

Primary importance

Dr Janet Enever shares the fascinating findings of a European project examining primary language learning with **Melanie Butler**

I started learning German at eleven, which was young in those days. When I was twelve my father put me on a train to Austria to stay with a family for six weeks. I spoke very little German and they spoke no English. It would be almost unthinkable now. But we managed.'

Dr Janet Enever smiles as she hands me a coffee in her tiny office in the bowels of London Metropolitan University. The British representative and project director on Early Language Learning in Europe (Ellie), she has just returned from the Ellie conference. She is not your typical British EFL academic. Her background is multilingual: her mother's first language was Welsh while her father insisted the children learn German because 'it was the language of science'. Her university degree and early career were in state-school primary teaching. Even the switch to EFL – in Poland, then Hungary – was in the family tradition: her aunt was a career British Council officer.

Her background, with a doctorate in primary languages policy, makes her the perfect fit for a research team that looked

at 1,200 children in 48 schools in seven countries: Croatia, England, Holland, Italy, Poland, Spain and Sweden. All were learning English, except in England, where they were learning French or Spanish.

Were there differences between the countries? 'Of course there were – for the Swedes and the Dutch, English is a second language rather than a foreign one. But the differences between the countries were less significant than the differences between the schools. Factors that played an important part included whether the schools had international links and also had supportive parents.'

'And gender,' I say confidently – after all it appears in almost every study of language learning.

'It is statistically significant but not as important for young children as school links or parental support.' In fact, at the beginning of the project a child's gender

and confidence were the strongest predictors of achievement. By the end of the project other factors – motivation, preferences for activities and attitudes to teaching – were also significant.

'Socio-economic factors?' I ask, quoting the holy grail of most primary research.

'Significant but not crucial,' she replies. I am aghast. 'Both the proportion of the target language used by the teacher and their own language level were important factors. If the teacher's grasp of the target language was below B1...'

'They didn't seem to learn much language.' For once I am right.

'And they did best with teachers whose level was C1 or above,' she confirms.

'The differences between the countries were less significant than the differences between the schools'

The talk turns to her experience researching in British schools, and Dr Enever the academic becomes Janet Enever primary school teacher, with

talk of 'my schools', 'my teachers' and 'my children'. She was thrilled, for example, when the English children reported listening to Spanish online – the World Cup. It was the first evidence of the English children accessing Spanish via the internet. Data confirmed that exposure to the target language through the media (undubbed films, cartoons, internet, etc) varies widely in the different contexts. Active contact with the language through interaction with speakers may be even more influential than exposure through the media, Enever says.

As she speaks, I am aware of the academic monitoring the evidence. 'In one of my schools in one year we noticed children were learning chunks of language. All the children in the study learned vocabulary, but this class produced an unusual number of lexical chunks. Perhaps because the teacher used a lot of songs.' She shrugs. 'The next year we saw more words than chunks.'

She craves more evidence, and hopes the Ellie project can follow the children into secondary school. 'We could learn so much,' she says.



TEAM TALK The Ellie team met in Poland in October to discuss their findings. Janet Enever is in the front row, second from right

But the evidence they have amassed in what is probably the biggest ever longitudinal research project on primary foreign languages remains impressive. There is, she confides, enough data to keep the team going for another ten years, and to keep PhD students busy for twenty. As of now, she hopes to use the evidence they have to persuade policy-makers across Europe of the value of primary language. There were dozens of them at the Polish conference, and Enever hopes to reach more by writing a book for the British Council. 'Free and downloadable.' She smiles.

That said, it is important to manage the expectations

of policy-makers, schools and parents. 'Some have very unrealistic expectations of what primary children can learn in 45 minutes or an hour a week.'

What the Ellie project demonstrates, however, is that primary language learning not only gives children a grounding in the language, it makes them more motivated to learn languages and more confident of themselves as foreign-language learners. At the end of the project 69 per cent of the children reported being happy learning a foreign language and more than half felt they were as fast as or faster than other children.

'Even,' says Enever triumphantly, 'my English ones.' ■

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