

Teaching Languages to Young Learners: A Historical Perspective

Fernando Trujillo Sáez
Facultad de Educación y Humanidades de Ceuta
Universidad de Granada
ftsaez@ugr.es

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Introduction

Sometimes, immersed as we are in a whirlwind of daily activities, we tend to think that we are working on the hottest field of research or on the most avant-garde pedagogical approach. However, Teaching in general and Teaching Languages in particular are not new activities to humankind and, consequently, it is at least risky to assume that we are advancing another step if we do not look back to consider how far we have walked. H.H. Stern stated some years ago: "Through studying the history of language teaching we can gain perspective on present-day thought and trends and find directions for future growth. Knowing the historical context is helpful to an understanding of language teaching theories." (Stern, H.H., 1983:67) The teaching practice of a certain moment, especially language teaching, responds and belongs to the socio-political, educational and linguistic circumstances, among many others, of that moment but if we want to analyse and improve that practice, it is necessary to contemplate it within a larger scheme, in comparison with previous theories of language teaching.

However, Stern himself warns of the difficulties of the enterprise: "Unfortunately the current state of historical documentation is far from satisfactory. Language teaching theory has a short memory." (ibid., 76) The readers are invited to check some of the latest book on language teaching or the proceedings of the last conferences and look for a chapter or a paper devoted to the history of language teaching. The metaphor of the whirlwind on the first paragraph is not gratuitous.

Furthermore, the need of historical reflection is more important in an area of language teaching as moved by the polemic as teaching languages to young learners. In 1978 Stern and Weinrib could already perceive the confusion and the debate around this topic and they summarised it as follows: "The teaching of languages to younger children has been a fascinating but confusing story of ups and downs over the last 25 years. It has increasingly become a puzzle and a worry to educational policymakers and administrators in many parts of the world." (Stern, H.H., and Weinrib, A., 1978:152)

There are, at least, three interesting ideas in the quotation above. First, language teaching to young learners is a fascinating story. This statement could be signed by any teacher who has had the opportunity to teach languages to young learners. The interest and motivation they show is indeed captivating, as the lessons and the results normally are. It is certainly a rewarding experience.

However, it is also a confusing story. There is confusion about the optimal starting age, about the time allowance, about the language pedagogy and about the

educational goals, as stated in Stern and Weinrib (ibid.). The teachers also feel this confusion, normally as a lack of a definite body of research and a satisfying theory of language teaching to young learners which could lead to a well-grounded, confident practice.

The third interesting idea in the quotation is that Stern and Weinrib do not refer to teachers as the main sector affected by the ups and downs, but to “educational policymakers and administrators”. So, the interest in language teaching to young learners is not exclusive of teachers or parents, but it also involves policymakers and administrators. As we said before, language teaching is particularly sensitive to the socio-political circumstances.

In fact, our main hypothesis is that the history of language teaching to young learners has been marked by two questions: (1) Which is the optimal age for starting to learn a language? (2) Is the effort and expense used worth the results? The answers to these questions came from different scientific fields such as Linguistics, Psychology or Pedagogy on the one hand, and the administration on the other hand, and that is what has provoked the ups and downs Stern and Weinrib wrote about.

Our objective, then, is to review the history of language teaching to young learners. To trace its history an international approach will be assumed, as mutual influences are quite frequent in this field among several countries. Furthermore, we will also try to encompass the teaching practice concerning young learners as well as the theories and researches on the question on the optimal starting age, as both theory and practice has been closely tied together in this occasion.

From the Ancient Rome to the nineteenth century

The first mention we find about teaching languages to young learners takes us back to Ancient Rome. The enhancement of the empire brought new ways of life and new languages to Rome and, above all, it was Greece the model that Rome was willing to follow. No doubt that “the Romans quickly appreciated the advantages they could draw from this more mature civilization, richer than their own national culture.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, “History of education”) Furthermore, “it came to pass that a Roman was considered truly cultivated only if he had the same education, in Greek, as a native Greek acquired.” (ibid.).

The process of education was as follows: “From the earliest years, the child, boy or girl, was entrusted to a Greek servant or slave and thus learned to speak Greek fluently even before being able to speak Latin competently; the child also learned to read and write in both languages, with Greek again coming first....In following the normal course of studies, the young Roman was taught next by an instructor of Greek letters (*grammatikos*) and then by a Greek rhetorician. Those desiring more complete training did not content themselves with the numerous and often highly qualified Greeks to be found in Rome itself but went to Greece to participate in the higher studies of the Greek themselves.” (ibid.) That is, the first real experience in foreign language teaching as it is understood in modern ages involves young learners in a sort of “immersion” experience with a Greek speaker. It is also to be noted that the motivation for this first educational experience was clearly socio-political, and as such, “only the children of the ruling class had the privilege of receiving the complete and bilingual education.” (ibid.)

The methodology used by the Romans had the same origin as the syllabus: “The early Romans quite naturally copied the pedagogy of the Hellenistic world: the same ignorance of psychology, the same strict and brutal discipline, the same analytical method characterized by slow progress – the alphabet (forward, backward, from both ends toward the middle), the syllabary, isolated words, then short sentences (one-line moral maxims), finally continuous texts – the same method for writing, and the same numeration, rather than computation.” (ibid.)

This bilingual education lasted until the age of Augustus. Between the 3rd and the 1st century BC a new *grammaticus Latinus*, similar to the Greek *grammatikos*, introduced Latin as the instruction language and as an object of study. The appearance of a new generation of poets, orators and writers (Virgil, Terence, Sallust and Cicero among other) provided the texts to be studied, analysed, memorised and repeated.

Progressively, and more intensely after the barbarian invasions, Greek was more and more ignored, although “despite the political and social upheavals, the methods and program of ancient education survived into the 6th century in the new barbarian Mediterranean kingdoms.” (ibid.) However, The starting age was raised as schooling change from the family and the first Roman public schools to the cathedrals and the monasteries.

In general, in those first centuries of the Christian era, education was secluded in the monasteries and the schools founded by bishops in the cathedrals, both of them aimed at aristocrats, future clergymen and monks. Latin became the language to study the Holy Scriptures, but it was not taught to young learners any longer.

We must wait until the emergence of the new gymnasium, in Italy in the 14th and 15th centuries to recover the bilingual early learning. In that period a number of educational institutions appear for young boys (girls had been out of formal schooling for some centuries now). One of the most important institutions was the gymnasium of Guarino Veronese (1374-1460), who “organized his students’ courses into three stages: the elementary level, at which reading and pronunciation were primarily taught, followed by the grammatical level, and finally the highest level, concentrating on rhetoric.” (ibid.) One of his disciples, Vittorino da Feltre (1378-1446), also founded, at Padua and Venice, several boarding schools for talented boys, wealth not being a decisive factor for admission. In these boarding schools, “Italian was completely ignored (...); all instruction was given in Latin, the study of which, together with Greek, reached a high level of excellence.” (ibid.)

This situation was not to change during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period. The reformer Philipp Melanchton (1497-1560) settled the basis for a new educational system, divided into three stages; in these three stages the children should not study too many subjects, as this was exhausting and possibly harmful. So, as it is necessary to choose among all the possible languages, Latin is more important and hence preferable to German, Greek or any other language. Another influential reformer, Johannes Sturm (1507-1589) also advocated the study of Latin, and in his grammar school children started learning Latin at the age of six, basically by memorizing, neglecting thus the mother tongue.

In fact, it is not until the late 17th and 18th centuries that the mother language can challenge Latin. For instance, Ratke (1571-1635) defended the necessity of learning the mother tongue first and its use as the instruction language. In that sense, he proposed a curriculum based on reading and writing in the mother tongue, singing, basic mathematics, grammar and, then in the higher classes, Latin and Greek. A.P.R.

Howatt summarises the evolution so far: “Until the eighteenth century, formal education in Europe consisted almost exclusively of the teaching of foreign languages, Latin mostly, but also some Greek and Hebrew, to young boys between the ages of eight and fourteen.” (Howatt, 1984).

In the same sense, one of the most important European intellectuals in the 17th century, Comenius (1592-1670), also designed a programmatic school-system organization. During the first years of life the children would develop physically within the family group; then, from seven to twelve, they would attend the “vernacular school”, in which they would study subjects such as religion, ethics, diction, reading, writing, basic mathematics, music, civics, history or geography. The following stage is the grammar or Latin school, where they would study from the age of thirteen to eighteen; at nineteen they could enter the university.

The situation was not to be different for nearly two centuries. Going on with Howatt’s text, he writes: “The broader trends of educational change in the nineteenth century served to reinforce the view that foreign languages (particularly the classics) were unsuited to the needs of mass elementary education and should be confined to the secondary level of schooling where they would do the least damage.” (Howatt, 1984). Stern and Weinrib (1978:152) also wrote: “The broad trend in most educational systems up to about 1950 was to regard languages as a natural part of secondary education.”

The twentieth century

What happened in the 1950s to provoke a change? Stern and Weinrib mark three reasons for the change: 1) the demand for a improvement in language learning; 2) the desire to enrich the educational experience of primary-school children; and 3) the wish to exploit the young child’s supposedly greater language-learning abilities. This third reason refers back to the starting age question, the most important single criterion for the implementation of early language learning.

W.G. Penfield (1953, 1959) explained that “there is a period when language acquisition takes place naturally and effortlessly” (Ellis, 1985: 107), which coincided with the period of the first ten years of life. Later, Lenneberg (1967) gave some support to this theory when he explained that before adolescence the two hemispheres are not “lateralized” or specialized, and thus young learners would use a whole-brain approach to learn languages.

The influence of this line of research was enormous. In the theoretical aspect, for instance, Theodore Andersson wrote in 1953 *The Teaching of Foreign Languages in the Elementary School*, laying the foundations for the FLES (Foreign Languages in the Elementary School) movement in the USA. Some other books were also written in the same line but we highlight Theodore Huebener’s *Why Johnny Should Learn Foreign Languages* (1961), which argues for early learning considering the polyglot nature of the USA. H.H. Stern (1964) contributed to the development of early learning experiences with his paper *A Foreign Language in the Primary School?*

Some time later, in 1965, the first French “immersion” kindergarten opened its doors in an Anglophone elementary school in St Lambert, Montreal, Canada. In between two International meetings on languages in Primary Education, sponsored by the UNESCO Institute for Education took place in Hamburg in 1962 and 1966.

This moment of euphoria is followed by the (logical) decline in the seventies. The title of Theodore Andersson's second book, *Foreign Languages in the Elementary School: A struggle against mediocrity* (1969), seems to reflect the change.

New studies appeared considering the "optimal age" for language learning, such as Baily *et al.* (1974), Fathman (1975), Burstall (1975), Oyama (1976) and Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978). Rod Ellis (1985) summarises these researches:

1. Starting age does not affect the route of SLA (second language acquisition), that is, "learners appear to process linguistic data in the same way, irrespective of how old they are."
2. Starting age affects the rate of learning where grammar and vocabulary are concerned; adolescent learners do better than either children or adults, when the length of exposure is held constant. Where pronunciation is concerned, there is no appreciable difference.
3. Both number of years of exposure and starting age affect the level of success. The number of years' exposure contributes greatly to the overall communicative fluency of the learners, but starting age determines the levels of accuracy achieved, particularly in pronunciation.

A particularly important research was the longitudinal study realized by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), "Primary French in the balance", about the British Project on Primary French (1964-1974). Three groups of eight-year-old children (17,000 children in total) together with two control groups were investigated and the results were conclusive though polemical. Foreign language teaching in the primary school was feasible and it was not detrimental to achievement in other school subjects (a 17th century argument against early learning). However, early starters were not better than later starters, which runs against the critical period hypothesis. In fact, the authors of the study declared that the theory of the advantages of an early start was a myth.

These researches provoked doubts in the minds of policymakers, who started a debate on the convenience of teaching languages to young learners. H.R. Partlow (1977) defined the problem which worries the administrations: it is expensive.

This process of reflection coincided with one of the most interesting moments in the history of Europe, the creation of the European Union; and in this framework, "throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s, education systems in the European Union (EU) and the EFTA/EEA countries underwent numerous reforms which affected different areas and levels depending on the country concerned." (Eurydice, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, Introduction, page 1). That is, a general reform movement was changing the educational systems all around Europe, particularly at the compulsory levels, just when the polemics on the teaching of languages to young learners was being debated.

As a sort of introduction to compulsory education in Europe, the general organization of the period of compulsory education in Europe is as follows: "In the majority of countries in the European Union, compulsory education begins at the age of 6 and finishes about the age of 16...Compulsory education in general lasts for 9 to 11 years...In the majority of Member States, there are characteristically three stages in the educational process between the ages of 2 and 18: pre-school, primary and secondary...Children can be enrolled in the majority of the educational systems of Member States from the age of 3 or 4 to receive pre-school education...Primary

education begins between the ages of 5 and 7 and finishes between 10 and 12, when secondary education starts in almost all the countries in the European Union.” (Eurydice, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, “General Organisation”, pp. 1-4)

Within this framework, the European Commission on Education and Culture, through its White Paper “Teaching and Learning: towards the learning society” (Eurydice, 1995), aims at helping EU citizens be proficient in three European languages, their mother tongues and two other languages. In that sense, early learning is one of the actions promoted to achieve that objective. For example, in 1997, a conference of experts and decision-makers, “Early Learning and After” was organised in Luxembourg, and then European Union Education Ministers stated the Resolution 98/c/1 to foster teaching languages to young learners.

However, the Member States gave different solutions to the dilemma of teaching languages to young learners. Austria, for instance, opted in 1983 for teaching languages in primary education: “The 1983 amendment to the curriculum prescribed initial foreign language learning on a compulsory basis to the extent of 1 weekly unit in years 3 and 4.” (Eurydice, 1995, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, “Austria”, pg. 2); that amendment even included the methodological approach for that early learning: “Initial foreign-language teaching is delivered through the communicative approach. The subject Foreign Language is not evaluated by marks; but attendance is certified in the school reports.” (ibid., pg.2) Recently, foreign language teaching to young learners has even been extended: “From the 1998/99 school year, a foreign language will be taught in the first two years of primary school in the form of a compulsory exercise (without assessment) in the teaching of compulsory subjects.” (Eurydice, 2000, *News*) Finally, another very interesting aspect in the Austrian case was the debate on the importance of the acquisition of the mother tongue in an intercultural education; we shall comment on this facet, the attitudinal, socio-cultural contents of language learning, later on.

In Denmark, however, the situation is different. Education is compulsory from the age of 7 to 16. The curriculum set by the Ministry of Education establishes that “the core curriculum for the first two years of the folkeskole includes Danish, mathematics, physical education, Christian studies, science, creative art and music. Thereafter, compulsory subjects are gradually introduced with, for example, English taught from the age of 11.” (Eurydice, 1995, *Denmark*) So, we cannot talk about early learning in the case of Denmark.

Finland and France are two extreme cases. Finland has an important language-centred curriculum. Apart from the mother tongue (Finnish or Swedish), students in Primary Education must learn the other national language and foreign languages. French Primary curriculum, on the other hand, “concentrates on basic subjects such as written and spoken French, study-related skills, art and physical education.” (Eurydice, 1995, *France*) However, the situation in France could change as France is involved in a process of reform of Primary Education. Similarly, Portugal’s curriculum for Primary Education does not include foreign languages either, which is left until the third stage in the educational system, the secondary schools.

The Greek compulsory educational system is divided in Primary Education (*Dimotiko Scholeio*), from the age of 6 to 12, and Secondary Education (*Gymnasio*), from the age of 12 to 15. In relation to languages in Primary Education, “teaching of foreign languages was integrated into school, initially on an experimental basis, and in 1992/1993 it was established in all *polythesia* schools (i.e. schools with four or more

teachers)." (Eurydice, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, "Greece", pg. 3) So, children start learning English three hours a week from Class 4, aged 9. Once again, reference is made to interculturality, as the objective of this early language learning is stated in the following terms: "The teaching of foreign languages means that tomorrow's citizens are better equipped, and forms a basis for intercultural education." (Eurydice, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, "Greece", pg. 4). Furthermore, "Presidential Decrees 369/85 and 436/84 establish schools for children of Greek émigrés for the purpose of improving the integration of children of returnee Greeks into the Greek education system. These schools follow the Greek education system, and teaching at these schools is in two languages (Greek and English in Athens, and Greek and German in Thessaloniki), according to the children's level of knowledge of the Greek language." (Eurydice, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, "Greece", pg. 8) Once again, the attitudinal, socio-cultural component serves to promote interculturality and the compensation for inequalities.

The Irish curriculum for primary education includes religion, Irish, English, mathematics, social and environmental studies, art and crafts, music and physical education. However, "the curriculum at primary level is currently being revised...A pilot project for the introduction of modern foreign languages is currently underway in primary schools." (Eurydice, 1995, *Ireland*) So, attention must be paid to Ireland, where three modern languages are going to be studied in Primary Education.

Italy, between the decade from 1984-1994, realized important educational reforms, some of which involved foreign languages. Thus, the Presidential Decree no. 104 of 12th February 1985, which came into force during the 1987/88 school year, introduced the new curriculum for primary education, but a compulsory foreign language was not included until the Ministerial Decree of 28th June 1991. So, from the 1992/1993 Italian children must compulsorily learn a foreign language (French, English, German or Spanish). As the Eurydice text explains, "adapting to the European dimension has meant that Italy has had to comply with new quality standards and to introduce foreign languages into primary education as well as university training for nursery and primary teachers," (Eurydice, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, "Italy", pg. 1) but "some aspects of this reform (such as the introduction of a foreign language) are still experiencing difficulties due to a shortage of specialised staff." (ibid., pg. 2)

Probably, the most complex case of foreign language learning is Luxembourg, where "the language of instruction depends on the level of education. In pre-primary school and the first two years of primary school, Letzeburgesch is the language medium. German is introduced as the language of instruction during the first year of primary school and French from the beginning of the second." (Eurydice, 1995, Luxembourg) Furthermore, a reform of pre-school education is being developed in which early language learning is regarded as greatly important for this multilingual country.

Primary Education in the Netherlands (ages 5 to 12) also includes a foreign language, English, within the compulsory subjects. In Germany, on the other hand, it is not until secondary education that the foreign language is added to the curriculum. In England and Wales, the foreign language subject is compulsory in KS3, that is, from the age of 11.

The Scottish case is quite extraordinary, as it involved a pilot period of FLT to young learners. Compulsory education in Scotland takes from ages 5 to 16, Primary education being from 5 to 11. In 1994, when the curriculum and assessment for

primary was discussed, "it was agreed, following a successful pilot period, that all pupils in the last two years of primary schooling (ages 10 and 11) will learn at least one foreign language. The four languages from which schools may choose are French, German, Spanish and Italian." (Eurydice, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, "Scotland", pg. 3)

The Spanish educational system has also undergone a process of radical reforms. The Organic Act on the General Arrangement of the Educational System (LOGSE) has regulated the structure and organisation of the education system at non-university levels. Among other changes, compulsory education has been extended up to age 16, Primary Education ranging from age 6 to 12 and Compulsory Secondary Education from age 12 to 16. Within this framework, one of the most important changes concerning the school subjects has been "the introduction of a foreign language in primary education from the third year onwards ... and a second foreign language in compulsory secondary education." (Eurydice, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, "Spain", pg. 7)

Compulsory education in Sweden (*grundskola*), which takes from 6 to 16, has also been reformed in this period of years. In spring 1994 a new curriculum and syllabi were issued and in July 1995 a timetable was stated by the Parliament. Thus, "in the new timetable, more time is allotted to courses in second foreign languages. Inter alia, Spanish is introduced as an alternative to German and French among the optional subjects that each municipality is obliged to offer. Local or individual options may also include a third foreign language." (Eurydice, *Reforms at Compulsory Education Level: 1984-1994*, "Sweden", pg. 5) So, 480 teaching hours are devoted to English and 320 hours to foreign language over the 9 years of compulsory school, and "teachers, within the framework of the timetable, will themselves decide the allocation of teaching time between different years." (ibid., pg. 5) The only requirement is that "subject tests in Swedish, English and mathematics are produced nationally to be used at the end of the fifth and ninth years." (ibid., pg. 6)

Conclusion

Europe, then, has accepted the challenge of teaching languages to young learners, although each Member State has the power to decide whether to incorporate foreign languages to the primary curriculum or not. As part of this decision, a project titled "Foreign Languages in Primary and Pre-School Education" was funded through the LINGUA programme. The results of this project are extremely interesting: "Early language learning can have a very positive effect on pupils, in terms of language skills, positive attitudes to other languages and cultures and self-confidence. Nevertheless, an early start doesn't itself guarantee better results than a later one. For success to be possible, certain conditions in terms both of pedagogy and of resources must be created." (Blondin, 1998)

The authors of this study recommend certain needs for early language learning: Research and innovation focused on results, context and classroom observation; parental involvement; continuity; short, daily lessons; teacher training; opportunities for all pupils; appropriate methodologies for different age groups and linguistic diversity. They even warn about the potential dangers, as "if it [early language learning] is implemented in primary and pre-primary education without providing sufficient resources and without sufficient planning to fulfil the conditions set out above, this could be counter-productive." (ibid.)

Obviously, the decision of implementing early language learning cannot be justified now, as in the 50s and 60s, on psychological advantages on the part of young learners. The reasons for that option then are two-fold: First, to enrich the schooling experience of Primary pupils, providing a larger number of learning hours, which was mentioned above as one of the most important reasons for success at language learning if high quality teaching is provided; second, and most important in the European Union context, language learning is a powerful way of developing, on the one hand, a European dimension in the school and, on the other hand, an intercultural sensitivity.

One of the most important explanations given in the 60s for the supposed advantage of young learners was their affective, socio-cultural resilience (Schumann 1978, Brown 1980). That is, young learners are prone to feel the integrative motivation more demandingly than adolescent and adults, which have already gone through a process of acceptance of cultural models and prejudices. In that sense, language teaching to young learners, particularly if focused on the attitudinal component, can serve as an instrument of intercultural construction in a multicultural world.

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