Teaching a Modern Language to Children at Primary School: Making It Work for All

Richard Johnstone
University of Stirling, Scotland UK
r.m.johnstone@stir.ac.uk

Abstract
The teaching of a modern foreign language (in many cases, English) to children at primary school is a major policy priority in many countries across the world. In order to develop a well-informed policy, it is necessary to be clear about the influence of the “age” factor and to avoid any assumption that merely by beginning “early” one guarantees success. In fact, it is argued that each age brings its own advantages and disadvantages for learning an additional language, and some examples are given of those areas in which younger learners appear to enjoy an advantage, and of those other areas where the advantage seems to lie more with older learners. For a policy on modern foreign languages at primary school to succeed, it is necessary to go beyond achieving a predictable level of success in a relatively small number of “showcase” schools which operate in favourable circumstances and to address those factors which apply to all schools in each particular country, including those in less favoured circumstances. Four different factors are briefly discussed and exemplified, either by reference to published international research findings or to the writer’s own personal experience gained in observing classes in different countries. The four sets of factors are: societal, provision, process, and individual/group, and each has some influence on the outcomes of modern foreign languages education at primary school.

Key Words: foreign language teaching, primary school education, language policy
INTRODUCTION

This article grew out of a series of talks which I was invited to give in October and November 2008 at conferences on ELL (Early Language Learning) in Beijing, Hefei, Seoul, and Taipei. I am grateful to the editorial committee of the present journal for affording me the opportunity to develop these talks in writing. Each talk was in some ways different from the others, because the audiences varied from one location to the next, and my article makes no attempt to cover everything that was presented. However, in one way or another, the talks all addressed the following questions: (1) What is special about young language learners? (2) What is ELL in primary school education? (3) What insights can we share about ELL in primary schools? (4) What pointers are there for the future?

Each of the above questions will be discussed in turn. Needless to say, my present discussion can only just touch upon them. To deal with them comprehensively and in proper depth would require books (plural) rather than article (singular). Nonetheless, even in a short article (singular) there may still be some merit in attempting to highlight these questions, particularly if ELL in primary schools is to succeed as a large-scale policy development, because those involved in overseeing or managing large-scale policy development generally consider themselves to be busy people who don’t have the time to read books (plural). The term “large-scale policy development” is important. The real challenge is not to be brilliantly successful in a small number of privileged schools but to be genuinely and generally successful across large numbers of schools in the state system of any
particular country, including those schools located in settings of socio-economic disadvantage.

**What is Special about Young Language Learners?**

There is something about a child’s acquisition of his/her first language which verges on the magical. If we think of children across the world who are born on any given day, it is not the case that the child is programmed to acquire the particular language of the parents, e.g. a Japanese child of Japanese parents being programmed to acquire Japanese, and a Spanish child of Spanish parents being programmed to acquire Spanish. On the contrary, we have to assume that a child is programmed to acquire any language. In other words, all children are born with a universal potential for language acquisition, or as Pinker (1994) has put it, with a “language instinct.” I am not claiming that this “language instinct” is the only factor influencing a child’s language development, but what seems almost magical is that, if we think of all children born on any particular day, this universal potential which they all possess even before birth will within the first three years of life have transformed itself into over 5,000 different languages across the world, each with its own vocabulary, grammar, sound system and network of meanings. This transformation of the universal into the highly differentiated and specific is remarkable, indeed (with the possible exception of the human spirit) maybe the most remarkable capacity that human beings possess.

It is well-established that if a child is born into a home or local community environment in which two or more languages are used,
then the child will be likely to acquire these languages gradually in a way that seems natural. However, when we think of teaching languages at primary school, the setting is very different, particularly if we are talking about a “foreign” language. The child will be in the same class as 20, 30, 40 or even more children, usually with one teacher who is the source of the additional language but who may not be a fluent speaker of it and who is likely to be a general class teacher who teaches a range of other things in addition to the particular language. Moreover, the amount of time that is available for learning the foreign language is likely to be limited to only a few minutes per day and with starting points that may vary considerably from one country to another, e.g. in some counties the starting point may be age 5 or earlier while in others it may be as late as 12. In this sort of context, the natural “instinctive” processes which children seem to bring into play in the acquisition of their first language(s) may not have very much opportunity to be activated with regard to the additional language they are learning. Indeed, if we consider the so-called “critical period hypothesis” which states that there is an optimum age, after which the instinctive capacity which children possess begins to atrophy, we note that recent reviews of the published research on this (e.g. Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000; Scovel, 2000) do not lend strong support to the view that in institutional contexts young children are better adapted for additional-language learning than are older learners.

A major authority on “the age factor” is Singleton, who in a series of publications (e.g. Singleton, 1989, 2000, 2001) convincingly demonstrates that there are several dimensions of language
proficiency, some of which seem to be influenced by age but others less or not so. Singleton also shows that there can be a big difference in children’s acquisition of an additional language, depending on whether they are in a naturalistic or an instructed context; and he concludes that an early start can make a difference “in the long run,” provided it is accompanied by good teaching and a supportive school context. These wise words seem to go well with the equally wise words of Stern (1976) who claimed that each age brings with it certain benefits and certain drawbacks. This leads to two related questions: In what ways do younger learners have an advantage over older learners? In what ways do older learners have an advantage over younger learners?

In a research review publication for the Council of Europe (Johnstone, 2001), I identified a number of benefits which researchers seem to believe go with younger learners (let us say, aged five or younger). These are that younger learners seem able to:

- access an instinctive language-acquisition capacity (of the sort already mentioned above);
- reproduce the sound system of the additional language (it is commonly held, for example, that the younger the beginner, the better the chance of obtaining an accent and intonation which resemble that of the native-speaker; though it has to be said that nowadays, and with some justification, that the native-speaker is no longer necessarily considered as being the most appropriate model);
- be less language anxious; in Low, Brown, Johnstone, and Pirrie, (1995) for example, I reported on a small study in which I found
8-year-old learners to be markedly less language anxious than their 11-year-old counterparts in the same schools.

In addition, by virtue of the fact that they begin earlier, they have:

• more time available overall ("time" is a major factor when we think of learning an additional language at school, particularly when it is linked to other factors including pre-eminently "good teaching");

• more opportunity to form productive links between their first language and the additional language they are learning, and thereby develop metalinguistic awareness;

• more opportunity to allow natural acquisition and more formal learning processes over time to complement each other (by this I mean that if children absorb certain words and patterns holistically and in pre-fabricated "chunks" in the first instance, they may be able to re-visit these later but this time in more analytical terms);

• more time in which to integrate their learning of an additional language into their general cognitive, social, emotional and cultural development, and hence to exercise a positive and formative influence on their sense of identity. With older beginners, by contrast, their identity may already largely be formed.

In my opinion, the above potential benefits can justify an early start on learning an additional language at school, provided they are
accompanied by other key factors, of which the most important is “good teaching.” Where the teaching is uninspired or lacking in confidence and competence, then these benefits will not be realized.

On the other hand, older beginners can make a real success of learning an additional language. Readers wishing to follow up the particular research studies which confirm this will find references in my aforesaid Council of Europe publication (Johnstone, 2001), so for present purposes I shall simply claim that older beginners may be able to:

- make use of their existing conceptual map of the world. For example, whereas the younger learner may have to learn not only a particular word in the additional language but also may have to learn the concept underlying the word, the older beginner may already have internalized the concept and as a consequence can map the new word in the additional language on to this;
- handle the complexities of discourse, e.g. manage conversations and obtain feedback (see Scarcella & Higa, 1982);
- draw on a wider range of strategies, e.g. note-taking; summarizing; reference materials;
- have a clearer sense of why they are learning a modern language (ML), and this may give rise to additional types of motivation such as “instrumental” or “integrative” which younger children usually do not experience strongly.

These are real benefits and in my view go some way towards explaining why in institutional contexts, when older beginners are compared with younger beginners, with other key variables held
constant, e.g. same amount of time, same quality of instruction, same size of class, same social and gender distribution, it is the older beginners who generally make the more rapid progress in school conditions. My conclusion on this is that it is never too early or too late to begin learning an additional language.

**What is ELL in Primary School Education?**

There are many different forms of ELL “on the ground” in primary education across the world, but most of them probably fit more or less well with one or other of the following more abstract models as set out in Table 1.

The main focus of my present article will be Models 1 and 2, on the grounds that they are by far the most common across the world. From Model 3 onwards there is a clear increase in the amount of “time” in which the ML is learned and used, and also in the “intensity” of the experience, in that children not only learn a ML but also learn other important subject-matter through the medium of the ML. However, Models 3 to 7 require special conditions to be put in place before they can successfully be implemented, such as teachers who are able to teach a range of primary school subject matter but who are also more competent and fluent in the ML than it would be reasonable to expect of teachers who are engaged with Model 1.
**Table 1**  
Models of ELL at Primary School

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>ML as subject</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Only a few minutes per day, teaching a course based on a pre-set progression of units, sometimes based on a course-book. Variable starting points—often at age 8 – 10, but once established across a country for these age-groups, may be progressively extended downwards over a period of time to ages 5 - 7.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><strong>ML as subject (embedded)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As for 1. above, but more flexible and responsive, in that the teacher periodically embeds the ML in the teaching of other subject matter, e.g. primary school science, geography, and/or exploits current events as they occur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><strong>Subject +</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As for 1. above, but with more time per day, maybe 30 - 45 minutes. Sometimes called “low immersion.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><strong>Extended</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As for 1. above but with 1 or 2 subjects, in part at least, taught through the ML, possibly from Grade 4 onwards, hence more time and intensity than for 3. above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><strong>Intensive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As for 1. above but with an “intensive” half year fitted in during Grade 4 or 5, in which the ML is used for up to 70 % of curricular time, then reversal to the Subject model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><strong>Immersion (partial)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children learn part of their curriculum, usually for a minimum of 40 % of curricular time, through the medium of the ML. May be early partial, delayed partial or late partial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td><strong>Immersion (total)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children learn all or most of their curriculum through the medium of the ML may be early total, delayed total or late total.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What Insights Can We Share about ELL in Primary Schools?

I do believe that, over the past fifteen years or so, much has been learned about teaching a foreign language to children at primary school. In attempting my own answer to this question, I shall draw partly on published research findings but also partly on my own experience of observing ELL in many different countries.

A useful starting point may be the two surveys of research on ELL which were commissioned by the European Commission (Blondin, Candelier, Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek-German, & Taeschner, 1998; Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006). The main focus was on ELL in primary schools across the European Union but in fact the surveys included references to research from other continents where this seemed appropriate.

The first survey (Blondin et al., 1998) was useful in that it collected research data on the new wave of ELL which had been introduced as a major national policy initiative in many European countries beginning in the early 1990s. The survey concluded encouragingly that pupils’ attitudes to ELL at primary school were almost universally favorable across all the countries included in the survey. For these pupils, learning an additional language was an interesting and enjoyable experience.

At the same time, though, the survey revealed a number of problems which needed to be addressed, if further progress was to be made. One problem was that although many children were able to pronounce the foreign language with a good accent and intonation, after three or four years of ELL at primary school, their spontaneous
spoken production tended to consist of “chunks” of pre-fabricated language which they had learned by heart. By the end of their primary school education, there was still little evidence of children being able to create their own spontaneous spoken utterances by drawing on a rule-system which they had implicitly or explicitly internalized. A second problem was that those children who had begun a foreign language at primary school did not necessarily retain their advantage when compared after one or two years of secondary education with those children who had begun their foreign language on entry to secondary school. Underlying this second problem was a third problem which was that there did not appear to be substantial evidence of what is sometimes called “continuity” or “articulation” between the primary and secondary sectors, which meant that children did not always receive very good support in learning to “connect” the foreign language they had learned at primary school to the same foreign language they were learning at secondary.

The second EC-commissioned survey (Edelenbos et al., 2006) reflected the enlargement of the European Union through the inclusion of a number of states from Central and Eastern Europe, and as a consequence there was a wider range of research and development on which to draw, with some evidence that problems identified in the earlier survey were at least beginning to be addressed.

In the remainder of the present section, I shall comment briefly on a small number of studies which I have found to be particularly interesting.
Combining Key Factors to Achieve Success: An Example

I remember being particularly impressed by what I was able to observe during a visit to Croatia in the mid-1990s as part of a small delegation invited to make contact with a nationally-sponsored ELL initiative taking place mainly in the area of Zagreb, the capital. The starting age for primary education was six, and in this particular project the children received 45 minutes per day of a foreign language (which might be English, French, German or Italian) and which reflected Model 3 (see Table 1). The class-size for their language-lessons was fifteen. The teachers were highly fluent and confident in the particular foreign language they were teaching and had received foreign language instruction and methodology as part of their Initial Teacher Education programs.

What I found particularly interesting was the clear and explicit link which the teachers helped the children to make between the foreign language they were learning and Croatian (for almost all children, their first language). This was achieved as a result of a deliberate strategy. In Year 1 of their primary school education, the children received their foreign language very much on an enactive, experiential basis, with lots of movement, songs, poems, rhymes, games, drama and fun. At the same time they were being introduced to a large number of linguistic-grammatical concepts through their first language. By Year 3, the strategy was to help the children transfer all of these concepts from their first language and into their learning of the foreign language. In one lesson in which I observed a Year 3 class, the teacher had written a short paragraph in French on the blackboard and then asked the children in French if they could
come to the blackboard to point out the nouns. This was done quickly and correctly, and the same happened for the verbs, adjectives, pronouns, adverbs and prepositions—no problem at all for the children. By Year 4, the children were able to talk explicitly about these concepts with their teacher in French. For example, a teacher might ask in French “Why does this word end in an -e sound?” and the pupil would reply in correct French, “Because it is feminine, Madame.”

Accompanying this strategy of early explicitness about language was a strategy of early introduction to reading and writing, with the consequence that from a very early point the children were learning to handle all four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. By Year 4, this strategy was clearly paying-off, as was evident from the excellent written production which the children were able to create without advance preparation. In fact, it seemed to me that they were even more creative in their writing than in their speaking, and I surmised that this was probably because they had developed a powerful conscious system of rules on which they could draw in order to create their own written products.

Another major factor supporting the impressive achievements in Croatia was the presence of a highly knowledgeable team of researchers from Zagreb University, led by the distinguished Professor Mirjana Vilke. It was through their influence that the strategy of helping children integrate their underlying knowledge of first and foreign language was developed, and in addition they have conducted research on the development of children’s attitudes and motivation. In one particular longitudinal study (Djigunovich, 1995; Djigunovich &
Vilke, 2000), they collected data from children in Year One and then from the same children in Year 3. They found that the children’s attitudes or motivation had neither increased nor decreased but had remained at the same high level. What was of particular interest, however, was that the nature of their attitudes and motivation had changed. In Year 1, they were motivated because they associated the learning of a foreign language with activities that were “fun;” by Year 3, however, their motivation arose from their perception that they were becoming successful foreign language learners—a big change from Year 1 and (I would say) a move in a highly promising direction. This change suggested that they had internalized the concepts of “language learner” and of “successful language learner” and I surmised that this was almost certainly influenced by the well-informed teaching strategy from which they had benefited so much.

In short, then this one experience in a country which I had not visited before pointed to a range of highly important factors which were contributing to the undoubted success of the project. These included:

• government policy support which promoted a feeling of importance and togetherness and which facilitated networking across schools;
• presence of a well-informed research team to help develop an underlying set of principles for the approach and also to undertake research in relevant areas, e.g. the development and changing nature of children’s attitudes and motivation;
• a substantial amount of time per day (45 minutes) from the start;
provision of well-qualified teachers who were proficient and confident in the language;
• reduced class-size;
• creation of a classroom climate which embraced both emotional warmth and continuing intellectual challenge;
• early introduction of reading and writing;
• implementation of a conscious strategy linking first and foreign language through the teaching of common linguistic concepts and supporting an underlying metalinguistic awareness.

If we consider the above factors, it sadly becomes evident that not all of them can be put in place in every primary school across the world. In particular, many countries are not yet in a position to provide an adequate supply of teachers who are not only good primary school teachers but who are also proficient and confident in the particular foreign language; and not every country would provide 45 minutes per day from the start or class-size of 15 (and indeed my colleagues in Croatia inform me that in their country there have been cut-backs on some of these provisions, because of pressure of other subject content on the curriculum). It would be unreasonable to expect every primary school across the world to reach the heights that were achieved in this particular project. However, it would seem entirely reasonable that some or all of the other factors could and should indeed be generally put in place, e.g. good governmental support as an instance of national policy, good research support from universities, creation of an appropriate classroom climate, early introduction of reading and writing, and a conscious linkage of first and foreign
language. If so, then in my opinion, ELL methodology would be moving in a positive direction.

I should now like briefly to address a small number of other areas in which recent research has in my opinion offered some potentially useful insights.

**Children’s Motivation**

The excellent work by Djigunovich (1995) and Djigunovich and Vilke (2000), to which I have already referred, teaches us something important about the development and the changing nature of children’s motivation for learning a modern language in the initial years of primary school education. I should now like to add to this by referring briefly to two further important studies.

First is the study by Wu (2003) of children aged 5 learning English in Hong Kong. They were attending a primary school in a setting that was largely monolingual Cantonese. An important aim of the study was to identify classroom activities which fostered intrinsic motivation. The notion of “intrinsic motivation” is important here, because there seems to be little or no evidence that children of this young age experience other types of motivation such as instrumental motivation, extrinsic motivation, or integrative motivation. So, for young children, the motivation has to be intrinsic, reflecting qualities such as “interest,” “fun,” “challenge,” “curiosity,” and “self-improvement.”

This is well illustrated by Nikolov’s (1999) study in which she followed three cohorts of children for eight years, taught by the same teacher. It was found that learners’ motivation could be maintained by
intrinsically interesting and cognitively challenging tasks. Intrinsic motivation was initially associated with “fun” activity, then it became linked to “curiosity” and “challenge,” and then eventually it became associated with the child’s perception of the self as a successful language learner. These findings are entirely in line with Djigunovich (1995) and Djigunovich and Vilke (2000).

In Wu’s (2003) study, it was found that children’s intrinsic motivation was particularly supported by five features of classroom environment and activity: a predictable learning environment, moderately challenging tasks, necessary instructional support, evaluation that emphasizes self-improvement, and attribution of success or failure to variables that the learner can do something about.

The latter point concerning “attributions” seems particularly important. In her seminal work on “Children’s Minds,” Donaldson (1978) claimed that some young children as early as the age of three may already have formed a negative perception of their capabilities and may see this as a permanent unchangeable condition. In this sense, if a child attributes his or her difficulties in learning an additional language to the perception that he or she is just not very clever or not very good at languages, then it becomes difficult for the child to do anything about this. If on the other hand the child attributes her or his difficulties to variables which can be positively influenced, then there is bound to be more hope (e.g. “I can pay closer attention,” “I can prepare in advance,” “I can practice,” “I can try harder,” “I can try a different approach,” “I can ask for assistance” or “I can make a little plan” and so on). Teachers clearly have an important role in helping
their young pupils make attributions which will stimulate and help their learning rather than act as a brier to it.

**Continuity**

As long ago as 1974, the Burstall report (Burstall, Jamieson, Cohen, & Hargreaves, 1974) identified lack of continuity from primary to secondary as one of the main explanations for the relative lack of positive impact which the teaching of a foreign language at primary school was having when children went on to secondary school. It was a sad fact that a number of modern languages teachers in secondary education were dismissive about what was being undertaken and achieved at primary school, and in some cases they more or less told their first-year classes to forget what they had learned at primary school, because they (the secondary teachers) were more qualified to do the job and they would now make a fresh start. One can easily imagine the unfortunate backwash effect which such negativity had on the teachers at primary school, and it is no surprise that in some cases they lost their initial confidence and enthusiasm.

It is of course true that if a class has been learning a modern language for a number of years at primary school, then the task of the secondary school teacher becomes different, and in some ways more challenging. However, the same can be said of mathematics, science, history and other areas of the curriculum, and few people would question the value of teaching these in primary school education, so there is no clear case for arguing that a modern language should be in any way different.
If a modern language has been taught in local primary schools, then indeed the secondary school teacher will find among their first-year pupils a range of capabilities in the modern language, a range of motivation, a range of self-confidence and anxiety, a range of first-language literacy, a range of general cognitive abilities and a range of parental support. This will indeed be a different challenge from taking on a fresh-faced first-year class at secondary school which is being introduced to a modern language for the first time. However, the answer cannot be to dismiss what has been attempted at primary school; the answer must surely be to build constructively on it. This is where “continuity” from primary to secondary education comes in.

“Continuity” was perceived as a serious problem in New South Wales, Australia, and a large-scale collaborative project was developed to address this problem (Chesterton, Steigler-Peters, Moran, & Piccioli, 2004). The project covered the final three years of primary school education and the first two years of secondary, and involved the collaborative participation of teachers from these two sectors, leading to an agreed curriculum for modern languages covering these five school years. This meant that the secondary teachers were fully aware of what had been taught in the three years at primary school and could therefore build on it, and it meant also that the primary school teachers knew how their pupils’ modern language learning would be further developed at secondary school. It is highly likely that there were other valuable gains arising from this process, going beyond the sharing of knowledge. The very act of working together to construct something that would be of mutual benefit would promote a sense of teamwork, networking and mutual respect, and similar
outcomes have been observed in other countries, including in my own country of Scotland which has taken major steps to address this matter. A key feature of Scotland’s attempts to bridge the “continuity gap” has been regular reciprocal visits by secondary teachers to local primary schools, visits by primary school classes and their teachers to the local secondary school, and language support by specialist and highly qualified secondary school teachers for their more generalist primary school colleagues.

**Early Reading and Writing**

In recent years a number of research studies have been published which all point to the benefits of the early introduction of reading and writing, thereby lending further substance to the approach which I have described for Croatia. Dlugosz (2000) for example found that the introduction of reading in the foreign language at kindergarten helped speed the process of understanding and speaking the foreign language. Mertens (2003) found that children in Grade 1 learning French benefited from being introduced to written French as a foreign language and immediately showed results superior to those in purely oral approaches, while Vickov (2007) claims that children at Grade 1 in Croatia were not disadvantaged in their writing in Croatian by being introduced to writing in English. In other words, the early introduction of reading and writing in the foreign language was seen to confer multiple benefits on children’s listening comprehension and spoken production in the foreign language, on their general progress in the foreign language and was not seen to cause any disadvantage to the development of literacy in their first language.
Fluency, Creativity, and Accuracy in Spontaneous Spoken Output

In recent years there has been a considerable body of research focused on finding ways of helping learners become fluent, creative, and accurate in their spontaneous spoken output. It is one thing to become fluent, creative, and accurate in written output because learners often have sufficient time in which to draw on their explicit knowledge of rules. They can ask themselves “What do I want to express in writing?” and then ask “How might I achieve this?” Then when they have set something down in writing they can often ask themselves “How correct or appropriate is this?” In spontaneous spoken interaction, on the other hand, things can happen so quickly that there is not time in which to ask these questions systematically, the one after the other. If you do so, then the conversation will almost certainly have passed you by. For spontaneous spoken interaction, a rule-system is needed which is so deeply internalized that the learner simply uses it and produces correct and appropriate language. However, an internalized rule-system of this sort can take a long time in which to develop, so it is not surprising that in order to engage in spoken interaction children at primary school overwhelmingly tended to use pre-fabricated chunks of language.

How then might teachers help learners develop an internalized rule-system of the sort that gets beyond the production of pre-fabricated chunks of language? One promising line of inquiry centres on the provision of corrective feedback by the teacher. This allows for the possibility of periodic brief moments of focus-on-form within activities that are essentially communicative and in which therefore the main focus is on meaning. Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) state
that corrective feedback for pupils may indicate that an error has been committed, or it may provide the correct form, or it may provide metalinguistic information about the nature of the error, or it may consist of any combination of these possibilities. Among the particular techniques for providing corrective feedback, as outlined by Lyster (2004a, 2004b) and several other researchers, are recasts, requests for repetition, requests for repair, and explicit correction. Generally, teachers seem to make most use of recasts. For example, a pupil might make an error, “I goed to the cinema,” and the teacher might offer corrective feedback by a recast, “Ah, you went to the cinema,” so the teacher has recast the incorrect form “goed” into the correct form “went.” One probable benefit of recasts is that they allow the interaction to proceed without interruption. There would be more interruption if, for example, instead of recasting, the teacher stopped the interaction and embarked on an explicit correction of the error.

However, a problem with recasts is that the pupil may not notice that the teacher has recast what the pupil said, and so the pupil may not be aware that an error has been committed, and therefore the use of recasts does not necessarily help learners to refine their internalized language system.

This is not to argue against recasts because they may well work effectively with certain types of learner in particular types of context, but it does argue for the teacher drawing on a wider repertoire of corrective feedback techniques which would include recasts but also others. Maybe there will be occasions for example when it would be appropriate for the teacher to stop the action and to correct an error that has been committed. Maybe also, however, there may be
occasions when the teacher might “request repetition” (e.g. “What did you say, can you say that again, please?”) thereby giving the pupil a second attempt which possibly the pupil might get right this time. Or maybe there might be merit in making a “request for repair” (e.g. “Not quite right. Can you please try again and see if you can get the phrase absolutely right this time?”). Or maybe the teacher might open the “request for repair” to the whole class (e.g. “Almost correct. Can anybody suggest how this phrase might be improved/made correct?”).

The argument is that by regularly fitting these brief episodes of focus-on-form into activities which are essentially communicative, the teacher is not unduly interrupting the flow of communicative interaction but is giving pupils the chance to notice formal features of the language which they are producing and to reflect on how this might be improved. In the long run, the hope would be that this helped pupils proceed beyond the production of pre-fabricated phrases and towards the use of a more creative language system which they would be able to monitor and refine.

**The Ladder—Ups and Downs**

It has become increasingly commonplace to view children’s progression in the additional language they are learning as being steadily upwards, as though they were climbing a ladder, with some children no doubt being able to climb the ladder more quickly than others. Indeed, the term “the languages ladder” has been widely adopted in England and is attracting interest in other countries.

The notion of a ladder of progression is undoubtedly attractive and may have many practical benefits for pupils and teachers alike,
and also for their parents, in that it gives an indication of how high the particular child has climbed and maybe also how much further there is to go.

However, the best research paints a more complex picture which I can exemplify by referring to two views of major experts. Mitchell (2003) claims that second language learning is not like climbing a ladder but is a complex and recursive process with multiple interconnections and backslidings, and complex trade-offs between advances in fluency, accuracy and complexity. In other words, language proficiency is not one whole, single thing. On the contrary, it has a number of different dimensions, and progression on one dimension may mean that for a while there is regression on another dimension. In their study of bilingual education in Vienna, Peltzer-Karpf and Zangl (1997) found that children's utterances seemed impressive in Years 1 and 2 but then in Year 3 went through a phase of “Systemturbulenz” in which their control of grammar seemed to fall apart. This caused some anxiety to the teachers for a while, who wondered what had gone wrong. However, it was realized that a natural process was being enacted. In Year 3, the cognitive level of tasks for the children had been raised, and for a while their grammar systems could not cope adequately, hence the appearance for awhile of “Systemturbulenz.” However, by Year 4 the children had learned to cope with the higher level of cognitive challenge, and so the “Systemturbulenz” receded.

The views of Mitchell (2003) and Pelzer-Karpf and Zangl (1997) suggest strongly that progression is not unitary and unidirectional (ever upwards) but is multidimensional and
multidirectional (with some aspects going up and others going down, for awhile). Much then may depend on the nature of the tasks which children are given. If all the tasks are based on carefully planned and carefully prepared activity, then the cognitive challenge may be missing, and so children may be deprived of the very feature which in fact helps to stimulate children’s grammar systems into first a period of minor turbulence and then into a higher level of functioning. On the other hand, if all of the tasks which a child is given make high cognitive demands, then this may cause too much anxiety. To my mind, the answer must lie in teachers adopting a varied approach which overall strikes a good balance between tasks that are cognitively demanding and other tasks which are emotionally reassuring.

LOOKING FORWARD

In this final section, I offer some thoughts regarding possible ways forward if a particular country is to engage successfully with a national ELL programme for primary schools. It will already be clear from the preceding sections that different sorts of factors are involved. Table 2 sets out a possible framework of four different factors, each illustrated by five examples, and a range of different possible outcomes of a national policy development.

It should be emphasized that for each of the four factors there are many more examples that could be included. In the case of pupil factors, for example, one might add “ethnicity,” “first language,” “prior literacy,” “cognitive style,” “learning style,” and “personality-type.”
Table 2
Possible Factors and Outcomes in Respect of National Policies for Languages at Primary School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Societal factors</th>
<th>Provision factors</th>
<th>Process factors</th>
<th>Pupil factors</th>
<th>Pupil outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political will</td>
<td>Clear policies</td>
<td>Input and interaction</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Plurilingual competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>Teacher supply, training &amp; development</td>
<td>Links with first language</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Intercultural competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power of national examinations</td>
<td>Continuity between sectors</td>
<td>Early reading &amp; writing</td>
<td>Anxiety-Confidence</td>
<td>Metalinguistic knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for TL use</td>
<td>Time &amp; intensity</td>
<td>Cognitive challenge</td>
<td>Aptitude</td>
<td>Global citizenship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business links</td>
<td>International contacts</td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Socio-economic background</td>
<td>Transferable skills and qualities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before discussing the four factors, a brief word should be offered in respect of the “outcomes” column. There, the outcomes are presented as “pupil outcomes,” and these must be surely the most important set of outcomes of any ELL policy. With regard to “plurilingual competence,” this is an outcome strongly endorsed by the Council of Europe. In other words, the aim of language teaching at school (including ELL) is not to develop a number of separate
competences, one for each language. Instead, the aim is to develop “one” competence which embraces and integrates all of the languages which the child has acquired and is learning. One of the reasons for this is an acceptance that in the modern, globalized world, when people from different countries and cultures interact with each other, there may be many occasions in which some degree of “language switch” is appropriate. As a learner of two Chinese languages (Cantonese and Mandarin), I certainly find this when I am in Taiwan, Mainland China, Hong Kong or among Scotland’s Chinese community. In such contexts it helps greatly if one shows willingness to interact in Chinese, even if most of the interaction is in English. It introduces into the interaction a feeling of respect for the other person’s language. So, globalized ML-users will have a repertoire of languages on which to draw, one or two of these likely to be at a high level of proficiency and the others at a lower level but still playing a vital role in each individual’s projection of their identity; and in addition globalized ML-users will develop strategies which enable them to decide on whether, when, to what extent, and how each particular language in their repertoire might be brought into play.

It is also worth reflecting on the possible outcomes of ELL not only for pupils but also for teachers, primary schools, secondary schools, and society.

In respect of possible outcomes for teachers, for example, we might think of “job satisfaction” and “self-improvement.” In other words, has a teacher’s participation in an ELL approach given her or him real “job-satisfaction” and to what extent has it enabled her or
him to “develop both as a person and as a teaching professional”? It is true, of course, that education at primary school should be for the benefit of the pupils, but it is appropriate to remember that this should not be inconsistent with benefits for teachers too, particularly as primary school is where they choose to spend a large proportion of their working lives.

We should think also of outcomes as benefiting schools, in addition to benefiting pupils and teachers. Among the benefits to primary schools might be “internationalization” through links with other countries which have been facilitated by their participation in ELL; and another benefit for schools might possibly be “reinvigoration of their curriculum” through the opportunities that English as global language might offer. An obvious benefit to secondary schools should be the opportunity to build on what has been achieved at primary school, in order to enable secondary schools to take their students to higher levels of proficiency and intercultural competence than what secondary schools had been able to achieve before ELL at primary was introduced.

Nor should we forget other outcomes in terms of possible benefits to society which might arise from the successful implementation of ELL at primary school. After all, this is something which politicians will take seriously into account when willing the funds for ELL in the first instance. They will be unlikely to will sufficient funds unless they can see a clear and probably measurable pay-off for their society—and being politicians, they will probably wish to claim the credit for this. Accordingly, in developing policies for ELL, it is most important to be thinking of how this will benefit a country’s society at
large, and not just the individual pupils at primary school. Clearly, one possible societal benefit might in the long run be “economic” in that a gradually increasing capacity in English as global language is likely to bring economic benefit to the particular country. However, I believe it would be short-sighted to leave it at that, since I would wish to argue that ELL also has the capacity over time to enhance a country’s “quality of life” by enabling more and more of its citizens to achieve a deeper understanding of other ways of life and to interact in positive, friendly, and interesting ways with people from other countries and cultures.

Let me now turn to the four factors and outcomes as set out in Table 2. All factors in the four columns are important, if a national policy across schools is to be successful. Each individual factor would indeed merit a series of articles on its own, something which is well beyond the scope of the present article, and so for present purposes I shall make only one brief statement about each factor.

A national policy for ELL will tend to be successful to the extent that it takes account of the following “societal” factors:

- It gains and maintains support from politicians and government, because of the high likelihood that substantial funds will be needed over a number of years in order to put in place a policy that will sustain itself.
- It takes seriously the needs, perceptions, and interests of parents who themselves may not be particularly proficient in the additional language and who may not know much about the teaching and learning of languages.
• It takes due account of the power of national examinations at secondary school. In some societies, innovation in the ELL curriculum becomes almost impossible, because it is blocked by highly traditional national examinations at a much later stage, exerting downwards pressure on what is possible at the earlier stage. If ELL is really to succeed, then arguments need to be developed for modernizing national examinations so that they take account of what schools are trying to achieve.

• It maximizes opportunities for making use of the target language not only in primary schools but also in society outside the school, e.g. through the media, visitors to the particular country.

• It exploits business links where this is possible. Many businesses I have had contact with have declared themselves keen to be investing in the education of young children whom they rightly see as future leaders of society. Some form of link between ELL and the world of business can be very good for pupils, teachers, and schools, because it can show them that the additional language actually has a practical use and can put them in touch with those who use it. As such, it can help children develop the beginnings of instrumental motivation, something which does not seem to come naturally to them at an early age.

It will tend to be successful to the extent that it takes account of the following “provision” factors:
• It develops a policy for ELL which is clear to all interested parties, which is inclusive (that is, for all pupils in the country, regardless of socio-economic, religious, ethnic or other background), which is soundly based (ideally, informed by high-quality research findings) and which is sustainable in the long term. I have come across several examples of policies which lasted less than two years and were then overturned in favor of another policy which in turn did not last very long.

• It provides for an adequate supply of teachers who are sufficiently well-trained in the knowledge and skills needed for helping young children to learn an additional language in school conditions. This is clearly a major challenge in several countries—the scale of the challenge in this regard in China, for example, is almost beyond contemplation, yet it is a challenge which must be confronted if a national policy is to succeed and give all children across the country equality of opportunity.

• It makes strong provision for continuity between sectors, so that children who have begun their learning of a particular language at primary school may continue to receive good support in this when they proceed to secondary.

• It exploits such opportunities as exist for maximizing the amount of “time” available for learning and using the additional language (for an authoritative discussion of the importance of the “time” factor, see Curtain, 2000), and also the “intensity” of the experience by, for example, not only teaching the language but also teaching at least some aspects of other subject content through the medium of the language. This does not mean that a
full form of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) has to be put in place. I have seen several teachers who have done excellent work “embedding” certain aspects of content-teaching for brief periods in their ELL teaching—one particularly good example was a teacher who had been teaching a science lesson based on river pollution and who managed to exploit this with great skill through her following lesson in French as a foreign language. For an indication of the positive effects of “time” and “intensity” combined in an early partial immersion initiative set in an area of substantial socio-economic disadvantage, see Johnstone (2002).

- It sets up international contacts for all schools, particularly through the use of ICT networks, thereby enabling pupils to participate in a living international community of practice and to gain invaluable intercultural experience through doing joint projects with their peers in other countries. I do believe that this is an essential component of ELL for the future and will help considerably in preparing children for global citizenship.

It will tend to be successful to the extent that it takes account of the following “process” factors:

- Teachers expose their classes to substantial amounts of varied input in the additional language and encourage particular types of interaction, often initiated by pupils themselves. Of particular interest will be the integration of form-focused corrective feedback episodes into interactions that are essentially communicative. The input and interactions will not only enable
them to learn an additional language but also to use it in various ways and to reflect on and monitor the correctness and appropriateness of their language-use.

• Explicit links are developed with pupils’ first language, whether this is the majority language of the country or a first language spoken by a minority. Of particular interest will be the development of an awareness of linguistic concepts which are common to the various languages which a child has or is learning.

• It helps children to make an early start on reading and writing, as well as listening and speaking, in the additional language. The benefits of this not only in terms of metalinguistic awareness but also in terms of proficiency in the first and the additional language are becoming evident from an increasing number of recent research studies, as has been shown earlier in the present article. Much remains to be learned, however, from good teachers as to how they actually go about this with their classes.

• It ensures that all children, regardless of their abilities, receive an appropriate amount of cognitively challenging activity. This is both to help them develop and maintain a positive motivation but also to help them extend their grammatical range and then to impose control over that extended range after possibly going through a predicted period of “Systemturbulenz” as described earlier in the present article.

• The school staff work effectively as a team that supports all members and that is well-managed by effective leadership which makes due provision for planning, shared decision-taking,
collaboration with other schools and sectors, monitoring, evaluation and consultation, e.g. with parents.

It will tend to be successful if it takes into account the following “individual pupil” factors:

- Pupils are taught, not on the basis that one particular age (whether young or old) is best for learning an additional language, but rather in ways which exploit the particular advantages that each age brings. My article has set out some ways in which different ages generate different sorts of advantage, but there is much still to learn from good teachers as to how they actually do this.
- A strategy is developed for enabling children to engage in holistic learning, drawing not only on their cognitive abilities but also on their emotional intelligence, their sense of movement and rhythm, their musical and artistic abilities, and any other talents which they may possess.
- An inclusive strategy is developed for making the learning of an additional language accessible to all children, regardless of their gender, socio-economic background, personality characteristics, levels of anxiety and language-aptitude, as opposed to an exclusive strategy which favors an elite minority only.
- Further examples of inclusion are children’s first language, especially if it is a minority first language), ethnicity, religion, and cultural background. These are valued and seen as a stimulus for learning an additional language.
- A strategy is developed for encouraging children not only to experience intrinsic motivation for learning an additional language, but also for enabling this motivation to develop and unfold through
describable phases, e.g. from association with pleasurable activity (or, fun), to interest, curiosity, intellectual challenge, and then to perception of self as successful language learner.

The above list of factors is not intended to be prescriptive. It aims to function simply as an incomplete checklist when thinking about the introduction of ELL across large numbers of schools. I do believe that all of the factors need to be addressed in some way that is satisfactory within the country concerned. However, no country will be at the absolute starting point for every single factor in the list, so a possible merit of the list may be that it offers a reminder of what is involved, that it may promote reflection, may offer some reassurance that on some of the factors in the checklist the particular country is already doing quite well, and may help in identifying priorities for development.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Johnstone is an Emeritus Professor of the University of Stirling, Scotland UK. For many years he was Director of the Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching & Research, based at the University of Stirling and funded by the Scottish Government. He has conducted a large number of research projects and has a large number of publications on Early Language Learning, including a paper on *The Age Factor* in the Council of Europe’s Language Policy series. He is a Lead Adviser to the British Council’s International Bilingual Schools Project which is focused on Early Bilingual Education. In 1994, he was awarded the OBE for his services to Modern Languages Education. In recent years, he has developed a strong interest in languages issues in Asia and is a keen learner of both Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese.
小學外語教學成功之鑰

摘要
小學外語教學（大半是指英語教學）是世界上許多國家優先考量的重點政策，但是要制定明智的政策，首先要了解年齡與學習的關係，以避免被「愈早學習愈能保障成功」的迷思所影響。事實上，每一個年齡層均有其學習另一種語言的優勢與劣勢，有許多研究顯示在某些方面年紀小的學習者享有學習優勢，而在其他方面則是年紀較大的學習者較有優勢。小學外語政策要成功不能只看幾個在特殊優越環境中小規模實施的典範學校之成功例子，而應尋找適用於全國學校（包括文化不利、資源不足之學校）的因素。本文依文獻及個人經驗簡述四種影響學習成效的因素：如社會、資源、過程、和個人及群體因素，這些因素每一種都能影響小學外語教育的成效。

關鍵詞：外語教學 小學教育 語言政策