

# Early EFL learning in context – Evidence from a country case study

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# About the author

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I dedicate this research paper to the memory of Professor Mirjana Vilke, the fairy godmother of early language learning in Croatia and far beyond, who has recently left us but whose vision, spirit and enthusiasm will stay on with us forever.

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# Abstract

The paper describes a longitudinal research study carried out as part of the Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) project. The author investigated early learning of EFL from a contextualised perspective. Data were collected from 173 Croatian YLs of EFL who were followed for three years (Grades Two, Three and Four). Processes and outcomes of early EFL are analysed considering a number of relevant contextual and individual learner factors as well as their interactions. Based on the findings it is concluded that contextualised approaches can offer a broader and deeper insight into early EFL learning.

# 1

## Introduction

### From popular beliefs to research approaches

Early language learning (ELL) is a phenomenon that has been attracting a lot of attention for quite some time now. Three approaches to it can be observed. First, there is the popular belief that children can pick up a second language (L2) effortlessly, successfully and fast. This has led to ELL programmes mushrooming all over the world (Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006). In more recent times, however, the high enthusiasm for ‘the younger the better’ position has met with critical overtones voiced by some experts (e.g. Muñoz, 2006; Nikolov, 2002), who point out that early starters are not necessarily faster or more efficient language learners than later starters. The second approach is connected to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) research, which is considered to represent the theoretical underpinnings of ELL. According to insights from the CPH-focused studies children acquire languages with greater ease and higher success because they can rely on natural acquisition processes that are not available to adults. In their language learning children make use of procedural memory and develop implicit competence, while older learners need to resort to declarative memory and explicit learning processes (Paradis, 2004). In spite of a large body of empirical findings concerning the age factor, the impact of age on language learning is still hotly debated: some experts support the CPH (e.g. DeKeyser and Larson-Hall, 2005; Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson, 2001; Long, 2005), while others claim there is no critical period (e.g. Bialystok, 2001; Birdsong, 2005; Moyer, 2004). The third approach to ELL can be discerned in studies

of experts whose focus on the complexity of the issue prevents them from taking an exclusive position on the impact of age on language learning (e.g. Johnstone, 2002; Muñoz, 2006; Singleton and Ryan, 2004). Thanks to the growing body of research into ELL programmes in different contexts, this new perspective on ELL has emerged as one that not only offers theoretical insights into this topical subject but can also inform teachers, parents and policy makers about the key issues in ELL. What characterises this third approach is the awareness that contextual factors may play an essential role. Thus, in foreign language learning (FLL) contexts, as opposed to second language acquisition (SLA) contexts, children’s reliance on natural implicit learning processes is highly limited. Insights into early FL classrooms show that in most situations ELL is based on form-focused teaching (DeKeyser and Larsen-Hall, 2004) and that young learners are exposed to ‘minimal input situations’ (Larsen-Hall, 2008). Nikolov (2009) also points to the frequently low L2 proficiency of teachers who cannot secure native-like levels of their young learners, which are often unrealistically expected by parents and policy-makers.

Following the third approach described above, in this paper we focus on early learning of English in a particular FLL context from the perspective of a number of key contextual factors that, in our opinion, determine both the processes and the outcomes of early EFL learning. We consider these in relation to individual learner factors and look into their interactions as well.



# 2

## Early EFL learning in Croatia

### Background

The study described below was carried out as part of the Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE)<sup>1</sup> project ([www.ellieresearch.eu](http://www.ellieresearch.eu)). It is a transnational longitudinal project whose aim was to look into early FLL in seven country contexts in Europe in order to see what are realistically possible outcomes of formal school language learning in Europe. The countries involved were: Croatia, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden. Early learning of English was investigated in all countries but England, where project participants were learners of French and Spanish. The project lasted for three years (2007–10) but was preceded by an exploratory scoping year<sup>2</sup>, the year in which participants began their FLL. The sample included over 1,400 young learners. This was a convenience sample made up of young learners drawn from 6–8 schools per country. During the three years investigations were carried out simultaneously in all seven countries using the same measuring instruments.

### The Croatian context

Early FLL has a long tradition in Croatia (Vilke, 2007). Its beginnings can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century and it has been characterised by constant lowering of the starting age at which it was introduced into the national school curriculum. Previously, the start age was 11, then 10, and since 2003 the FL has been a compulsory subject for all learners from the age of 6–7 (Grade One of primary school). The popularity of different foreign languages taught in Croatian schools kept changing, but in recent decades English has been by far the most popular. Currently over 85 per cent of first graders learn English, over 10 per cent start with German, while Italian and French are represented in very small numbers (Medved Krajnović and Letica Krevelj, 2009). English also has a special status in the curriculum: those learners who do not start learning English in Grade One must be offered an opportunity to start with it in Grade Four (age 10), so that no learner ends

primary education without having had English classes. A second FL is offered at different points during formal education and the Croatian education policy follows recommendations of the Council of Europe aiming at two FLs for everyone. Attitudes to FLs are highly positive and, as a country whose economy is based on tourism, FLL is high on the priority list of policy-makers. Unfortunately, this is not followed by equally high investment into language learning. Out-of-school exposure to English is quite high. Foreign programmes shown on Croatian national TV channels are not dubbed and neither are foreign films. EFL learners can listen to music with lyrics in English. Most of the computer software that learners use is also in English. Contact with foreigners is quite high too: many foreign tourists communicate with local people in English, and the same is true of business people visiting Croatia.

What also characterises the Croatian early FLL context is decades of research into early learning of FLs. Studies in the field of ELL have been carried out since the 1970s (e.g. Vilke 1976). The best well known internationally are those made as part of a 10-year national longitudinal experimental project (1991–2001) that looked into early learning of English, French, German and Italian of three generations of young learners throughout their eight-year primary education (Mihaljević Djigunović and Vilke, 2000; Vilke and Vrhovac, 1993; 1995; Vrhovac, 2001). The main aim was to find the optimal age for introducing the FL into the primary curriculum in the Croatian socio-educational context. The conclusion of the project was that the optimal age was the beginning of formal education (Grade One) provided that three conditions were met. The conditions included: intensive FL teaching in the first few grades (five class hours per week), small groups of learners (not exceeding 15 learners per group) and FL teachers who were specifically trained to work with children. Although the Ministry of Education sponsored the project and

<sup>1</sup> This research has been supported by a European Commission grant under the Lifelong Learning Programme, Project n°. 135632-LLP-2007-UK-KA1SCR. An additional British Council grant supported the Croatian team.

<sup>2</sup> The scoping year was partly sponsored by the British Council.

welcomed the findings, when the FL was introduced in the national curriculum, none of the three conditions were met. Thus, Croatian children start FLL in Grade One but with only two class hours per week, they are taught in large groups (up to 30 learners per group) and, often, their FL teachers are not specially trained to work with children.

Currently, in their teaching of EFL schools are following the Croatian National Curriculum and the Croatian National Educational Standards, two documents that centrally regulate teaching EFL in primary and secondary education in the country. According to these documents, early teaching of FLs should be communicatively oriented, holistic and multisensory. It is specifically stressed that grammatical explanations and metalanguage should be totally excluded. The aims are expressed in terms of the Common European Framework (2001) levels: by the end of Grade Four learners are expected to reach the A1 level of communicative language competence.

Classes in Croatian primary schools are generally monolingual, except for schools in areas that are close to the border.

EFL teachers who teach YLs in lower primary can acquire their qualification in two ways. The traditional pathway implies a university degree in English language and literature (teaching stream). In the past 15 years or so it has also been possible to qualify by obtaining a university degree in 'early education with a minor in English'. There are, however, still some (older) EFL teachers who have a college degree in English that earlier used to qualify teachers for teaching in primary schools only.

# 3

## The study

### Aims of the study

In this study we wanted to get an insight into early EFL learning using a country case study approach. By investigating a number of contextual and individual factors involved in ELL in Croatia, as well as their interplay, we hoped to contribute to a deeper understanding of processes and outcomes of early EFL learning. We focused on the following research questions:

1. What are the main characteristics of the Croatian context relevant to early EFL learning?
2. Which individual learner factors contribute to linguistic outcomes of early EFL learning?
3. How do contextual and individual factors interact with linguistic outcomes in early EFL learning?

### Sample

A total of 173 young EFL learners participated in the study. They were drawn from seven schools: two metropolitan, two small town and three village schools. In each school one class was followed during Grades Two, Three and Four. A smaller subsample was also selected for the purpose of more intensive investigations. The subsample ('focal learners') was composed of six learners from each class. These were selected on the basis of their EFL teacher's report about their language learning ability: in each school focal learners included two high-ability, two average and two low-ability learners. Comparisons of focal learners' performances to non-focal learners on tasks administered to whole classes showed that they could be considered representative of the whole sample.

### Instruments

All the instruments used in the study were designed by the ELLiE team ([www.elliresearch.eu](http://www.elliresearch.eu)). YLs' attitudes and motivation, linguistic self-confidence, home support and out-of-school exposure to English were measured by smiley questionnaires and individual oral interviews. Data on the socio-economic status, type and amount of out-of-school exposure were elicited by means of the parents questionnaire. Information about school setting contexts was obtained through interviews with school principals. Relevant data on EFL teachers were gathered by means of teacher questionnaires and interviews with teachers. Insights into the classroom teaching that YLs were exposed to were obtained through classroom observation. Listening comprehension was used as a measure of linguistic outcomes throughout the three years. The listening tasks administered consisted of multiple choice items that each included three drawings. To measure YLs' progress from year to year some items were kept while others were added to follow the expected levels in different grades. A later addition included a second part: a picture of a room in which YLs had to find the right people and objects.

### Procedure

Classroom observation was carried out three times per year on average. The observed classes were audio-recorded and transcribed. Principal interviews were carried out at the beginning of the study and again at the end. Teacher interviews were done at different points in the school year depending on teachers' available time. Teacher questionnaires were filled in during the researcher's school visits. Parents questionnaires were filled in at home and handed in to class teachers. All other instruments were administered towards the end of school years.

# 4

## Findings

### School level contextual factors

The seven schools had a lot in common. They all followed the central curriculum for EFL and used teaching materials approved by the Ministry of Education. All except one school were attended by local children, as is common practice in primary education in Croatia. The exception – School 77<sup>3</sup> – was a metropolitan school that was considered prestigious because it was also attended by children of foreign diplomats and businessmen who followed an international curriculum. Many of the Croatian pupils there were not local children and were being taken to school by their parents from different parts of the city. A summary of school characteristics is presented in Table 1 below.

School 71	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– a small town school with over 600 pupils; average class size: 25 pupils</li> <li>– offers English and German</li> <li>– early FLL offered long before it became mandatory in 2003</li> <li>– very positive attitudes to FLL; German highly popular too (many families with someone having worked as guest workers in German-speaking countries)</li> <li>– involved in international ecological projects</li> <li>– EFL teacher – one was a class teacher with a minor in English, two replacements were unqualified teachers</li> <li>– well equipped by Croatian standards: video and CD player, a computer room with software for FL teaching (but not used with lower primary classes), interactive whiteboard in IT classroom; library equipped with authentic books for children and simplified readers in English</li> </ul>
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School 72	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– a very modern small town school with around 800 pupils, average class size: 25</li> <li>– offers English and German</li> <li>– early FLL offered long before it became mandatory in 2003; local community had covered the costs</li> <li>– very positive attitudes to FLL; German highly popular too (many families with someone having worked as guest workers in German-speaking countries)</li> <li>– EFL teacher – class teacher with a minor in English</li> <li>– very well equipped: one computer with FL software in each classroom, interactive whiteboard in IT classroom, video and CD player; authentic English books for children in the library</li> </ul>
School 73	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– a village school with around 600 pupils; average class size: 25 pupils</li> <li>– offers English and German</li> <li>– moderately positive attitudes to FLL</li> <li>– moderately equipped: CD player, a few computers in the building but not used for language classes; some authentic English books for children in the library</li> <li>– EFL teacher – an unqualified teacher in Grades One and Two, a class teacher with a minor in English in Grade Three, a specialist teacher with a degree in English language and literature in Grade Four; the school had difficulty with finding qualified staff for many subjects</li> <li>– ELLiE was the first project the school was involved in</li> <li>– low primary classes on a separate floor</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> Project schools were number coded (for coding consult Table 1). The same numbers are used for teachers and classes (groups) in respective schools.

School 74	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– a village school with 150 pupils; class size varied between 9 and 21</li> <li>– offers English and German</li> <li>– high enthusiasm about early FLL</li> <li>– moderately equipped: video, CD player, nine computers in a separate classroom; two English dictionaries but no English books for children in the library</li> <li>– EFL teacher – class teacher with a minor in English</li> </ul>
School 75	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– a village school with over 440 pupils; average class size: 25 pupils</li> <li>– offers English, German and Hungarian</li> <li>– very positive attitudes to early FLL; school regularly visited by Americans (international help), ELLiE pupils having contact with native speakers</li> <li>– moderately equipped: ten computers with FL software in a separate room, CD player; authentic English books for children in the library</li> <li>– EFL teacher – primary (only) specialist teacher of English (college degree)</li> </ul>
School 76	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– a metropolitan school with close to 1,000 pupils situated in a working class area; many pupils of low socio-economic status; average class size: 27 pupils</li> <li>– offers English and Italian</li> <li>– traditionally considered a good school thanks to highly qualified teachers</li> <li>– very positive attitudes to FLL</li> <li>– participated in a 10-year YL national research project on early learning of Italian</li> <li>– EFL teacher – a specialist teacher with a university degree in English language and literature</li> <li>– well equipped by Croatian standards: video and CD players, an LCD and 2 laptops, a computer room with 16 computers; authentic English books for children in the library</li> </ul>

School 77	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– a metropolitan school with over 700 pupils; average class size: 25 pupils</li> <li>– offers English, French and German</li> <li>– considered a prestigious primary school; besides usual primary education programmes, offers international programmes in English for foreign children as well as Croatian national curriculum in English</li> <li>– involved in a great number of national and international projects, promotes holistic learning, critical thinking, life skills, development of self-confidence and multicultural communication</li> <li>– EFL teacher(s) – class teachers(s) with a minor in English</li> <li>– extremely well equipped: video, CD player, interactive whiteboard, each classroom with at least one computer with English software, English corner display area, self-access area with EFL readers/ games, class library with books in English, authentic books for children, children's dictionaries in the school library</li> </ul>
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**Table 1:** Project school characteristics

As can be seen from the listed characteristics, in all schools there were generally positive attitudes to learning English. In most schools the languages offered were English and German. Italian was offered in a school that used to be involved in a project with early learning of Italian. Hungarian was offered in a school that is close to the Hungarian border. Only one school offered French in addition to the usual English and German. Village schools were less well equipped than schools from small town or city schools. Their principals often complained that not enough was invested in village schools. Interestingly, small town school principals seemed to manage to engage the local authorities in investing in their schools and somehow turned the local community into a stakeholder.

In all schools except one village school (School 73) young learners were taught by qualified teachers. In School 73 the teacher was finishing her studies towards a teaching degree in Croatian and was employed to teach English because of a lack of available people who would know English well enough to be able to teach it. In only one case (School 76) English was taught by a specialist teacher with a university degree in English language and literature. In four schools teachers had a university degree in primary education combined with a minor in English. In one, the EFL teacher had a college degree in English.

## What EFL teachers think about teaching young learners

All teachers believed that Grade One was the appropriate time to start FLL and agreed that an even earlier start would be a good idea. Most saw the greatest advantage in easy acquisition of good pronunciation and intonation and in more natural learning processes that children are capable of. Some stressed that early FLL was a good investment for later learning.

Teachers were also aware of some difficulties. 'YL groups can be very heterogeneous because some YLs have a higher language aptitude than others' (Teacher 71). One teacher pointed out difficulties in pronunciation: 'Pronunciation is a bit difficult because most first graders are missing front teeth. This problem is usually solved by speaking in chorus.' (Teacher 77) She also stressed difficulties with writing: 'Writing can also be a bit of a problem since YLs are still struggling with controlling their fingers and with writing in their mother tongue.'

Most teachers reported liking to teach YLs, while some could not make up their minds about which age group they preferred: teaching YLs was considered enjoyable because children are interested in everything but it was also very hard work; teaching older learners was less exhausting but older learners are difficult to motivate because they find most things

boring. One teacher said: 'I am happy when I come to school every morning; I think that says everything.' (Teacher 77) Some liked their jobs but at the same time had some reservations: 'I like teaching English to young learners but I find it very exhausting too. Still, I'm quite happy since there are good sides to teaching as well: I have a lot of free time, even though sometimes it takes me ages to prepare some of my classes.' (Teacher 71) One of the things some teachers complained about was that they felt their English was getting rusty. As one of them said: 'My English has been deteriorating. I wish I could teach one generation throughout all the eight grades of primary school. It would force me to brush up my English.' (Teacher 72)

## Looking inside YL classrooms

As mentioned earlier, the Croatian National Curriculum and the Croatian National Educational Standards advocate the age appropriate communicative approach to teaching YLs. Classroom observation carried out on a regular basis (three times per year on average) throughout the three years of the study offered interesting insights into teaching approaches, types of tasks young learners engaged in during lessons and into participants' classroom exposure to English. The following excerpts can illustrate our findings.

Excerpt 1: Teacher 71

T: Daisy, Daisy se kupala [Daisy is having a bath].  
Pa što joj sve treba za kupanje [So what does she need]? Er.. Helena?

S1: Shampoo.

T: Shampoo. Mhm. So this is a shampoo.  
Mhm, dobro, što joj još treba [good, what else does she need]?

(T shows a flashcard with a shampoo)

S2: Ja, ja! [Me, me!] Soap.

T: Soap. Tako je [That's right]. Treba joj soap  
[She needs soap]. So this is a ...

(T shows a card with a soap in it)

SS: Soap.

T: Mhm. Onda treba joj, Damir [Then she needs,  
Damir]? Što joj treba još za kup... [What else does she need for a bath]?

S3: Toothbrush.

T: Toothbrush. Tako je [That's right]. Što će raditi sa  
toothbrush [What will she do with it]?

S3: Prati zube [Brush her teeth].

T: Damir?

S3: Prati zube [Brush her teeth].

S2: I ja znam [I also know].

T: Tako je prati zube. Tako je. [That's right,  
brush her teeth. That's right]

S2: Učiteljice [Teacher]? I ovaj shampoo [This  
shampoo too]. Shampoo.

T: To smo već rekli. [We have already said that].  
Što nismo još rekli, Jana [What haven't we said yet, Jana]?

S2: Mogu ja [Can I]? Duck.

S4: Hairbrush.

T: Hairbrush. Što će raditi sa hairbrush  
[What will she do with the hairbrush]?

S4: Češljati kosu [Brush her hair].

S3: Duck! Prati kosu [Wash hair]! Duck! Duck!  
Duck ! Duck ! Duck !

T: Sh...sh...sh...

S5: Duck!

T: Rea, što još treba [Rea, what else does she need]?

S6: Duck.

T: Duck. Što će raditi sa duck [What will she do  
with the duck]?

S6: Igrati se [Play].

T: Igrati se [Play]. (noise and shouting) Što nam još  
treba [What else do we need]? (noise) I što nam je  
ostalo [What are we left with]? Što nismo još rekli  
[What haven't we said yet]?

(noise).

SS: Towel!

T: Nećemo svi u jedan glas [We shall not speak  
all at once]!

SS: Towel!

T: Nećemo svi u jedan glas [We shall not speak  
all at once]!

(noise)

SS: Towel!

T: Martina?

S7: Towel.

T: Towel tako je [that's right]. Ajmo staviti na ploču  
ali moramo staviti i riječi, jel da [Let's put this on the  
board, but we need to put the words too, don't we]?

SS: Da [Yes]!

(T puts up cards with pictures and cards with words  
on the board).

**Excerpt 2: Teacher 77**

<p>T: Yes it's a tiny, tiny, tiny yellow line. Yes, come here please... no, no, no, no, no, she's going to come. Come, Dora, yes. Put it on the left too. (pause) Thaaank you! Good! Waait a second. What's this? (murmur) Oh!</p> <p>S1: Apple!</p> <p>T: It's an apple. Je l' to samo jedna ili ih ima više? [Is it just one or are there more of them?]</p> <p>SS: One. Jedna.[One] One.</p> <p>T: Only one. Kako znaš? [How do you know?] Osim što vidiš sliku? [Apart from seeing the picture?]</p> <p>S1: Zato što je- [Because it's-] (pause)</p> <p>S1: Apple!</p> <p>T: Apple! A kako bi rekao recimo Fran da imaš four? [And how would you, Fran, say if you had, say, four?]</p> <p>SS: Apples!</p> <p>T: Apples. Što dodamo? [What do we add?]</p> <p>SS: ssssssss...</p> <p>S1: S! S!</p>	<p>T: Mhmm...Ok this is very easy. Yes, come here Petre, put it on the right... here you are...</p> <p>S: Thank you.</p> <p>T: You're welcome.</p> <p>(pause)</p> <p>T: Good! What's this?</p> <p>S2: Pear! [pi:r]</p> <p>SS: Pear! Pear! Pear! ([pi:r] [pi:r] [pi:r] )</p> <p>T: (short laugh)w, w, w, wait, wait, wait... (...)</p> <p>S3: Ti kažeš [You say] pear. [pi:r]</p> <p>S2: Yes. Pear. [pi:r]</p> <p>T: Well it's wrong.</p> <p>S2: Ne! [No!]</p> <p>T: No, no, no, no...</p> <p>S2: Je! Je! [Yes! Yes !] (...)</p> <p>T: It's a pear [pɛəɹ]. Aaaa s kojom se riječi rimuje pear? [Aaand which word does pear rhyme with?]</p> <p>(short pause)</p> <p>S2: Bear.</p> <p>T: Bear! Ok. What colour is this pear?</p> <p>S2: Yellow. (short pause)</p> <p>S: Bear.</p>
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**Excerpt 3: Teacher 72**

<p>T: Ok. And now. Sit down. Ok. Look here. This is a duck. (some children repeat the word several times)</p> <p>T: Now. Can you see a duck here? Can you see a duck? (T points to a set of pictures).</p> <p>SS: Yeeees.</p> <p>T: Yes. Right here. Look! Ok. This is a toothbrush. Can you see a toothbrush?</p> <p>SS: No. No.</p> <p>T: This is a hairbrush. Can you see a hairbrush?</p> <p>SS: Yes.</p> <p>T: Yes?</p> <p>SS: Yes.</p> <p>T: Ok. Then, put a tick here. Ok. Put a tick for a hairbrush. What's this? This red thing. What is it? What's this?</p> <p>S1: Bag.</p> <p>S2: Bag.</p> <p>T: It's a ...?</p> <p>SS: A bag!</p> <p>T: It's a schoolbag. That's right. Can you..? Can you see only schoolbag?</p> <p>SS: Yes.</p> <p>T: Yes. Ok. Put a tick for a schoolbag. What's this?</p> <p>S3: Book.</p> <p>S4: A book.</p> <p>T: It's a book. It's a book. Can you see a book?</p>	<p>SS: Yes.</p> <p>T: Put a tick for a book. What's this?</p> <p>SS: A ruler.</p> <p>T: That's right. Can you see a ruler?</p> <p>SS: Yes.</p> <p>T: Yes. Ok. And what's this?</p> <p>S5: Pencil.</p> <p>S6: A pencil.</p> <p>SS: Pencil.</p> <p>T: A pencil. That's right. Can you see a pencil?</p> <p>SS: Uhuh!</p> <p>T: Uhuh! Put a cross for a pencil. (T writes a tick and a cross on the board) You can't find a pencil here. What's this? It's blue and yellow and it's a..?</p> <p>SS: Drum. A drum.</p> <p>T: A drum. That's right. Can you see a drum?</p> <p>SS: Yes.</p> <p>T: Ok. Put a tick. This is a shoe. This is a shoe. Can you see a shoe?</p> <p>SS: Yes. Yes. Yes.</p> <p>T: Put a tick for a shoe. What's this yellow...?</p> <p>SS: Balloon.</p> <p>T: A balloon. Can you see a balloon?</p> <p>SS: Yes. Yes.</p> <p>T: Put a tick.</p> <p>S7: Da l' mi to trebamo bojati? [Do we have to colour this?]</p> <p>T: That's right.</p>
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The three excerpts illustrate three teaching approaches observed in Croatian YL classrooms. They all show how teachers elicit vocabulary that they want to review. In Excerpt 1 the vocabulary relates to bathroom objects, in Excerpt 2 the teacher revises fruit vocabulary, while in Excerpt 3 the teacher elicits words for different objects in order for YLs to fill in a textbook exercise.

The first teacher carries out the activity relying on visual material (flashcards) in order to elicit vocabulary from learners. She uses L1 all the time, both when focusing on language and when trying to manage the class. Learners either provide the elicited word in English or resort to L1. All her questions are closed questions requiring single word answers. The teacher in Excerpt 2 also uses visual material to elicit vocabulary. Her talk is characterised by some code mixing. It seems that by mixing L1 and L2 she is trying to make the L2 material more salient. The questions she asks are both open and closed, and require learners to think and make conclusions. She draws learners' attention to linguistic aspects by focusing on the meaning of structures (e.g. four for plural) and by directing learners to the phonetic characteristics of English (e.g. rhyming of words). The third excerpt shows the teacher using the visual stimuli in a more communicative way: she uses 'wrong' words (toothbrush), or asks YLs to guess the object on the basis of a description (balloon). Although all her questions are also closed and result in single L2 words as answers, her consistent use of English during the activity gives the impression that these learners are immersed, to use Chomsky's words, in a 'rich linguistic bath'.

### **Out-of-school exposure to English**

According to their parents' reports, YLs in this study had considerable contact with English outside school. This is not surprising because English seems to be omnipresent in everyday life in Croatia through undubbed foreign TV programmes, the Internet, and contacts with English speaking people who visit Croatia as tourists or for business purposes. YLs' parents reported that over 20 per cent of YLs spent two hours per week on average watching programmes in English, and a little over one third spent five or more hours per week watching films,

TV series or cartoons in English. Almost two thirds played computer games or watched videos in English. Exposure to English through listening to music in English was also very frequent: over 70 per cent of YLs spent between one and four hours a week listening to music. About 60 per cent of learners engaged in reading English books or comics for an hour a week on average. About a quarter of YLs had no chance of speaking to someone in English, but over half of YLs would spend about an hour a week speaking English to someone. Over 70 per cent used the Internet to engage in the activities mentioned above.

In Grade Two half the YLs reported having met a foreigner; in Grade Four close to 80 per cent had a chance to meet someone who did not speak their L1. Over 60 per cent said they could say something in English to them, and 80 per cent reported that they were able to understand what the foreigner was saying.

Very few YLs reported having English storybooks or dictionaries at home or that they ever used them.

### **Parents' support**

In Grade Two all YLs claimed that their parents were happy with their progress in English. In Grade Four only two learners reported that their parents were not happy about their English and this was because they had low grades in English.

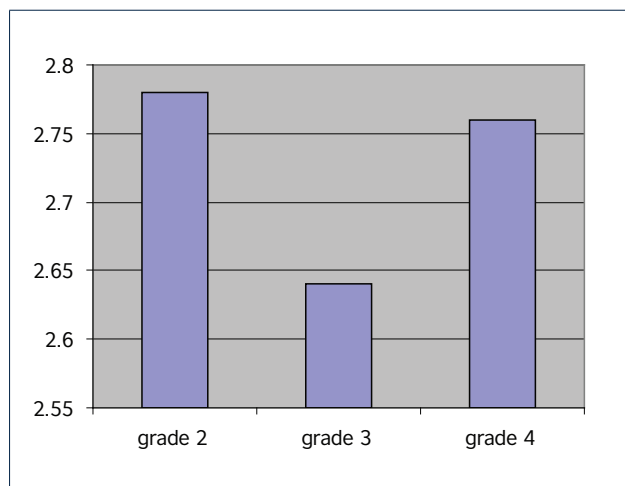
Parents or other members of family (mostly older siblings) helped YLs with their English. This was reported by 97 per cent of learners while in Grade Two, and 87 per cent in Grade Four. We assume that with growing competence in English some parents who themselves did not speak English could not help any more. The help consisted mostly in explaining things the YL did not understand, revising what was done in class, checking homework and the like.

Most parents claimed that their children regularly told them about their English classes (89.2 per cent) and showed them what they learned in class (88.5 per cent). They also reported that they practised English at home (88.6 per cent) and asked their parents or another family member for help with homework (87.1 per cent).

## YLS' perspective

### Attitudes and motivation

YLS are generally thought to have positive attitudes to FLs and to be highly motivated. During the three years of the project smiley questionnaires and oral interviews were used to find how much our young participants liked learning English. Below we first present results that show how motivation developed over the three years (Figures 1 and 2).

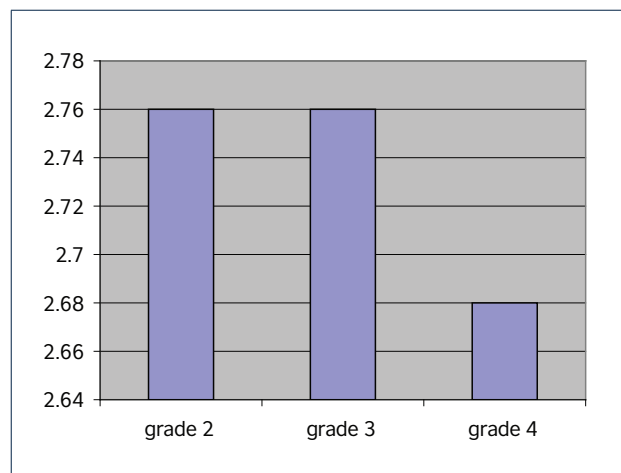


**Figure 1:** YLS' scores on smiley item: How do you like learning English this year? (scale range: 1–3)

As is clear from Figure 1, YLS' motivation was high throughout the three years but it cannot be considered a stable phenomenon. Some experts (Nikolov, 1999) have already pointed out that YLS' motivation is initially high but can decrease with time. At the very start of early FLL the teacher and classroom processes play a key role (Vilke, 1993; Nikolov, 2002), but with growing age their impact changes and other sources seem to direct the ups and downs of YL motivation. In this study the high motivation in Grade Two dropped in Grade Three and increased again in Grade Four. We assume that by Grade Four many YLS had experienced a feeling of achievement and this boosted again their motivation for EFL learning. With an increased knowledge of the language they could make better use of it when watching the many English language TV programmes and films, or when using the internet.

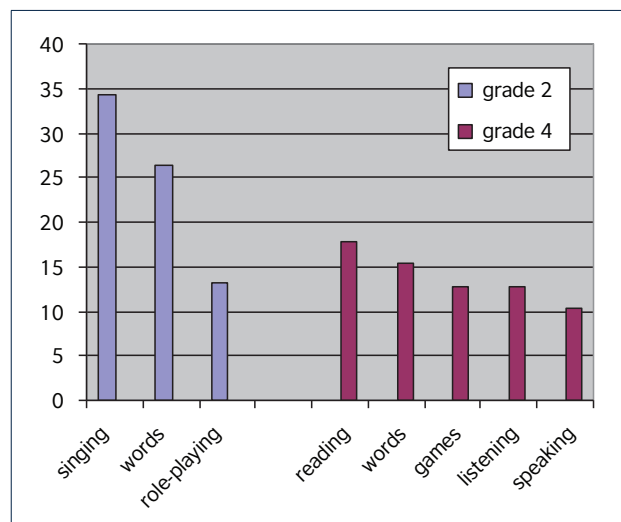
Inquiries into first graders' motivation during the ELLiE project scoping year (Szpotowicz, Mihaljevic Djigunovic and Enever, 2009) showed that of all classroom activities they engaged in YLS were most motivated for learning new FL words. Thus we continued measuring Croatian young EFL learners' attitudes to learning new English words during three years. As shown in Figure 2, motivation for learning new words remained high throughout the three years but decreased a little in Grade Four. Judging from the activities YLS reported as favourite (see below),

in Grade Four new activities – such as reading – became very popular too and competed with learning new vocabulary.



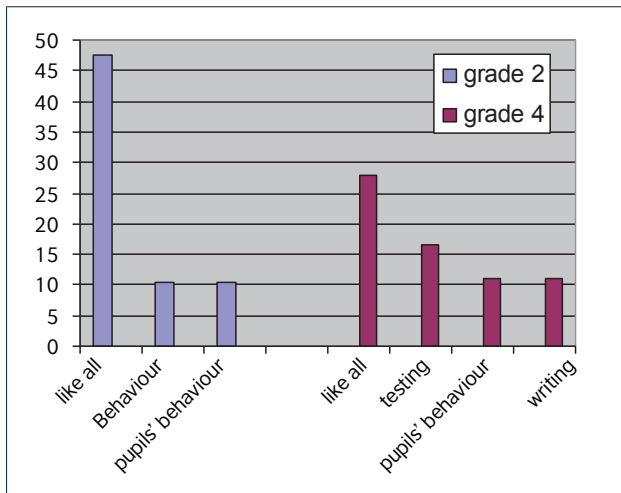
**Figure 2:** YLS' scores on smiley item: How do you like learning new English words this year? (scale range: 1–3)

YLS' attitudes to EFL classes were looked into as well. Their preferences for different classroom activities in Grade Two were compared with those in Grade Four (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Favourite classroom activities as reported by more than 10 per cent of YLS

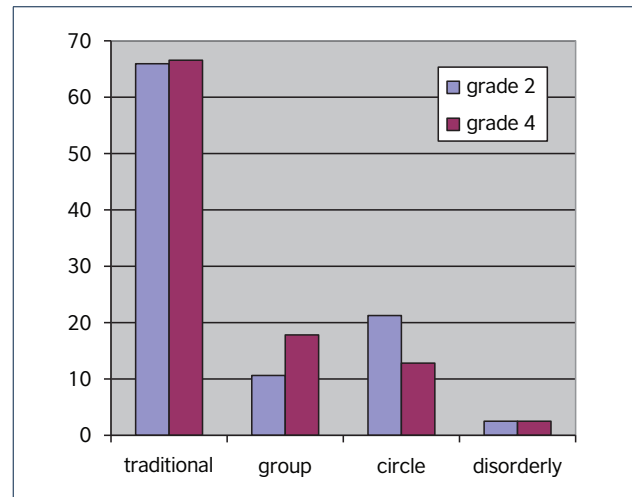
Interesting changes over the three years can be noticed. In Grade Two, out of three top activities two involved physical movement (both songs and role-plays were usually accompanied with actions). In contrast, in Grade Four, out of five top activities four referred to typical language learning activities. YLS varied in their explanations of why a particular activity was a favourite one: 'I like it' (reading), 'I'm good at it' (learning new words), 'It's fun' (speaking).



**Figure 4:** Dislikes reported by more than 10 per cent of YLs

YLs' answers to the question about what they disliked offered interesting insights too. As can be seen in Figure 4, almost half of Second Grade focal learners found nothing to dislike. Less than a third liked everything in Grade Four, however. The most frequently mentioned things second graders disliked confirm that the teacher and classroom processes are very important to YLs. At the age of eight they complained about their EFL teacher not paying as much attention to them as they wanted, disliked it 'when the teacher writes something but there is not enough time to copy everything'; they also complained about their fellow students fighting among themselves, arguing and interrupting games. In Grade Four their dislike of some peers' behaviour remained but complaints about the teacher were not frequent. However, new things appeared: fourth graders disliked writing activities claiming that it was hard and their hand hurt if they had to do it for a longer time. This indicates that physicality can impact on YLs' disposition for FLL. Tests, as well as other forms of learner assessment, emerged as a frequent cause of YLs' concern, probably as a source of language anxiety. Such impact of tests was observed in an earlier study on Croatian EFL learners (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002).

Participants' attitudes to FLL and teaching were also measured indirectly by having each focal learner look at four pictures depicting four different classroom arrangements: a traditional teacher-fronted classroom, one in which group work was going on, one in which YLs and their teacher were sitting in a circle on a carpet, and one that looked disorderly.



**Figure 5:** Replies to the question: *In which classroom would you learn English best?*

Results presented in Figure 5 clearly show that most learners preferred the traditional teaching arrangement both in Grade Two and in Grade Four. They offered interesting explanations for their choices: 'Desks are all neat and kids are listening to their teacher, and they are not fighting', 'Nobody jumps or shouts', 'There is peace and quiet'. It is interesting to note that learners who chose the traditional arrangement came from all the seven school contexts, and their choice did not reflect their own classroom reality. It seems that YLs generally prefer organised classes under the teacher's control. Hence a negligible number of YLs who selected the disorderly class as the best for learning English.

### YLs' linguistic self-confidence

Linguistic self-confidence is considered to be an important factor in early FLL (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). Our findings (see Figure 6) show that at the start of FLL the majority of children view themselves very positively. With growing experience as language learners, YLs seem to get more critical in their self-perception. This is reflected in seeing themselves more frequently as being at the same level as their peers. It is very interesting to see what they base their perception on. For illustration, here are a few examples of YLs' explanations.

- being better than others in class:

*I think I am good because I got an A just like Ivona, who is the best...so I am better than others. (Group 76)*

*I go to extra English lessons and I learn more. (Group 77)*

*Often, when I put down my pen, I see everyone else is still writing. (Group 73)*

- being at the same level as others:

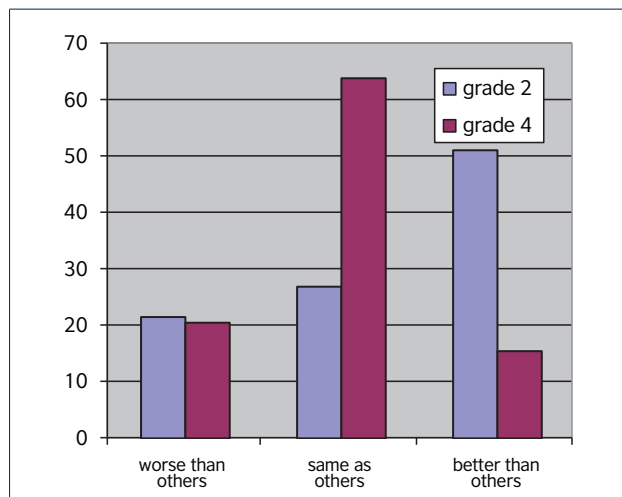
*I know the same as others, except for Ivana and Nataša, who are very smart and get only As. (Group 75)*

*I raise my hand as much as others and have the same grades as others. (Group 75)*

- being less good than others:

*I get bad grades in English. (Group 74)*

*It's more difficult for me this year, I can't really understand English. (Group 73)*



**Figure 6:** YLs' comparison with peers

As these explanations clearly show, YLs tend to compare themselves to their peers in class as well as take into account the grades they are assigned by their teacher.

### Linguistic outcomes – YLs' listening comprehension in English

Scores on listening comprehension tasks administered at the end of each schoolyear offer interesting insights into YLs' linguistic outcomes. Taking the score of 500<sup>4</sup> as the dividing line between low and high performance on these tasks, we could see that in all the three years over 80 per cent of YLs in this study scored higher than 500. The Croatian sample means were 544.99 and 544.44 in 2008 and 2010, respectively. These quite high listening scores can probably be attributed to being exposed to a lot of listening materials in English classes in school and to a rather high exposure to English outside school. Besides, oral skills are insisted upon during the early years of FLL.

### Interactions

As stressed in the introductory part of the paper, deeper insights into early FLL can be obtained not by investigating individual variables on their own but by looking into their interactions. Thus, in order to answer our third research question, we looked into the interplay of the different variables included in this study. Applying both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data we collected over three years of the study we found a number of interactions that threw more light on processes and products of early EFL learning.

Thus, linguistic outcomes interacted with both contextual and individual factors we examined. Significant differences in listening comprehension were found among different groups of YLs, thus making school and class environments salient contextual factors. In Grade Two, groups 71 (a small town school) and 73 (a village school) scored significantly lower than some of the other groups ( $F= 7.027, p< .001$ ). In both of these school contexts learners were reported to be less exposed to English outside school and hardly any YL took private lessons in English because there were no private language schools nearby. Also, both groups were taught by beginner teachers and, in the case of group 73, the teacher was unqualified as well. This was combined with an exceptionally high level of L1 use by both teachers and learners which, we believe, contributed to slow development of listening comprehension. In Grade Four, however, a significant difference in scores was found only for group 71: these learners performed significantly worse than groups 76 and 77, both from metropolitan schools ( $F= 5.967, p< .001$ ). Group 73 had in the meantime changed teachers twice, each time the replacing teacher was a qualified teacher of EFL. In group 71, on the other hand, the second grade teacher was replaced too but by unqualified and even less experienced teachers. Such circumstances combined with generally lower out-of-school exposure to English of village and small town YLs may be the probable cause of low listening comprehension.

How much YLs enjoyed learning English correlated with listening comprehension in Grade Four only ( $r= .237, p= .002$ ). Impact of motivation on linguistic outcomes seems to appear when differences in motivation among learners start to appear. At the very beginning of ELL, there is very little variance in motivation and it becomes larger as learners grow older and language material becomes more complex. Thus, as YLs progress with their language learning, their motivation interacts with outcomes in different ways.

<sup>4</sup> This score was calculated on the basis of scores for seven-country ELLiE sample in 2008 and 2010.

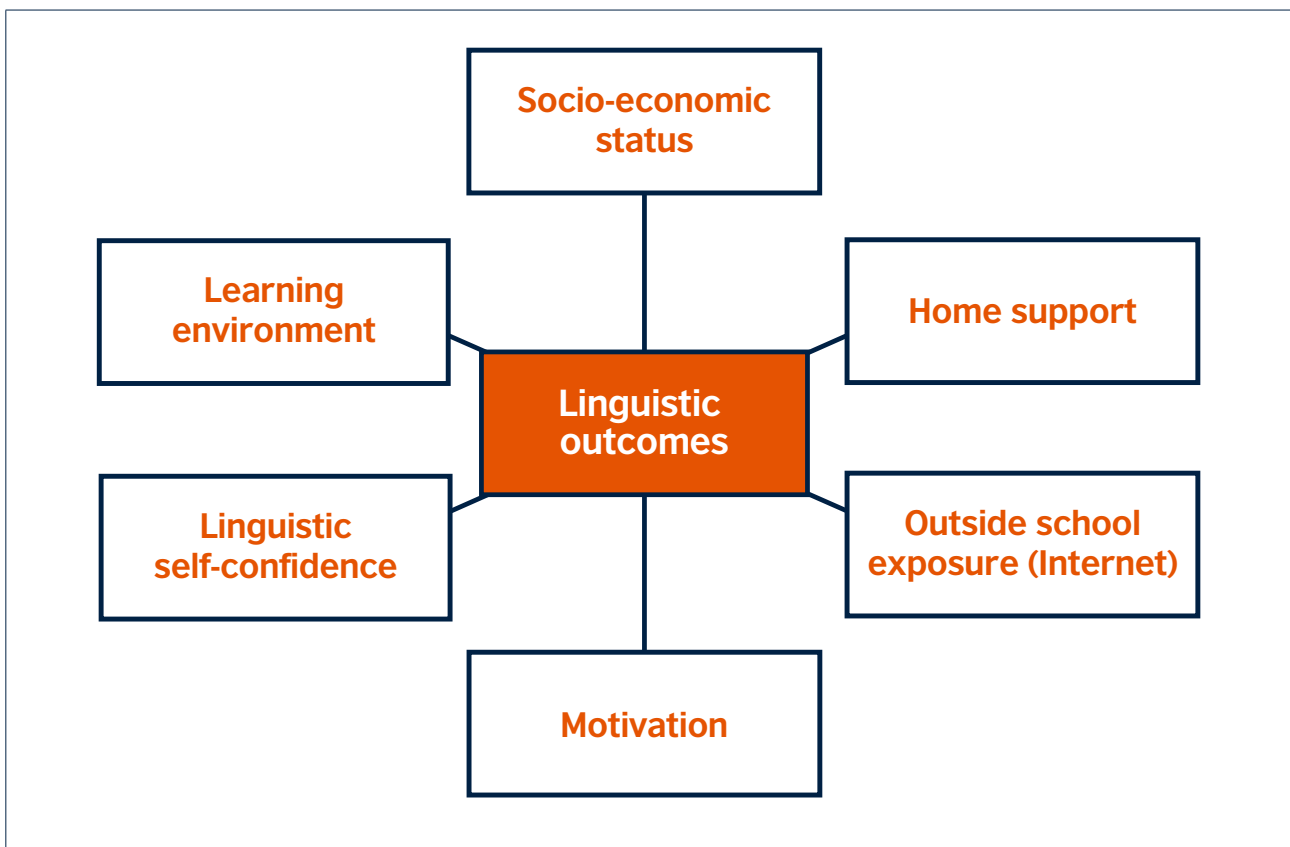
Another interesting interaction was found between listening comprehension and linguistic self-confidence. These two variables showed significant correlations ranging from  $r = .373$  ( $p = .021$ ) in Grade Two to  $r = .576$  ( $p < .001$ ) in Grade Four. The different levels of significance suggest that interactions between these two variables change with time, increasing in intensity. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in linguistic self-confidence among different groups of YLs, indicating that school level and class level influences were not decisive in case of this learner variable. What proved to be more relevant was having met a foreigner with whom the YL could use English. YLs with such experiences displayed higher linguistic self-confidence. Here the association with confidence decreased in time (Grade Two:  $p = .006$ ; Grade Four:  $p = .016$ ).

Using the internet was significantly correlated with listening scores in Grade Two ( $p = .019$ ) but not in Grade Four ( $p = .251$ ). It can be assumed that fourth graders who did not use the internet watched TV more and built up their listening comprehension that way.

Listening comprehension interacted with YLs telling their parents about their English classes. However, this interaction was significant only in Grade Four: those fourth graders who discussed their English classes with parents scored higher on listening tasks than those who did not ( $t = 2.525$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ).

The socio-economic status, as measured by mother's and father's education level, also interacted with linguistic outcomes. Although correlation coefficients were not very high, they were significant in both Grade Two and Grade Four. It is interesting to note that correlations with father's education were higher than those with mother's education, and that both were higher in Grade Four than in Grade Two. It can be assumed that with YLs' progressing knowledge of EFL the role of the socio-economic status becomes more important. As parental education levels were not associated with helping children with learning EFL, we assume that what is at work here is the so called passive role of parents (Gardner, 1985). This role implies that parents can influence their children's attitudes and motivation in subtle and sometimes totally unconscious ways through their own attitudes to FLs or FLL, and without actively engaging in their children's learning.

Below we present graphically the described interactions of contextual and individual variables with linguistic outcomes.



**Figure 7:** Interactions in early learning of EFL

# Conclusions

Our study clearly shows that the context in which Croatian YLs acquired EFL was generally favourable. Their teachers had positive attitudes to teaching YLs even though they were aware of a number of difficulties and professional challenges involved in their work. Out-of-school exposure to English was found to be considerable in most of the investigated school contexts, and the same was true about parents' support. YLs' attitudes, although generally positive over the three years, proved to be unstable: they changed from highly positive to less positive to more highly positive again in Grade Four. Preferences for classroom activities changed over time too: activities comprising strong physical elements gave way to those in which formal learning elements were more pronounced. YLs' self-perception changed from overly positive to more realistic with the growing experience in EFL learning and with accumulating evidence of their language performance. On the other hand, YLs' attitudes to the immediate learning environment remained rather stable: the traditional classroom arrangement continued to be preferred over the three years, suggesting that structured settings are more desirable in early EFL learning.

In terms of linguistic outcomes, our findings point to the impact of a number of relevant relationships among the factors we investigated. Lower language learning outcomes were shown to be related to learning contexts in which out-of-school exposure to English and teacher qualifications or teaching experience were lower. Impact of motivation and linguistic self-confidence on learning outcomes proved to be stronger in Grade 4 than in Grade 2. The same was found about some elements of the socio-economic status of YLs: as YLs' knowledge of EFL increased so did the interaction of the socio-economic status and linguistic outcomes.

Following the third approach to ELL (outlined at the beginning of this paper) enabled us to get a broader and deeper insight into early learning of EFL. Contextual factors presented themselves not only as relevant but often as key variables in explaining this phenomenon. The interactions they entered with individual learner characteristics and with linguistic outcomes threw more light on both processes and outcomes of early EFL learning. Of special significance is the finding that all the examined factors and their interactions changed with time, thus creating highly dynamic relationships.

Extending such studies to other contexts and including larger samples would make it possible to form research-based generalisations that could inform EFL teachers, policy-makers and young EFL learners' parents worldwide about what can realistically be achieved in early EFL learning and how to go about it.

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