Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in Primary Schools in Europe: Beliefs and Realities

Aprendizaje y enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en la educación primaria en Europa: Expectativas y realidades

Maria Kihlstedt
Université Paris Nanterre
Bâtiment A, Bureau 404A
200 Avenue de la République
Nanterre, 92001
maria.kihlstedt@parisnanterre.fr
France

Abstract:

Since 2001, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) has been the main reference for teachers of foreign languages in Europe. However, difficulties in applying the CEFR and attaining the expected learning outcomes in foreign language (FL) have been expressed by teachers, especially with regards to young learners. This paper examines the assumptions underpinning the policy of foreign languages for young learners in the European Union (EU). The focus will be on primary schools, starting ages and instruction time. An illustration of the somewhat "unrealistic" expectations of learning outcomes in the CEFR will be given, with consideration of empirical research evidence on learning a FL in preschool and primary schools. Some possible pedagogical solutions will also be suggested.

Keywords: Language education policies, trends and innovations in FL teaching, young learners, input and age effects.

Resumen:

Desde el 2001, el marco común europeo para las lenguas se ha convertido en un referente importante para los profesores de lenguas extranjeras en Europa. Sin embargo, comúnmente, los docentes enfrentan desafíos para su implementación y el alcance de los niveles lingüísticos establecidos en él, principalmente con los estudiantes que inician el aprendizaje de lenguas a una edad muy temprana. Este escrito discute algunos principios del marco común y su aplicabilidad para la enseñanza de lenguas a niños. En la discusión, se critican estos aspectos con base en los resultados de investigaciones realizadas con niños en educación preescolar y primaria. Para subsanar las debilidades de estos principios, se plantean sugerencias pedagógicas.

Palabras clave: Lenguas y política educativa, Enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, Edad y aprendizaje de lenguas.

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|1. Language policy in the European Union (EU)

The best way to optimize second/ foreign language learning in a classroom setting is a widely debated issue. In multilingual Europe, with its 66 languages and the political ambition to promote language learning and language diversity, this issue has been taken seriously by the Council of Europe with particular attention to the development of the Common European Framework for Language (CEFR). Generally, practitioners and teachers associate European language policy with the CEFR and its proficiency scales. Although the proficiency levels constitute an important part of the CEFR and of foreign language policy in the old continent and beyond, it is important to understand two things: the CEFR is more than just a "proficiency scale," as it reflects the achievement of language policy elaborated by the council of Europe that goes back to the late 60s.

So, what is the CEFR? It is considered to be the standard leader for a new era of language teaching, in addition to an innovative tool which is neither normative nor dogmatic. It is not a concrete method, but it offers thoughts about various methodological options for language teaching. The CEFR is intended to provide a shared basis for reflection and communication among the different partners engaged in teacher education and elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, textbooks and examinations etc. For teachers, it is a descriptive tool that allows them to reflect on and analyze their decisions and practice in their specific contexts, making it easier for them to clarify what they wish to achieve in the foreign language classroom. However, it does not tell practitioners *what* to do or *how* to do it. It raises questions but does not

provide ready-made answers. With regards to the proficiency scales, the Council of Europe underlines the importance of not confusing "the rigor of the grids describing CEFR levels with the spirit of the CEFR itself, which is both open and dynamic" (Council of Europe, 2018: 2). The 2001 version of the CEFR is most often cited, although there is a more recent version from 2018 that has not yet been heavily implemented and reviewed. To understand the philosophy behind the CEFR, its historical background and current developments must be discussed first.

1.1. Overview of the CEFR History

The 2001 version of the CEFR was developed as a continuation of the Council of Europe's work in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the beginning of the EU, member states committed themselves to the facilitation of communication among citizens through the promotion of each other's languages. Therefore, it was natural for the Council of Europe to develop their language policy in parallel with the communicative approach in language teaching which replaced the contrastive audio-lingual method based on imitation and grammar knowledge in the late 1960s.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, the *Threshold levels*, the first functional/notional specification of language *needs* rather than pure linguistic knowledge, was developed first for English and later for nearly 30 other languages. Five dimensions of communicative ability were identified: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, socio-cultural and social competence. As for the levels, work at this stage pointed to what was to become the most innovative and wide-spread feature of European language policy: the scaled description of second language (L2) proficiency in terms of defined, communicative criteria as the base for learner assessment.

By the 1990s, the time had come to develop a common framework for language learning, teaching and assessment. The starting point of the 2001 CEFR document was initiated in 1991 during a major Council of Europe symposium in Rüschlikon (Switzerland), and a research group was set up in collaboration with the

Swiss National Science Foundation. Different drafts of the framework were created during the 1990s[2], and in 2001, the "European Year of Languages," the official launch of the CEFR took place. For the first time in Europe, a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabus and curriculum guidelines, as well as for assessment of foreign language proficiency was created. Since this time, the CEFR is now internationally widespread and highly formalized into six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. The levels, defined by "illustrative descriptors", provide a basis for comparing various second/foreign language curricula, textbooks, courses and examinations. General language certifications, such as TOEFL, IELTS (for English) and DILF, DELF, DALF, TCF and CLES (for French) are also defined according to the CEFR levels both for oral and written competence. Since its publication in 2001, the CEFR has been translated into 40 European and non-European languages, and its use has spread outside Europe from Asia to Latin America. It is the second most translated document of the Council of Europe after the Convention of Human Rights.

In 2002, the Barcelona Council invited EU countries to take action to "improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages *from a very early age* (Eurydice, 2017: 11, emphasis mine). The objective of learning two languages in addition to the mother tongue before entering secondary school, the "M + 2 Formula", was a strong ambition. The CEFR project and the Barcelona Council's recommendations for the member states were launched at the same time and led to high expectations on facilitating quality in language education and promoting a Europe with open-minded, plurilingual citizens.

Despite numerous on-line resources to support implementation that followed the publication in 2001, as well as an intergovernmental evaluation of the CEFR in 2007, requests and questions on how to use the CEFR continued to arise from practitioners. It was not always easy to find an answer in the introductory guides or general guides to the CEFR that flourished on the website of

the council of Europe. In 2018, the "CEFR Companion volume with new descriptors," a document of 233 pages, was published by the council of Europe as a complement and an update to the 2001 book. The updated volume focused on more precise illustrative descriptors for each level and a more precise definition of the "mediation" skill (cf. 2.2 below), often questioned by users of the CEFR principles. The 2018 CEFR publication is the largest and most recent document among the numerous updates for users that has appeared from 2001 up to today.

However, clear guidelines on the CEFR for young learners are still missing. Despite the fact that "a recognized need for instruments to better support CEFR alignment of teaching and learning for young learners" is identified (Council of Europe, 2018: 49), no updated descriptors for these learners appear. The recommendation for teachers in the 2018 CEFR is to use the samples of the European Language Portfolios (ELP) for young learners in order to "collect and collate" (Council of Europe, 2018:49) descriptions for young learners in the main age groups 7-10 and 11-

15, the most representative ages in the validated ELP samples. The ELP is an activity that was used at the beginning of the CEFR and the following years but is less used today. It is a document in which those who are learning or have learned one or more languages can record and reflect on their language learning and intercultural experiences. It has three components: a language passport, a language biography and a dossier. The ELP was supposed to support the development of learner autonomy, plurilingualism and intercultural awareness and is clearly linked to the self-evaluation principle, the "can do" statements of the CEFR (see 1.2). However, it needs to be underlined that there are no direct guidelines in the CEFR for primary schools, only the recommendation of an early starting age, prevailing from the Barcelona Council in 2002.

|2. Specific features of the CEFR

The CEFR is language-neutral, which means that it can be applied to any foreign language learning situation. It takes an action-oriented

approach, which represents a shift away from syllabuses based on a linear progression through language structures towards syllabuses based on needs analysis, oriented towards real-life tasks and real communication. A *proficiency* perspective of what the learner "can do" is more important than a *deficiency* perspective focusing on what the learner has not yet acquired. The system offers self-evaluation to help the learner, through the so-called "can do" statements which present what language learners can do at different stages of their learning. These statements are given in the descriptors for each level.

The six levels of ability go from A1 (the lowest) to C2 (the highest). Learners are classified into three distinct groups: the Basic User (levels A1 and A2), the Independent User (B1 and B2) and the Proficient User (C1 and C2). Here is an example of a descriptor for the B1 level from the 2001 version:

> "B1: Can convey information and ideas on abstract as well as concrete topics, check information and ask about or explain problems with

reasonable precision." (CEFR, 2018)

Another specificity of the CEFR is that it describes language learning outcomes in terms of language competence and defines users of a language as *social actors* who perform *tasks* (not just speaking the language) in various circumstances and in a given environment, within a particular field of action (individual, public, educational or professional). The central notion of tasks is divided into language competences of four kinds, replacing the four traditional skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking by *reception* (listening and reading), *production* (spoken and written), *interaction* (spoken and written), and *mediation* (translating interpreting, paraphrasing or summarizing). The mediation competence is particularly put forward in the updated version of the CEFR (2018), as a means to facilitate plurilingualism for newly arrived migrant children. Based on the idea that "in both the receptive and productive modes, the mediation makes communication possible between persons, who are unable, for whatever reason

to communicate with each other directly" (CEFR, 2018: 32). This idea clearly recalls the translanguaging approach (see Garcia & Wei, 2014 and 5.1 below), without explicitly mentioning the recent advances in this research domain.

As mentioned above, the CEFR claims to be an extension of the communicative approach introduced in foreign languages classrooms in the 80's. In the interface between Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Second Language Teaching research, the Task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach was introduced in the 1980s as a complement to the communicative approach. The TBLT does not exclude a focus on form and a conscious noticing of particular linguistic features, in line with Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis. In that respect, it goes a step further than the first 'pure' communicative approach, where only real communication, at the expense of focus on linguistic knowledge, is what matters. The objective of real communication rather than any explicit focus on form is still a basic principle of the CEFR.

The two interpretations of TBLT in SLA research and in the CEFR seem both similar and different. The TBLT approach advocates a FL classroom context where the use of communicative *tasks* is central, just as in the CEFR. However, in SLA and L2 teaching research, it does not exclude attention to structure and grammar. Focus on form in a meaningful context is what matters (Keck & Kim, 2014). It is worth mentioning that the domain of TBLT in SLA and L2 teaching research developed independently of the CEFR principles and emerged first on the other side of the Atlantic, mainly in the United States. Already in 1998, Skehan, drawing on Long (1985), described the notion of task as a classroom activity in which:

"1. Meaning is primary

2. There is a communication problem of some type to solve (e.g. information gap and "jigsaw" tasks, where each participant has a piece of information needed to solve the problem)

3. The activity has some relationship with real-world activities (when applicable)

4. Task completion is usually required
5. Task performance can be assessed in terms of language outcome with focus on form"
(Skehan, 1998: 95)

Norris (2009: 578) stressed that "it is by engaging learners in *doing valued activities* that relevant *declarative and procedural knowledge* is developed" (emphasis mine). This claim is different from the first communicative approaches and Krashen's dichotomy of acquisition as opposed to learning (Krashen, 1982), but is similar to the "can do" statements and language performance measured by *tasks*, two basic principles of the CEFR. The main point here is to show that the interface between SLA and SL teaching has been in operation for a long time. This is not explicitly mentioned in the CEFR, which quotes very few SLA or SL teaching researchers. The results from the exchange between SLA and SL research applied to the classroom does not seem to have been taken into heavy consideration by language policy makers in Europe, although the same terms are often used ("tasks", "communicative competence")

In summary, the CEFR emphasizes real communication in a task-based approach and focuses on what has been acquired (and not what is left to acquire) along six levels of competence. However, it presents a gap with regards to what has already been said on the TBLT approach in SLA and SL teaching research. Next, I will discuss the application and the criticisms of the CEFR from the point of view of practitioners.

|3. Implementations of the CEFR: Some shortcomings

Some questions can be raised regarding the concrete applications of the CEFR. How can the proficiency levels be attained in the classroom and with what material? What are the linguistic correlates of the A1 to C2 levels that can be used in the FL teaching setting? How can the descriptors, that are necessarily quite general, be adapted to young classroom learners? While the majority of practitioners are aware of the need for a language-independent framework, many teachers have found it difficult to apply the general principles in their everyday classroom practice

(Whyte, 2015). To ensure that the CEFR can be fully adapted to local contexts and purposes, the Council of Europe has encouraged the production of Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) for national and regional languages and specific learner contexts. Consequently, teacher trainers and scholars have written practical guides for teachers as e.g. Beacco, Bouquet and Porquier (2004) illustrate for French as a second/foreign language.

Another source of information for users of the CEFR is the *Eurydice* document, published by the European Commission. This document provides insight into the policies and recommendations in place that currently influence FL teaching in the member states. It gives figures on the current situation regarding choices of foreign languages, teacher education, classroom methods, instruction time and provision of additional classes to migrant students, etc. The latest edition, *Key Data on Teaching languages at school in Europe 2017 edition* (178 pages) will be referred to in this article, to empirically verify the implementation of the CEFR in primary schools in the member states.

Despite the aids and sources of inspiration provided by the CEFR and related documents, some criticisms are regularly put forward by teachers and researchers. The most serious criticism stems from researchers in SLA (e.g., Hultsjin 2007). Their concern is the relative absence of empirical underpinnings of the CEFR descriptors and levels. According to Hultsjin (2007), there is an urgent need for empirical validation on the basis of *performance data* from language learners' production and comprehension in secondary schools. He also points to the absence of tools to establish the frequency or specificity of what the CEFR calls an 'uneven profile" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 17), in reference to users who are at different CEFR levels of proficiency in different competences, such as comprehension versus production, or spoken versus written competences. Although these concerns are relevant, they will not be further developed in this paper, where the focus is on primary schools.

Today, most European countries start teaching a compulsory FL in primary school or earlier. According to the Eurydice 2017 report, students in primary education are learning a FL at an increasingly early age as compared to 10 years ago. A substantial increase (16.5%) took place between 2005 and 2014. In the majority of countries, compulsory foreign language learning starts between the ages of 6 and 8.

The assumption often made by educational stakeholders, policy makers and language educators that 'earlier is better", highly inspired from the Critical Period Hypothesis (see 4.1), is being increasingly questioned, especially in relation to the allocated time for teaching foreign languages. In 2016, the share of instruction time dedicated to foreign languages, compared to total instruction time for the entire primary curriculum was, in most countries, only between 5 and 10%, except for Luxembourg (44 %) (Eurydice, 2017). In practice, this means 1-2 weekly hours. Primary school teachers often complain about the impossibility of creating "plurilingual, open-minded citizens" (cf. the Barcelona Council and above

2.1) with so little time dedicated to FL learning (Myles 2017)[3]

Teachers also question the application of the principles to newly arrived migrant students. This is a reality that becomes increasingly difficult for teachers. Multilingualism has become the norm in many European classrooms and migrant children learning both the majority language as an additional language and a FL are typically difficult to assess. To face this problem, almost all member states provide additional classes in the language of schooling which the newcomers attend while the rest of the class learns other subjects (Eurydice, 2017, p.16 and p. 135). A current problem is the teacher requirements for this group of learners, which are very heterogeneous throughout Europe. Only a quarter of the member states have centralized requirements for teachers working with students from migrant backgrounds. Only in Denmark and Austria does initial teacher education prepare trainee teachers for their role of facilitating the integration of migrant students in primary and secondary school (Eurydice 2017, p. 16). Some recent

empirical research exists on newly arrived young children and schooling (see e.g. for France, Auger, 2010; Vigner, 2009) but more research is needed.

This is probably the reason why nothing is said about FL outcomes and migrant children in the Eurydice report (2017). Anecdotally, one can often hear teachers say "Students should rather concentrate on learning the language of schooling than a FL". Others, especially adherents to the CLIL method (see e.g. Ruiz de Zarobe, 2013) claim that one possibility to avoid excluding young migrant pupils from the FL courses in primary education could be to use the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) method, where the foreign language is the medium for teaching other subjects and not restricted to language lessons in the curriculum. The migrant pupils would then start at the same linguistic level as their classmates in understanding and taking part in activities in the target FL. Naturally, this requires a minimum amount of teacher training and a high level of proficiency in the FL by the teacher. The solution for integration of plurilingual and pluricultural pupils is a problem in Europe. No coherent

efficient language policy for newly arrived migrant pupils is offered in the CEFR. Solutions often come from local initiatives in certain countries, such as the CLIL method (Ruiz de Zarobe, 2013)

To sum up this section, the amount of instruction time, the effects of an early starting age and how to deal with newly arrived migrant children are seen as the major problems for implementing the language policy of the CEFR of foreign/second languages in primary schools (Myles, 2017). Some of these concerns have been the issue of recent research, and I turn now to a short review of recent work.

|4. Age and Instruction Time in FL Education: Some Quantitative Comparisons

It seems as if insights from new research have not been taken into account in the language policy of the European Union, namely two main concerns raised by practitioners with regard to the CEFR - starting age and instruction time. As an example, Eurydice (2017) states that students are expected to reach

an "independent user" level (B1) in their first FL by the time they finish secondary school but does not comment on the actual outcomes of this expectation. Therefore, in this section, the focus will be on research that highlights the shortcomings expressed by teachers.

For nearly two decades now, the council of Europe has encouraged early start policies with the aim of protecting linguistic diversity and promoting multilingualism for reasons of cultural identity, social integration and economic growth. This policy has been "uncritically accompanied by expectations of superior FL outcomes that are modelled by children's language acquisition outcomes in social and school immersion settings, where the amount of exposure is abundant" (Muñoz, 2014: 2), far beyond the typical 1-2 hours per week (5-10 % of the school time, cf. Eurydice, 2017) in most primary schools. Moreover, the FL is often taught by generalist class teachers, who "perhaps learn the language at the same time as the children" in extreme cases (Myles, 2017:5)

One could say that the European language teaching policy mixed up two considerably different learner contexts: exposure to a FL in an instructed setting a few hours per week versus exposure to a FL in a natural setting with abundant input. With only one or two hours per week, the Barcelona Council recommendations of taking actions to *improve the mastery of basic skills*, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages *from a very early age* (emphasis mine) still seems to be wishful thinking.

Research shows that an early starting age is not the problem *per se*, as long as a rich quantity of input is provided. Some figures clearly illustrate this point. Clark (2003) claims that in L1 acquisition, 10,000 hours of exposure to the L1 are needed to attain basic levels of proficiency at around 5 years. In comparison, 3 hours weekly during six years of schooling corresponds to 936 hours of exposition to a FL (Abdelilah-Bauer, 2008), provided that the teacher speaks the target language most of the time. At the rate of one hour of FL per week, as in the United Kingdom, it would take 425 years for children in a classroom

setting to match the input of children acquiring their first language. (Myles, 2017:3)

For a child, a language is "caught rather than taught" (Baker, 2006, p. 128). Initial bilingual or early child L2 acquisition is implicit; the child learns by "doing" rather than by conscious learning and in particular, compensates for a cognitive development that is not yet fully developed with abundant language input in the L2. The "younger is better" assumption seems inspired by the latter learning context, which is very different from the typical FL learning in primary schools.

The effects of starting age and amount of exposure has been examined in detail in a recent neurolinguistic study (Ojima, Matsuba-Kurita, Nakamura, Hoshino & Hagiwara, 2011). The focus of this study was on children's online processing capacity of spoken English words. In the results from event-related potential (ERP) data, with early starting age children (350 Japanese children aged 6-9 learning English as a FL), the length of exposure turned out to be the decisive factor: The study revealed that children who had received

more than 800 hours of exposure were particularly sensitive to incongruous meaning and the N400 amplitude[4] continued to increase at least up to 2500 hours of exposure, which suggests that "at least a few thousand hours of learning are necessary for the development of even the most fundamental aspect of FL processing such as semantic processing of single words" (Ojima et al. 2011:203)

But how much time is in reality necessary to develop a high general proficiency level in a FL or an L2 among early learners? A Canadian study showed that 50% exposure to each language during the hours when children are awake is sufficient to develop a stable bilingualism (Thordardottir, 2014). The children in this research were exposed to English and French in different contexts: some had two languages at home, others one language at home, and another in preschool or in daycare. These different contexts were not really important. The most important factors were the number of hours and the fact that the same person spoke the same language. Once in primary school, to achieve equal

literacy in both languages, 50% of teaching in each language was still needed in the curriculum, especially if one of the languages was no t used in extra-school life. In light of these figures, it is obvious that the limited amount of input typically offered in primary schools in Europe will not foster development in a FL. The enthusiasm and motivation young learners often show and share with the primary school teachers in learning a new language (Myles, 2017) will not compensate for this lack of input. But why is starting age such a crucial issue? This is typically due to the influence of the Critical Period Hypothesis, which I review in the following section.

4.1 The Critical Period Hypothesis

The idea that an early starting age is important for learning an additional language goes back to the precepts of the *Critical Period Hypothesis* (CPH), well-known by laymen and researchers alike. This hypothesis was first advanced by the biologist Lenneberg (1967), who claimed that children who have never learned a language, for instance, due to deafness or isolation, cannot return

to normal if these deprivations go on for too long, from 2 years until puberty. He argued that language acquisition, like other biological functions, works successfully only when it is stimulated at the right time. After this time, language acquisition will no longer occur. This claim has been transposed to SLA and caused lively debates. It lays behind the hasty conclusion of "younger is better", often expressed by stake-holders and language educators.

However, the relationship between a learner's starting age and potential success in a L2 is not a straightforward issue. Whereas some early, often-quoted studies, showed advantages for students having arrived in the United States before the age of ten (Patkowski, 1980; Johnson & Newport, 1990), Snow Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) arrived at a different conclusion, showing an initial learning advantage for teenagers and adults as compared to young children.

More recently, other scholars argue that we can learn a new language late in life and lose one acquired in childhood (Montrul, 2008), which would not be possible if there

were a critical period. Singleton (2003: 21), after a rigorous review of a body of studies in the CPH framework, argued that "the more we examine the hypothesis of the critical period in the light of the studies of recent years [...] the more it seems to crumble". The problem with studies in the CPH framework is that they are based on notions such as 'native-like', 'near-native' mastery as compared to native speaker use. In our multilingual society, it becomes more and more difficult to define what a "native speaker" is. Also, a native-like mastery is not necessarily the goal of FL teaching, at least not when considering the CEFR principles, where the B1 or B2 level is the goal for the end of secondary education. The argument in favor of an early start for L2 has guided language learning policy for a long time without considering the complex issue of age and language learning.

4.2 New empirical evidence on starting age, amount of instruction and FL outcomes

Following the doubts about the Critical Period Hypothesis, three recent studies from three different European countries (Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) tried to empirically study age effects in an instructed learning context. Despite having different learner groups and languages, and somewhat different designs, they all arrive at the same conclusion: an early starting age is not a determining factor for success in FL learning.

Probably the most ambitious research project that has investigated the role of age in early foreign language learning is the *Barcelona Age Factor* (Muñoz, 2006, 2014). Data were collected from almost 2000 Catalan-Spanish bilingual learners of English, distributed in five groups in terms of their starting age: 6, 8 11, 14 and 18 years. The data from the two main groups (who started English at the age of 8 and the age of 11) were collected longitudinally during two years, after 200, 416, and 726 hours of instruction. The older learners' advantage (aged 13 at the end of the investigation) was greater in more cognitively demanding tasks. It diminished by the end of secondary education, which was interpreted

as reflecting the narrowing of the gap in maturation between the two main groups.

Pfenninger and Singleton (2018) also challenged the "younger is better" claim. The claim was undermined by a 5-year longitudinal study conducted in Switzerland on 636 secondary school students who had started learning English at 5 or 8 years. They were tested in a variety of proficiency measures (listening, receptive and productive vocabulary, written and oral lexical richness and grammatical judgement tests). Individual differences and contextual effects, not age of onset, influenced L2 outcome. An earlier age of learning proved beneficial only for children raised as bilinguals with substantial parental support and thus,received more input.

Whereas most studies concern English as a foreign language, Myles and Mitchell (2012) documented in a large corpus, the *French Learner Language Oral Corpora* (FLLOC), the development of linguistic competence in French in the British classroom for children aged 5, 7 and 11. In this

EU financed action research project involving teachers, the same French teacher provided similar teaching for the three age groups in two state schools, thus controlling for the evasive input factor. All lessons were video recorded and the children were tested on a variety of linguistic measures as well as on motivation and learning strategies. The results were similar between the three groups, with no age effects, except for grammar competence where the older group (11 years) scored better. Input frequency was the single most important factor, especially for vocabulary learning. The youngest children were very enthusiastic and motivated, a factor that declined with age, and the older children used a wider range of cognitive strategies. In sum, the studies reported above seem to indicate that the ideal starting age for FL classes with limited time would rather be situated around 11 years.

|5. Some pedagogical solutions

Despite the problem of poor outcomes of FL competence, due to little instruction time and (too) early

starting ages, several pedagogical solutions exist and are currently being applied by primary schools teachers. The solutions include the utilization of on-line resources, such as the teaching management platforms Edmondo and Royal ABC for teachers and young learners in the UK There is also ongoing development of teacher-researcher collaborative methods, which is the focus of two major action research projects funded by the EU, one in the UK and one in France. I briefly consider these issues in further detail below.

First, an innovative tool for teaching young learners is being developed at the University of Essex by Florence Myles and her team in a network website, *Research in Primary Languages* www.ripl.uk. Teachers, teacher trainers and trainees, and researchers involved in pedagogical action research projects present their results to practitioners. This site is not explicitly linked to the CEFR, but the issues of starting ages and instruction time are in focus. It is a valuable website for consulting research on early language learning. It also contains links to articles with concrete advice for teachers, e.g. Myles (2017) and Holmes & Myles (2019)

The participative action research approach, where scholars and teachers together examine what is really learnt in FL classrooms, is a way to promote efficient language learning with a low amount of instruction. Moreover, action research is encouraged within the CEFR policy. An extensive European-funded project of action research is now being conducted in France in collaboration with the UK, Germany and France: *ITILT* and *ITILT2* (Interactive Teaching in Languages with Technology: *Enseignement Interactif des Langues avec les Technologies*). This project has examined and implemented TBLT and technological innovations in language teaching/learning of English as a FL in primary schools (Whyte, 2018; Whyte & Cutrim Schmid, 2018). The project has shown great benefits for teachers who sometimes do not know how to apply the CEFR principles and the recommended TBLT in primary school settings and are not necessarily familiar with the benefits offered by new technologies in the

classroom. Shona Whyte and her team (Whyte & Cutrim Schmid, 2018) have developed tools for classroom interaction, both digital mobile technology and classroom instruments like the interactive white board, that encourage learners to interact in the FL. It should be mentioned that only teachers asking for new methods of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) were involved in the project, and the "no-use-of-technology" comfort zone which is sometimes put forward was not a problem. Nowadays, most European schools are equipped with laptops, tablets and video-projectors, and students have their own mobile phone. This means no extra financial support to implement technology devices was demanded (Whyte, 2015). A guide for teachers on how to use digital interactive technology in the FL classroom is available on the website of the latest project, *Itilt2* (http://www.itilt2.eu/Pages/default.aspx). There is an urgent need for developing action research projects like Itilt, carried out in the field and close to the reality of teachers. Their potential is considerable. With the increasing movement of people in the EU, primary-school teachers in Europe see their classes becoming more and more linguistically heterogeneous. A pedagogical solution is discussed in the next section, which is more directly linked to linguistically heterogenous classes where various mother tongues co-exist in the classroom.

5.1. Translanguaging in the multilingual classroom

To face the challenges of the multilingual classroom, the *translanguaging* approach is gaining ground. Garcia & Wei (2014) give an exhaustive account of what translanguaging means for bilingual education and language use. Many studies in the field of SLA have taken for granted that a maximal, even exclusive, use of the target L2 is the optimal way of teaching and learning a L2 in the classroom. However, according to Garcia & Wei (2014), this "strict language separation (no L1 only L2) has become increasingly questioned as globalization has encouraged movement of people, and as a consequence, a shift in our conceptions of language use"

(Garcia & Wei, 2014, p. 59). The central idea is that there are other ways than traditional methods or the "only L2" approach to maximize the communicative potential of learners in the classroom: translanguaging is defined as a multilingual situation where teachers and pupils use different languages during language courses. The benefit for the plurilingual children is "the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the [systematic and planned] use of two languages" (Baker, 2006, p. 288) within the same lesson. In practice, a translanguaging classroom consists of activities that add value to the migrant children's first language(s) (L1). Garcia & Wei (2014) give several examples of how monolingual teachers can use "translanguaging". Bilingual teachers can more easily "translanguage" between the mother tongue of the children and the majority language (e.g. Spanish teachers teaching English in the United States), but in linguistically diverse classes, it is impossible to speak all the students' languages. That is the situation faced by the majority of European primary class teachers. Garcia & Wei (2014) show how teachers can then prepare material in several languages (with the help of parents and native speakers) and then group teams with homogenous home languages together to work with texts and material totally or partly in their home languages. With contextualization of key words and concepts in the language of schooling, use of "Google translate" and knowledge from the more bilingual classmates in the group, children develop metalinguistic awareness, which is a condition for literacy. Through this interaction, the teacher shows an interest in all the texts and the cultures conveyed in the groups. By using this approach, all knowledge is clearly valued and pupils learn as much from one another as from the teacher. *Co-learning* is the key word and instead of "target language", the focus is on "mother tongues". It allows learners to use all their linguistic resources in their L1 as well as in the majority L2 and enables them to follow their natural cognitive development and acquire literacy skills at the same age as their monolingual peers.

Research also implicitly supports the translanguaging approach. Having learnt two languages early in life increases meta-linguistic skills (Bialystok, 1997; Sanz, 2008), and thus literacy, *provided that both languages are continuously used* (emphasis mine) and that the minority L1 is not abandoned. Various studies have shown that a strong foundation in a minority L1 promotes school achievement in the majority L2, a fact not yet generally acknowledged among laymen and practitioners (Winsler, Diaz, Espinosa, Rodriguez, 1999; Akinci, 2006; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2018). The translanguaging model allows regular, enhanced and valued use of the minority L1 in the classroom and can thus contribute to better achievements in the L2 majority language for migrant children, a fact that is confirmed in the numerous examples from translanguaging school situations shown by Garcia & Wei (2014, pp. 90-115)

|*Conclusion*

In this paper, I have tried to show why the Common European Framework for Languages has not always fulfilled their expectations of enhancing language learning in Europe. Some factors can account for the so-called "unrealistic expectations" of FL learning outcomes in children in primary schools. The "younger is better" mantra seems to have largely influenced policy makers, who took some hasty and simplified measures without considering available research. A whole body of empirical research has shown that young adolescents learn faster than children, thanks to more developed cognitive resources that are typically called upon in FL education in European school settings, which tend to neglect young learners' need for a higher amount of input.

I have also pointed out some discrepancies that exist between European language policy and research. On the one hand, research in SLA has informed sSL teaching for several decades, and this interface is richly documented (form-focused instruction and task based language teaching, (see e.g. Ellis 1997, 2003, Ellis & Shintani 2014; Keck & Kim, 2014,). On the other hand, the development of European language policy has not heavily

drawn on this research, despite its relevance for developing language learning programs built around the CEFR. Creating a larger interface relation between the two would certainly benefit both researchers and policy makers.

However, language policy is slow to change and the implications of SLA research on teaching are not always easy to implement in a general manner. In this situation, some pedagogical solutions have been suggested in this article. One way forward would be to involve teachers to become reflective practitioners of their own teaching, thanks to more research directly applied to the classroom. Tools already exist (Myles 2017, Whyte 2018) to promote research-based lessons involving teachers in order to optimize FL learning with little instruction time. A larger implementation of these tools and structured guidelines for teachers on how to use the translanguaging approach would help fill the gap of a coherent language policy for FL teaching and for migrant children in highly linguistically diverse classes.

In the future, empirical *comparative* research on early FL teaching and learning methods in different national educational systems needs more attention, and we also require the engagement of language educators in order to implement policies that promote realistic successful learner outcomes in multilingual classrooms in Europe and beyond.

End notes

1 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers as well as Jesús Izquierdo and Shona Whyte for useful comments. I am also indebted to Connor Youngberg for proofreading and polishing my English. Any remaining inconsistencies and errors are mine.

2 For details see https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/history "Plurilingualism" and "plurilingual citizens" refer to the individual's abilities in different languages. "Multilingualism" refers to diversity of language in society.

3 "Plurilingualism" and "plurilingual citizens" refer to the individual's abilities in different languages. "Multilingualism" refers to diversity of language in society.

4 The N400 is an electrophysiological measure, a so-called event-related brain potential (ERP) response linked to meaning processing. The N400 is sensitive to priming: in other words, its amplitude is reduced when a target word is preceded by a word that is semantically, morphologically, or orthographically related to it. When it is not, its amplitude increases, i.e. the electrophysiological brain activity changes.

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