

Review of *The young language learner: Research-based insights into teaching and learning* (Hasselgreen, Drew, and Sørheim, 2012)

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Introduction

For a long time, language learning research focusing on young learners was a neglected field of research. Most empirical studies within the broad area of second/foreign language acquisition were instead carried out among adults in tertiary education and it was not until in the 1990s that the scope of research broadened to include also young learners, then loosely defined as children in primary and/or secondary education (see, for example, Hasselgreen & Drew, 2012; McKay, 2006; Nikolov, 2009a). In fact, some agreement upon how to define ‘young learners’ was not properly discussed until in 2013, when Gail Ellis (2013) provided some useful clarifications as regards how to label learners within the broad age-span that encompasses both primary and secondary school. In short, based on a literature overview, she concludes that the term *young learners* is most often used for children between the ages of five and eleven/twelve, which in most countries would be equivalent to learners in primary school.

Thus, since young learners did not catch much scholarly attention until fairly recently, research volumes on the topic have been scarce. However, with a rapidly growing interest in examining how small children learn foreign languages, there has been a sudden increase in terms of the number of books available targeting young language learners. A first, major contribution was Nikolov’s (2009b) *Early learning of modern foreign languages*, in which 16 studies of young language learners from different countries are accounted for. Another important contribution is the edited book that will be reviewed here, which specifically targets studies about various aspects of second/foreign language learning among young (mainly Norwegian) learners. Bearing in mind that Norway and Sweden are very similar countries in terms of schooling, language

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background, and demographics – only to give three examples of similarities between these two nations – it is particularly relevant for Swedish scholars within the fields of education and second language acquisition to become familiar with research findings from the neighboring country.

In this review, the editors and the outline of the book are first described, then brief summaries of each chapter are provided, before the text closes with an evaluation of the volume.

Editors and book outline

The book in focus is titled *The young language learner: Research-based insights into teaching and learning* (2012, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen; 254 pages). It is edited by three renowned scholars. Angela Hasselgreen is Professor of English Language Didactics at Bergen University College; she has led many international research projects and has published widely, often on the topic of assessment. Ion Drew is Associate Professor of English and Literacy Studies at the University of Stavanger. Just as his co-editor Hasselgreen, he has been involved in many projects and as regards publications, Drew's main contributions are within the areas of English as a foreign language reading and writing development, and teaching methodology. The third editor, Bjørn Sørheim, is a Reader in Linguistics and English Language Didactics at Sogn og Fjordane University College. He has published several English as a foreign language course books as well as a book on English as a foreign language teaching methodology.

After an introduction by the editors, the book is divided into four parts: (I) "Classroom practices" (73 pages), (II) "Pupils' language development" (73 pages), (III) "Teachers' perceptions and understanding" (59 pages), and (IV) "Assessment" (28 pages). Parts I and II both contain five chapters each, whereas part III has four chapters and part IV two. At the end of the book, there are biographies of all contributors and an index. Below, I summarize the chapters in the order they appear in the book.

Chapter summaries

Part I, "Classroom practices", starts out with a chapter by Speitz called "Experiences with an earlier start to modern foreign languages other than English in Norway". She presents the results of a pilot project carried out in twelve Norwegian primary schools. At these schools, other foreign languages in addition to English were introduced and the author presents the reactions of

teachers, pupils, parents, and head teachers; she also discusses pedagogical implications of the project. In chapter 2, co-authored by Larssen and Høie, focus is on the European Language Portfolio (for a version in Swedish, see <http://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/larande/sprak/stod-i-undervisningen/europeisk-sprakportfolio-1.83490>). They examine to what extent it is possible to use teacher development courses as a means for implementing the European Language Portfolio in primary classrooms. Among other things, the European Language Portfolio is a useful tool to foster learner autonomy, which is at the core of the current curricula of both Norway (*Knowledge Promotion Curriculum, LK06*) and Sweden (*Lgr11*). Chapter 3 is another co-authored chapter, this time by Birketveit and Rimmeride. The chapter reports on a case study whose focus was on an extensive reading project that included authentic picture books and authentic illustrated books; *authentic books* are defined as books that were not written for the purpose of language learning. The researchers investigated whether extensive reading affected motivation, language learning, and participants' own perceptions of this learning. In the following chapter 4, Charboneau presents findings from a nationwide questionnaire about EFL reading instruction and development in primary school (grades 4 and 5). Her study targets literacy approaches and practices that the teachers use. The final chapter of part I of the book, chapter 5, is written by Drew and Pedersen. They present a qualitative study of what is known as Readers Theatre. Readers Theatre is a reading aloud activity that is carried out in groups. The study was undertaken among two mainstream classes in lower secondary school (8th grade) and the researchers examine both pupils' and teachers' experiences of taking part in Readers Theatre.

Part II of the book, "Pupils' language development", begins with chapter 6 ("Incidental foreign language learning in children") and is authored by Lefever. This study is from Iceland, and Lefever investigates incidental learning of English by the age of eight, which is one year before formal English instruction is introduced. Chapter 7, by Figenschou Raaen and Guldal, presents the results of a longitudinal study (from grade 7 to grade 10) in which the development of formal aspects of written English was examined among close to 300 learners. In chapter 8, Nitter Rugesæter takes a close look at phonological competence in English among Norwegian pupils (aged 11–13). More specifically, the study examines whether the participants were able to distinguish between English phonemes that are known to be difficult for learners with Norwegian as a first language, for example minimal pairs such as /z/–/s/ and /w/–/v/. Some

implications for the teaching of pronunciation are also part of this particular chapter. Next follows chapter 9, which is about a three-year study (from grade 5 to grade 7) on second/foreign language English vocabulary development. Scott Langeland, the author of the chapter, examines learners' receptive and productive vocabulary growth in grades 5 and 7, using gender, individual differences, and reading as independent variables. Similar to chapter 9, also chapter 10 focuses on vocabulary development ("A comparative study of the vocabulary of 7th and 10th graders in scripts from the national test of writing in English"). This chapter is written by Lahlum Helness. Using learners in grades 7 and 10 who had been assessed to be at the same level of overall English proficiency, she compares lexical density, vocabulary variation, and text length in their writing.

Part III of the book includes four chapters about teachers' perceptions and understanding. In chapter 11, by Hughes, Marjan, and Taylor, readers are introduced to a study about action research. In total, 75 action research projects from around the world are examined. The common denominator of all projects is that they spring from a Master of Arts program offered at the University of York. The authors focus on four aspects of the action research projects: methodology, problems, patterns, and potential impact on students' professional development. In the next chapter, chapter 12, Hestetraet examines language teacher cognition as well as the teaching and learning of vocabulary (7th grade), using data from a nationwide survey among Norwegian English as a foreign language teachers. Then, in chapter 13, co-written by Mikaelson and Sørheim, the researchers attempt to find out how language teachers approach what is referred to as Adapted Education, an educational principle encompassing an ultimate objective to "teach each pupil according to his/her ability level" (p. 191). In this project, two groups of teachers were asked to use the European Language Portfolio (cf. above) and a third group did not use it. In the study, comparisons are made between the groups with regard to group members' perceptions of Adapted Education and how it was put into practice in their classrooms. The final chapter in part III, chapter 14 (Mellegård and Dahlberg Pettersen), reports on a study examining how teachers perceived and implemented the most recent curriculum in Norway, *Knowledge Promotion Curriculum (KL06)*, that is, they investigate the effect of curriculum change on English as a foreign language teachers.

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As mentioned above, the final part IV of the book includes two chapters, both targeting assessment. In Hasselgreen's chapter 15, a description is given of a large European project called the Assessment of Young Learner Literacy Project, or AYLLIT, a project closely linked to the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz. The project focus is on the assessment of writing in primary school and the chapter gives a picture of how an assessment framework was developed as part of this project. Furthermore, Hasselgreen demonstrates how this particular framework of assessment of writing may be used in the classroom. In the final chapter of the book, chapter 16, Chvala accounts for a number of oral English exam tasks that were produced locally in lower secondary schools around Norway (10th grade). More specifically, the author studies how genre and situational features are defined in these exams, and also how these features may have an effect on general aims of the curriculum.

Book evaluation

My overall impression of *The Young Language Learner: Research-based insights into teaching and learning* is positive. As was made clear in the introduction, the contribution this book makes to the fields of education and foreign/second language acquisition is, indeed, welcome. Not only does the book add to the growing body of work on young learners, but it is also well-edited and presents many important as well as carefully designed studies. The book begins with an excellent introduction by two of its editors, Hasselgreen and Drew, which serves the purpose of guiding the readers. The content that follows is generally interesting, but of varying scholarly quality. I would like to state clearly that the majority of the chapters are solid and very good, but some do not quite reach as high a standard as one would have wished for, which will be made clear in my chapter comments below.

For teacher educators, the first chapter about an early start of foreign languages comes across as very useful. The text reminds everybody involved in education to work relentlessly on improving the transition from primary to secondary school, not least when it comes to language education, where there is a clear divide between the two levels of the school system, signified by lack of communication from each side, so to speak. Chapter 2 (about the European Language Portfolio) is also very useful, and especially so for English as a foreign language teachers, since it describes how the portfolio can be implemented and used in primary classrooms. For instance, the portfolio has two functions of great value, for both teachers and learners: an educational function, in that it

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helps pupils to reflect on learning and learning objectives, and a reporting function, in that it provides a record of learners' language skills related to the levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* (Council of Europe, 2001). By using the portfolio and the scales offered in the *CEFR*, it becomes possible for teachers to communicate individual learners' progress to the guardians in a straightforward and hands-on way as compared to what would be the case without use of the portfolio. In addition, since the Norwegian curriculum *LK06* and the Swedish *Lgr11* resemble one another, Swedish teacher educators and English as a foreign language teachers have a great deal to learn from chapter 2.

Whereas chapter 3 does not provide very convincing results about whether reading stories may contribute to language learning – in my opinion, the authors draw conclusions that the data they present really do not allow for, and they miss mentioning the potential of intentional vocabulary learning (as opposed to incidental vocabulary learning through reading) – Charboneou's chapter 4 is in stark contrast. Chapter 4 is an impressive piece of research about the teaching of English as a foreign language reading. The results Charboneou presents are relevant and presented in reader-friendly tables with impeccable statistical analyses to accompany all the numbers. The same positive comment should be made about chapter 5 (Drew and Petersen), in which Readers Theatre was researched. With the help of a structured outline, inclusion of relevant data, and reasonable conclusions, the project proves to deliver very positive findings as regards using Readers Theatre in English as a foreign language classrooms, something which ought to be encouraging for teacher educators and practicing teachers alike.

Part II of the book, which focuses on pupils' language development, contains five excellent chapters. The study from Iceland (chapter 6), in which Lefever examines incidental learning of English before formal instruction begins, provides new knowledge about a severely under-researched field of foreign/second language acquisition: out-of-school learning. Lefever shows that the Icelandic children in his study pick up a vast amount of English outside of school at a very early age, which is in line with previous findings from some other countries (cf. Kuppens, 2010; Skoric, Lay Ching Teo, & Lijie Neo, 2009; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). Chapter 7 deals in great depth with spelling, yet another area that is rarely researched, and chapter 8 deals with pronunciation, a focus that is more commonly studied, albeit not that

often among young learners. The pronunciation chapter is interesting and I would like to highlight one conclusion that is drawn: incorrect pronunciation on the systematic, contrastive level at an early age is very problematic, since that type of mispronunciation may easily become fossilized (p. 129). This means that it might be more or less impossible for learners to succeed in producing certain phonemes successfully at a later stage, despite extensive training as regards pronunciation. In short, mispronounced phonemes affect intelligibility negatively and, therefore, it is crucial that English as a foreign language teachers have a good command of English themselves, and relevant teaching skills to aid their learners.

In contrast to pronunciation in chapter 7, chapter 8 targets learner vocabulary. Here in chapter 8, Scott Langeland convincingly shows how learners' trajectories of productive and receptive vocabulary both develop unevenly "in spurts and plateaux, even regressions" (p. 142). Similarly, chapter 9 also targets vocabulary and the main relevance of this study is that it brings forward methods of identifying young learners who lag behind their peers, needing help to acquire everyday words. Chapter 10 presents findings in the same vein as regards vocabulary, stressing the importance of focusing on vocabulary building in the early ages.

The four chapters in part III of the book, that is, the texts that focus on teachers' perceptions and understanding, are all solid reports on different research projects. Whereas chapter 11 manages to reveal how action research projects developed master students in "innumerable ways, both professionally and personally" (p. 175), chapter 12 shows how the teachers in the project (on teacher cognition) believed in learning and using vocabulary in context. This was reflected in their practices, characterized as predominance for meaning-focused output practices, all neatly reported by Hestetraet. Likewise, Mikaelson and Sørheim's chapter about Adapted Education is neatly presented, and their project shows the great importance of enabling young learners to take charge of their own learning processes, in line with Holec's (1981) original ideas about learner autonomy. The last chapter in part III, chapter 14, puts emphasis on the fact that teachers need to be prepared already during their training that their future careers will involve shifting paradigms/curricula. The authors highlight one finding of their study, namely that some teachers seem to put too much trust in their textbooks – believing that the textbook on its own is enough to put a new curriculum into practice. This chapter is particularly important for

anybody involved in teacher education and/or teachers' professional development courses.

The final two chapters of the book (the ones that deal with assessment) also present findings of great relevance for teacher education/professional development. The Assessment of Young Learner Literacy Project (chapter 14) clearly proves the relevance of using tools such as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* to communicate learner progress, and the oral exam project (chapter 15) provides plenty of evidence as regards the imminent need of more research on the assessment of oral skills. The chapter is very convincing, and it seems as if the Swedish Research council is on the same note, having recently approved of a multi-year project called Testing Talk (www.kau.se/testing-talk), which targets, among other things, the assessment of the speaking part of the national test of English in 9th grade.

In sum, I warmly recommend *The young language learner: Research-based insights into teaching and learning* to anyone involved in English as a foreign language, be it as teacher students or practicing teachers, or as teaching and learning researchers, or as a person in charge of teacher training.

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