

Early Foreign Language Learning in Pre-Primary Education: Principles and Strategies

REVIEW PAPER

Received: 3. 2. 2025.

Accepted: 24. 4. 2025.

UDK

[37.091.3:81'243]:373.2

37.012:81'243

37.015.3

<https://doi.org/10.59549/n.166.1-2.4>

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Abstract

This paper examines the foundational principles and practical strategies for early foreign language learning in pre-primary education. In particular, it draws on the significance of a child-centred, play-based approach that integrates language learning into daily routines and activities. Within these approaches, six guiding principles for early language learning are described. Effective strategies such as circle time, songs, games, storytelling, and peer interaction are discussed, all of which align with principles of developmentally appropriate practice, multi-sensory engagement, and meaningful communication. The paper concludes with implications for educators and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: child-centred approach; early language learning; play-based learning; pre-primary education.

1. Introduction

Pre-primary education plays a crucial role in a child's early development, focusing on social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic skills. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in integrating foreign language learning into pre-primary education. As a result, early childhood education programs are increasingly including foreign languages, although in most EU countries they are not yet a compulsory part of pre-primary curricula (Ellis, 2019)¹. This trend reflects a societal shift towards multilingualism and a recognition of the cognitive and social benefits of early language exposure. In Europe, this shift is particularly evident, as multilingualism is seen as a key component of cultural identity and economic integration within the European Union (European Commission, 2011). The European Commission (2005, p. 8) envisions a multilingual Europe where "every citizen has practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue."

The Policy handbook (European Commission, 2011) emphasizes that early language learning should be seamlessly integrated into the existing early childhood curriculum, rather than introduced as a separate, formal subject. This necessitates a shift from a teacher-centered approach to a child-centered approach that prioritizes exploration, discovery, and play (Edelenbos et al., 2006). This paper provides an overview of the main approaches and six guiding principles of inspiring language learning². Practical strategies for effective early foreign language learning in pre-primary education are presented, drawing upon research and best practices in the field.

2. Principles of Early Foreign Language Learning

According to Mikulec and Rogulj (2023), it is more important to adapt the teaching to the target group than to adapt the teaching to the prescribed rules of a particular method. In other words, teaching becomes child-centered. Within the child-centered approach, learning is centered around the child's interests, needs, and learning styles, fostering a supportive and stimulating environment that encourages curiosity, exploration, and active participation (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). In the European context, this approach is emphasized in the European Commission's Policy Handbook (2011), which advocates for a shift from formal instruction to a more holistic, child-centered model that integrates language learning into everyday activities.

¹ For an extensive overview of foreign language policies in ECEC in some European countries, see Mikulec and Rogulj (2023).

² <https://www.ecml.at/inspiringearlylearning>

Very young learners are restless by nature, and they lose interest quickly. Trying to teach anything at this age is primarily a pedagogical task, so teachers of very young learners need to familiarize themselves with all relevant pedagogical principles “in order to find the best ways to ‘talk’ to the children’s minds and ‘touch’ their hearts” (Alexiou, 2015, p. 286). Teachers need to be very talented, imaginative, and creative so as to keep the children’s minds active and their interest alive. If the teacher does not know the teaching methods appropriate for this age, this opportunity may be forever missed.

Another approach that should be at the heart of language learning, play-based learning, is considered the cornerstone of early childhood education (Elkind, 2007). This is in line with UNICEF (2018, p. 7), which states that “Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills. For this reason, play opportunities and environments that promote play, exploration and hands-on learning are at the core of effective pre-primary programmes”. In Europe, play-based learning is widely recognized as an effective method for early language acquisition. For example, the ELLiE project³ (Enever, 2011) found that children in European pre-primary classrooms who engaged in play-based language activities showed greater motivation and language proficiency compared to those in more formal settings. This presupposes that the foreign language is not supposed to be taught or even instructed formally; the child should be educated through the language with communicative activities where language is used in meaningful contexts that resemble preschool practices (Mourão, 2019; Murphy et al., 2016). Integrating language learning into playful activities such as games, songs, stories, and imaginative play provides a natural and engaging context for language acquisition, allowing children to engage with language through exploration and interaction (Whitebread et al., 2017). For instance, a study conducted in Portugal showed that participating in play-based English learning areas provides children with opportunities to experiment and choose, make mistakes, decide for themselves, and become autonomous learners (Mourão, 2014).

³ Early Language Learning in Europe

2.1. Six guiding principles for inspiring language learning in the early years

The European Centre for Modern Languages project group, Inspiring Language Learning from the Early Years⁴ (Schank et al., 2021) identified six principles that form the foundation of inspiring language learning for young children. Aligning with the child-centered and play-based approaches, these principles place the child at the heart of the learning process. Language learning is recognized and approached as an ongoing, interactive process that builds on what young learners already know. The principles focus on children's learning pathways rather than emphasizing assessment strategies, taking into account their needs and preferred ways of learning. Following is a brief description of the principles proposed by Schank et al. (2021).

Language learning is holistic. This principle recognizes that children explore and interact with the world through all their senses — sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste — while using various modes of communication, such as spoken or written words, drawings, gestures, and body movements, to describe and share their experiences. This holistic approach to learning, including language learning, acknowledges that children learn in integrated and interconnected ways, respecting and encouraging the diverse ways in which children express themselves.

Language learning actively relies on the existing linguistic repertoire of each child. This principle emphasizes that language learning should build on the linguistic knowledge and experiences that children already possess. By connecting new language learning to their existing linguistic repertoire, children can make meaningful connections and enhance their language skills.

Language learning is meaningful. Language learning should be relevant and meaningful to children's lives. It should be integrated into their daily experiences and activities, making it a natural part of their world. This approach ensures that language learning is not an isolated activity but one that is deeply connected to their everyday lives. Young children's language learning is closely linked to their surrounding world (i.e., their homes, toys, pets, food); their actions and interactions are described with words and a focus is put on listening and speaking skills supplemented by visual representations, concrete objects and written words where appropriate.

Language learning is active learning. Active learning empowers children to express their thoughts and experiences, describing, explaining, debating, analyzing,

⁴ Core thoughts on language learning along with practical examples are presented on the ECML website <https://www.ecml.at/inspiringearlylearning> which responds to the question "What makes language learning inspiring for young children?"

and sharing what they have learned. They naturally draw upon all their language resources to communicate effectively, switch between languages, translate, and use whatever linguistic tools they have to make themselves understood. This approach recognizes and supports the changing and dynamic ways learners use language as they build knowledge and comprehension, whether in a single-language or multilingual environment. Active learning involves children in hands-on, interactive activities that engage their senses and encourage exploration and discovery. This principle aligns with the idea that children learn best when they are actively involved in the learning process, rather than passively receiving information.

Language learning is an ongoing process. Language learning is a continuous process that evolves over time. Therefore, it is important to provide consistent and ongoing opportunities for language learning, allowing children to develop their skills gradually and naturally. Learning is intricately linked to a child's overall development — physical, emotional, social, and cognitive. As children mature, their learning shifts from concrete, contextual understanding to more abstract and specific concepts. Literacy skills, alongside listening and speaking, become increasingly vital for expanding their linguistic abilities. Existing language knowledge forms a foundation for learning new languages, enabling more complex expression.

Language learning is continuous and integrated. Language learning is interconnected across all languages a child knows or has encountered, including their home language(s), the language(s) used in school, any foreign languages, and various spoken and written styles. Continuity in language learning means integrating it seamlessly into teaching and learning practices. Children need consistent opportunities to use languages in relevant contexts, and they should receive support in navigating the specific language demands of various situations. Learning should be seamlessly integrated into the daily routines and activities of pre-primary education. Consistent exposure helps children connect new information to what they already know, creating a strong foundation for developing proficiency in diverse language use.

3. Practical strategies supporting the principles for early foreign language learning

Circle Time. Circle time, also known as “carpet time” (Mourão, 2015, p. 58) is a widely used strategy in pre-primary education, serving as a structured opportunity for whole-group interaction and language practice. During circle time, together with the teacher children usually gather on the carpet in a circle to engage in activities that promote social interaction, language development, and a sense of community. This

practice aligns with the provision that early language learning should be carried out in a stimulating and inclusive environment (European Commission, 2011).

Effective circle time activities should be interactive and engaging with opportunities “to sing, listen to stories, play games, and talk” (Mourão & Ellis, 2020, p. 59). For example, saying or singing hello, engaging with a class puppet, doing routine activities can set the stage for reinforcing vocabulary, pronunciation, and for building confidence in using the language. Circle time can open or close an English session. For very young learners, Mourão and Ellis (2023) identify some ground rules for implementing circle time, such as coming to the circle empty-handed, sitting with legs crossed, listening to what others have to say, speaking one at a time, rising the hand when wanting to speak. Circle time can also be carried out in the form of a community circle during which children and the teacher talk adhering to rules such as only the person holding the talking stick is allowed to speak (Campbell & McMartin, 2017). The community circle can be implemented daily at the beginning of the day in schools or kindergartens, promoting interconnectedness, equality, and continuity (Campbell & McMartin, 2017).

Key elements of effective circle time for language learning include repetition and predictability, multi-sensory engagement, active participation, and peer interaction. For instance, starting each circle time with the same greeting song in the target language provides a predictable routine that children can anticipate and participate in confidently. Using props like puppets, flashcards, or real objects during storytelling or vocabulary games can make language learning more tangible and memorable. Activities like “Simon Says” or “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” in the target language allow children to associate words with actions, reinforcing their understanding through physical movement. Activities during circle time, such as songs, rhymes, and storytelling, engage children’s senses (e.g., hearing, sight, and movement) and promote social interaction, aligning with the principle that **language learning is holistic**.

Daily Routines. Routine activities are frequently mentioned in the context of teaching foreign languages to young learners (Mikulec & Rogulj, 2023). A routine is a “familiar series of actions related to an established schedule” (Mourão & Ellis, 2020, p. 61) which can be anything from lining up, walking down the hall. Being familiar, they help children develop a sense of safety and self-confidence (Mourão & Ellis, 2020; Samuelsson, 2021) but also a sense of control, responsibility and independence (Mourão & Ellis, 2020). Integrating language learning into daily routines, such as greetings, mealtimes, and transitions, makes it a natural part of the child’s experience. A daily routine can be established with a picture schedule which includes an opening routine, timeline, transition, and closing routine. The pictures

serve as cues for the words and activities that follow. This also helps the development of sequencing in terms of children understanding what is happening now, what comes next and what has already happened (Council of Europe (ECML/CELV), 1994-2025). The day can start with a greeting ritual in the target language, such as saying “Good morning” and asking “How are you?” with responses such as “I am fine” or “I am happy”. It can also be a ritual during which teachers take attendance or discuss the weather, helping children associate the language with everyday activities. Similarly, during transitions, simple commands like “Please stand up” or “Let’s go to the circle” can be given in the target language. At mealtimes, teachers can use the target language when setting the table, describing the food, asking questions about preferences, counting the number of plates and utensils, e.g. “I have an apple” or “This is delicious”. The target language can be used during outdoor activities when giving instructions for games (e.g., “Run to the tree” or “Jump over the line”) or describing nature (e.g., “The sky is blue” or “The leaves are green”).

Furthermore, incorporating songs, rhymes, and fingerplays into daily routines is an effective way to provide repetitive language exposure in a fun and engaging manner. These activities are particularly useful for young learners because they combine language with movement, rhythm, and repetition, which are essential for language acquisition. Moreover, Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2023) point out that classroom routine, storytelling, songs and rhymes, and playful engaging tasks involving movement can all offer learning opportunities without inducing anxiety. For example, a simple greeting song such as “Good Morning” can be used at the start of the day to welcome children, but also to set a positive tone and encourage children to use English in a meaningful context. Similarly, a clean-up song can be used to signal the end of an activity and the start of tidying up, helping children associate the target language with everyday tasks.

During mealtimes, teachers can use songs to introduce vocabulary related to food. For instance, the song “Apples and Bananas” can be adapted to include other foods, helping children learn vocabulary in a fun and interactive way. After meals, a “Thank You” song can be used to teach polite expressions, reinforcing gratitude and polite language in the target language. The daily routines described build on the linguistic knowledge and experiences that children already possess while new language learning is connected to what children already know, making it more meaningful and accessible. They also align with the principle that **language learning is continuous and integrated**.

Games for Active Participation. Following the principle that **language learning is active learning**, engaging children in a variety of games encourages active participation, language use, and problem-solving. Games can be adapted to suit different

learning objectives and can be used to practice vocabulary or pronunciation. Active participation can be achieved with memory matching games featuring pictures and words in the target language (e.g., animals, colors, or food). Children take turns flipping cards and saying the word aloud when they find a match. When children design their own cards, the game becomes more meaningful while language learning is active. A game called “What’s Missing?” can be used to teach English vocabulary related to animals and colors. Games like “What’s Missing?” or “I Spy” require children to actively use language to solve problems or complete tasks, promoting active learning. *Bingo* games with pictures of animals, food, numbers, or other familiar themes can be an engaging way to reinforce vocabulary in the target language. As words are called out, children listen attentively and mark the corresponding images on their cards, promoting active listening and recognition skills in a fun and interactive manner. Participating in a scavenger hunt can be another fun learning activity. The teacher hides objects around the classroom and gives children clues in the target language to find them (e.g., “Find something red” or “Find something round”).

Storytelling and Picturebooks. Reading and sharing stories in the target language exposes children to rich language, fosters imagination, and promotes cultural understanding. Additionally, storytelling and reading picturebooks support the principle that **language learning actively relies on the existing linguistic repertoire of each child**. Reading stories to children in the target language allows them to connect new vocabulary and phrases to familiar concepts and experiences, building on their existing knowledge. The vivid illustrations in picturebooks can start discussions and, even in contexts with limited exposure to the target language, support later use of the second language (L2) when children’s first language is initially used (Mourão, 2015, p. 75). Additionally, these illustrations enhance vocabulary acquisition and comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002). The appeal of picturebooks lies in the fact that children readily revisit familiar stories, enjoying repeated readings and listens. The tactile experience of handling and exploring books is often a source of joy for young children, which often inspires imaginative play such as pretending to read. Illustrations which aid reception, can also prompt students to create their own stories either in their mother tongue or another language (Walsh, 2003). This demonstrates the affordance of active, meaningful, and integrated language learning. The structure of certain stories further enhances engagement. For example, chain stories like *The Mitten* authored and illustrated by Jan Brett, or Laura Numeroff’s *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (illustrated by Felicia Bond) captivate children with their linked sequences. Cumulative tales, such as Dr. Seuss’s *Green Eggs and Ham* or Eric Carle’s *Today is Monday*, build upon previous elements, creating a satisfying rhythm. Repetitive stories like *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (by

Bill Martin Jr.) also draw children in with their predictable patterns. In other words, being read to is also a highly enjoyable experience, all of which fosters a love of stories and reading (Narančić Kovač, 2016; Reilly & Ward, 1997). Moreover, regularly reading stories in the target language exposes children to rich language, and if selected and presented in an engaging way fosters a continuous interest in learning. That supports the principle that **language learning is not a one-time event but a continuous process** that evolves over time. In addition to the printed picturebooks, there are online resources for language teachers and learners of all ages. The website <https://globalstorybooks.net/> provides illustrated stories in many languages which the teachers can read, teach, download, and listen to.

Storytelling, according to Reilly and Ward (1997) has the potential to create a close and intimate atmosphere, which can be achieved by having children sit in a semicircle on the carpet or cushions around the storyteller. As opposed to reading, storytelling establishes a connection between the teller and children primarily in eye-contact. Children focus on the storyteller's facial expressions, mimicry, voice, body movement and other visual aids, and in that way engage in the story. As Mourão and Ellis (2021) report, without the effective use of mime and gesture to support understanding, children may lose motivation. The greatest advantage of storytelling is exposing students to longer, contextualized language expressions (Pinter, 2017). Children exposed to storytelling have shown better results in listening comprehension tasks, vocabulary development, improved ability to organize narrative thinking, and increased intellectual development (Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). In addition, stories undoubtedly develop students' intercultural competences, which has been proven by research (Ghosn, 2013).

Dramatic Play and Role-Playing. Role-playing allows children to explore different social roles and express themselves creatively, integrating language learning with emotional and social development. For example, children can play a simple restaurant scenario, ordering food and drinks in the target language, or act out short plays based on familiar stories. Children actively engage in role-playing scenarios, such as pretending to be shopkeepers or customers, which encourages them to use the target language such as "How much is this?" and "Thank you!" in a dynamic and interactive way. In that respect, drama and role-play support the principle that **language learning is active learning** and that **children learn best when they are actively involved in the process**. Additional examples could be "Doctor's office", where a pretend doctor's office is set up and children can role-play as doctors and patients, using phrases such as "Where does it hurt?" or "Take this medicine" in the target language; "Airport or Train Station", where children can role-play as travelers, ticket sellers, or pilots, using phrases like "Where are you going?" or "Your

ticket, please” or “Post Office” set up, where children can “send” letters and packages, using phrases like “I want to send this letter” or “How much does it cost?”. Role-playing scenarios like the ones mentioned allow children to use language in a multi-sensory, interactive context. When participating in such activities, children naturally draw upon all their language resources to communicate effectively, switch between languages, translate, and use whatever linguistic tools they have to make themselves understood.

Peer Interaction and Collaboration. When children work together on tasks, they draw on their shared experiences and knowledge, making language learning more relatable and accessible. Encouraging peer interaction and collaboration allows children to learn from each other, develop communication skills, and build social relationships (Vygotsky, 1978). Activities such as pair work, small group projects, and language exchange games can provide opportunities for children to practice their language skills with their peers. For example, children can work in pairs to complete a puzzle while using English to describe the pieces and give instructions to their partners. In language exchange pairs children who speak different home languages can be encouraged to teach each other simple words or phrases in their respective languages. Group art projects are collaborative art projects in which children can create a mural or collage while describing their work in the target language (e.g., “I am drawing a tree” or “This is a big sun”). Children can also work in pairs or small groups to build something using building blocks or LEGO© sets while using the target language to describe their creations (e.g., “We are building a tall tower”). Another engaging activity is the *Float? Sink? Let’s find out!* where children explore which objects float, and which objects sink. Objects to experiment with can be a piece of paper, a spoon, a pencil, a plastic bottle, a key, an orange/apple, a cork, small plastic toys ... and whatever the teacher finds suitable to play the game.⁵ Active learning encourages children to express themselves and to put their experiences into words while they describe and explain, argue and analyze, pair and share knowledge. Collaborative activities such as group art projects or building challenges integrate language learning into social and creative activities supporting the principle that **language learning is continuous and integrated**. Furthermore, they allow children to draw on their shared knowledge and experiences, making language learning more relatable and therefore **building on their existing linguistic repertoires**.

⁵ The game is explained in detail at <https://www.ecml.at/Portals/1/5MTP/Schank/documents/Float-and-sink.pdf>

Conclusion

Foreign language learning in pre-primary education offers numerous benefits for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. By adhering to the principles of child-centered learning, play-based approaches, and multi-sensory engagement, educators can create a stimulating and enjoyable learning environment that fosters a love of language and prepares children for future language learning success. The six guiding principles for early language learning — holistic, building on the existing repertoires, meaningful, active, ongoing, and integrated — are effectively supported by the practical strategies outlined in the paper. Circle time, daily routines, games, storytelling, dramatic play, and peer interaction all align with these principles, creating a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate approach to early foreign language learning. In addition to promoting language acquisition, they also foster a sense of community and cultural understanding. However, creating immersive, language-rich environments demands a solid pre-service teacher training program which can equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge. Ongoing in-service professional development is necessary to support educators' continued growth and adaptation in the field. Above all, effective implementation of these principles requires a commitment to reflective practice and a collaborative approach to professional learning. Future research in early foreign language learning should focus on teacher training, inclusivity, technology, and cultural competence, as these have not been addressed in the present study.

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Učenje stranoga jezika u ranom i predškolskom odgoju: načela i strategije

Sažetak

U ovome se radu istražuju temeljna načela i praktične strategije za rano učenje stranoga jezika u predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju. Naglasak je na važnosti pristupa usmjerenog na dijete i igru, koji prirodno integrira učenje jezika u dječje dnevne rutine i aktivnosti. Unutar ovih pristupa opisano je šest vodećih načela za rano učenje jezika. Raspravljaju se učinkovite strategije kao što su krug, pjesme, igre, pričanje priča i interakcija s vršnjacima, a sve su u skladu sa spomenutim načelima te načelima usmjerenima na djetetov razvoj, multisenzorni angažman i smislenu komunikaciju. U zaključku se navode implikacije za odgojitelje i prijedlozima za buduća istraživanja.

Ključne riječi: dječji pristup; predškolski odgoj; rano učenje jezika; učenje temeljeno na igri; višejezičnost.

