rječnika i vještine rane pismenosti djece rane i predškolske dobi.

Ključne riječi: engleski kao strani jezik; rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje; vrlo rano usvajanje jezika