

ELLiE

Early Language Learning in Europe

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Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE)

Summary of Findings

1 Introduction: the ELLiE research project set out to establish what is realistically achievable in school contexts where relatively limited amounts of curriculum time are available for second and foreign language learning. The large scale of this study offers empirical evidence, underpinning clear indicators, to guide policy makers, schools and the wider community in the design and forward planning of future curricula to effectively support children in their early FL development, with due regard to the many other expectations placed on primary school curricula today. The findings of the study are expected to be of relevance in Europe and beyond.

2 Project Approaches: the study has employed a mixed method approach to exploring the context for 1,200 young language learners with the aim of providing a longitudinal perspective of their learning experience from viewpoints including: the learner, the teacher, the school, parents and the wider community. Drawing from a range of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods the research team have aimed to develop a broad, transcontextual account of the varied experiences of young children learning FLs in European primary schools today.

3 Findings: The following is a short summary of key findings prepared in September 2010. The ELLiE research team anticipates that the review and discussion phase to which delegates will contribute during the Warsaw meeting will contribute to a final Executive Summary to be available at www.ellieresearch.eu following Project completion in December 2010.

KEY FINDINGS

Policy implementation

- Six of the seven ELLiE countries expect children to begin learning a foreign language from six or seven years of age, if not earlier.
- Despite substantial development in some countries, there is insufficient pre-service and in-service teacher education for both language competency and age-appropriate language teaching skills in most ELLiE country contexts.
- Teachers need a minimum competency level of B1, with a preferred level of C1 to facilitate an appropriate context for early language learning (CEFR levels).
- All seven ELLiE countries have newly designed policies for early language learning introduced since 2005 and are steadily building expertise.

The Learner

- Children's attitudes to foreign language learning and their motivation change over time. They are often related to the amount of exposure to the language outside school and their parents' support. In the ELLiE study, children's own sense of achievement in the foreign language also appeared to be a factor.
- In 2008 approximately one fifth of the learners had never been exposed to the FL, but by 2010 over one third reported some FL exposure. It seems that over the three years of the study the average exposure had steadily increased.
- In class, children preferred to learn through game-like activities and those which involved learning new vocabulary and singing.
- Perception of how good they are at FL learning varies among children and changes over time.

The School

- Principals highlight factors that can sustain or affect children's language learning including: staff turnover, teacher training opportunities, lesson length and frequency, together with the availability of teaching aids and materials.
- Principals and teachers are very positive about the use of multimedia for foreign language learning in primary schools, acknowledging its unique potential for providing real examples of native speaker language in authentic situations.
- The amount and type of involvement of schools in international contacts and projects tends to be related to the children's linguistic achievements and attitudes.
- Parents' involvement in their children's foreign language learning at primary school is important and the kinds of involvement seem to be related to children's linguistic achievement.

The Teacher

- In ELLiE schools, changes in children's attitudes towards foreign language learning from year to year were often sensitive to teacher change.
- The amount of target language use by the teacher in the classroom seems to be related to students' oral production. The teacher's use varies according to the needs of the task, but a general average of approximately 60% seems to provide a valuable model for learners.
- The teachers' frequent use of translation between languages seems to affect children's oral fluency in the second/ foreign language.

The Home

- Analysis indicated a significant correlation between parents' education and young learners' linguistic outcomes across all contexts.
- Similarly, a statistically significant correlation was found between children's Informal contact with the target language (i.e. through holidays and family friends) and young learners' linguistic outcomes.
- Among those countries in which the target language is English, there is a wide variety of degrees of exposure, ranging from an average of less than five hours a week to more than 13 hours per week. Some children are exposed to English for more than 20 hours per week.
- In the ELLiE country context where French or Spanish was the target language almost all children had less than five hours' exposure per week to the foreign language and very few had ever met native speakers of Spanish or French.