Ion Drew

*Associate professor at the Faculty of Arts and Education, University of Stavanger
Angela Hasselgreen*

Professor at the Faculty of Education, Bergen University College

Young language learner (YLL) research:

An overview of some international and national approaches

Abstract

Growing attention is being given to young language learners (YLL), following a global trend to introduce foreign languages at earlier stages of the curriculum. This article provides an overview of some recent international YLL research and follows this up by comparing it to current YLL research in Norway. A YLL research network has recently been established in Norway in order to share and promote research in the field. Eight Norwegian YLL research projects, involving both English and other foreign languages, are presented. The scope of this research in Norway is compared with international research being conducted in the field. Although the Norwegian YLL research is active in certain areas, such as starting age of second foreign languages, teachers' practices and attitudes, the use of extensive reading, vocabulary and the analysis of written texts, there appear to be gaps in other areas. These include research into the effects of story-telling and drama in the classroom, processes in writing, pupils' cognitive skills, the use of textbooks and the effect of the curriculum. The establishment of a YLL network is considered as an important step in both consolidating current YLL research in Norway and initiating new research projects.

Introduction

The phenomenon *Young Language Learners* (YLLs) has begun to make its mark in several arenas. These include special interest groups in organisations such as IATEFL and EALTA, special editions of periodicals, such as *Language Testing* 2000 (17/2), and, as demonstrated below, conferences and research networks. Why then do YLLs need such attention? What makes this group so 'special' (and how indeed may they be defined)? To take the last question first, for the purposes of this article, YLLs are defined as learners from five years, up to around 12/13 years, which seems to reflect the lower and upper limits of primary school education, at least in Europe. Why YLLs are special is, basically, because they are children. Hasselgreen (2000, pp. 262-3) lists some of the features which put YLLs in a special situation. These include their enthusiasm for and openness to the learning of new languages, but at the same time, their need for special classroom methods. Not only do the learners themselves form a particular group, but also their teachers tend, very often, not to be specialists in language or language learning. Moreover, the L2 language itself produced by YLLs is different from that of adults, just as their L1s are different.

In the traditional study of foreign language learning, teaching and their 'output', has had as its default group, adults. Methods based on early theories of

SLA, such as the audio-lingual approach, based on behaviourism, were geared to an adult learning environment. However, as the focus moved to a more naturalistic approach, for example following Krashen's (1982, 1984) theories, the way children learn their first language, and the apparent ease with which they are able to pick up other languages, were acknowledged as relevant to SLA in general. Chomsky's theory of *Universal Grammar* (Mitchell and Myles, 1998) highlighted further the unique capacity of the child as a language learner, and the issue of a critical age for successful acquisition raised a serious interest in the advantages of an earlier start to learning foreign languages. And very recently, there has indeed been a spate of early foreign language teaching internationally. The challenge thrown out in Barcelona, 2002, by the European Council, to teach at least two foreign languages from a very early age was the catalyst for many countries to move initial teaching of a second foreign language from secondary to primary school, or to lower the existing onset age in primary school (Rixon 2000a). This seems to have heralded a recent shift from the traditional research focus on older learners towards YLLs (e.g. Nikolov et al. 2007).

A number of international conferences have focussed on YLL research, for example in 1999 in Budapest, Hungary, and Pulawy, Poland, and the TEMOLAYOLE (The Teaching of Modern Languages to Young Learners) conference in Pécs, Hungary, in 2007. Publications based on these conferences have included Moon and Nikolov (2000) and Nikolov et al. (2007). Some of the YLL research has considered the wider picture of young language learners. Other research has focussed on issues such as the national implementation of early foreign language learning programmes, age of acquisition, the teacher and teacher education, classroom practices, the development of language skills, and the learner.

This article aims to provide an overview of some recent international YLL research, especially those presented at the 2007 Pécs conference, supported by the Council of Europe, with its focus on YLL research into modern languages in general, and of YLL research projects that are known to be ongoing in Norway. Norway has long been one of the foremost countries in the early introduction of English in school, but perhaps due to the fact that the highest levels of education are associated with teaching at upper school levels, most language research has not involved YLLs. Thus, it is an aim of this article to examine what is known to be being done in Norway in this field, and to compare it with YLL research internationally. In line with the characterisation above of the YLL phenomenon, it seems logical to consider YLL research in five main categories: 1) Issues pertaining to the starting age of foreign language learning, 2) issues pertaining to YLL teachers; 3) activities, material and curricula in the YLL classroom; 4) the language of YLLs; 5) the learners themselves.

Some international trends in YLL research

The wider picture

It is worth beginning this discussion by considering the wider picture in international YLL research. Rixon (2000b) reported on a worldwide survey of primary English teaching. To acquire information about primary English as a foreign language (EFL) around the world, a questionnaire was devised and sent to targeted individuals in different countries. Data was elicited on issues such as when EFL was introduced into the primary curriculum, if the onset age had been changed, the number of contact hours, the educational background of the teachers, curricula, materials and the place of English compared to other foreign languages.

Also relating to the wider picture, Johnstone (2007) reported on a study, supported by the European Commission, of published evidence and documentation on the early learning of one or more additional languages both in and outside the European Union. The study contains three components: firstly it provides an overview of recently published research on provision, process, individual and group factors, and their outcomes. Secondly, it provides accounts of what is considered to constitute ‘good practice’ in early languages learning. Thirdly, it relates the views of experts on what are considered to be the key principles of early language learning. In terms of implications, the study both highlights the conditions needed to achieve large-scale general success and possible new models of early language learning.

In the context of implementing early foreign language learning programmes nationally, Harris and O’Leary (2007) reported on the relatively new experience of learning a foreign language (French, German, Spanish or Italian) in Ireland at the primary level. In Ireland, Irish, a minority language, is the first official language. Nevertheless most children speak English at home and begin to learn Irish as a second language when they start school. The *Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative* was established in 1998 involving 270 schools, the number expanding to 400 in 2007 (about 12% of primary schools). Pupils in the experimental schools receive 1.5 lessons a day in one of the four foreign languages being offered.

The starting age of foreign language learning

On the question of age of acquisition, scholars have largely fallen into two main groups: those who believe in the ‘earlier the better’ hypothesis (Johnson & Newport, 1989) and those who favour postponing the onset age of learners until they have become older and more cognitively mature (e.g. Lightbown, 2000). Studies of an early start have shown that motivation and positive attitudes to a second language (L2) can readily be fostered in young children (Blondin et al. 1998; Donato et al. 2000). In one study, Cenoz (2003) compared Spanish/-Basque L1 learners who had started EFL instruction (English as a third

language) at the ages of 4, 8 and 11. The youngest learners scored the highest in attitude and motivation. Another argument for an early start is that it will ultimately lead to higher proficiency levels (Singleton, 2003). In contrast to an early start, some studies have shown that older learners acquire a foreign language at a faster rate than younger learners (e.g. Marinova-Todd et al. 2000) and that older learners can reach levels of proficiency in morphology and syntax that approximate native speakers (Juffs & Harrington, 1995).

Other factors that have been explored in addition to age are time and intensity. Curtain (2000) used achievement tests and teacher interviews to explore time, intensity and how time was used in early foreign language programmes involving English first language (L1) children learning Spanish at ages 5, 6 and 9 in the US. Each of the age groups was taught in programmes with different time allocations. The results generally supported the hypothesis that time and intensity would influence language achievement, but that the time allocated to a language itself is less important than the way that time is used. As Curtain (2000, p.108) points out:

Students given more time will do better than students with less time; students in more intense programmes will do better than students in less intense programmes. Students who have more time to use the target language will perform better than students who have less time.

YLL teachers

Turning to language teachers of young learners, research into this group has focussed on both pre-service and in-service teachers. For example, Matteoudakis et al. (2007) investigated how pre-service teachers from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Greece applied theoretical principles they had learned about story-based language teaching in practical situations. The trainees were asked to adapt and present a story of their own choice to their peers. Results showed that the quality of work varied from country to country and that the trainees' educational context partly influenced how they performed the task. Czech and Hungarian trainees were training to be specialists at the primary level, whereas the Greek trainees were training to teach EFL at both the primary and secondary levels.

In a study focussing on in-service teachers, Lundberg (2007) conducted a three-year action research project whose aim was to enhance the competence of language teachers of young learners in Sweden who lacked formal qualifications in teaching English. Before the training course started, Lundberg investigated the content of typical language lessons, the use of the target language, and pupils' and teachers' attitudes to the subject. She discovered that pupils were generally demotivated to learn English and the teachers were generally insecure and lacked confidence. Lessons were characterised by lack of variation, tempo, boring materials, lack of planning, lack of continuity from previous lessons, insufficient challenges, lack of physical activities, and lack of long-term

progression. However, as a result of the action research project teachers' linguistic and methodological competence were enhanced, dramatically improving the quality of English lessons and radically changing for the better the attitudes of pupils and teachers to the subject.

In a final study of teachers, Shohamy and Inbar (2007), in a nationally sponsored project in Israel, compared whether homeroom (i.e. class) or EFL specialist teachers were best suited to teach English in the first grade. Their research was based on observations, attitude questionnaires, interviews, pupil achievement tests and parents' questionnaires. In addition, principals and first grade teachers in 32 schools answered questionnaires concerning their perceptions of the qualifications required to teach English to young learners. The findings were inconclusive about which category constituted the ideal first grade English teacher. Homeroom teachers integrated English with other subjects, whereas EFL specialists taught English in a more detached way. The EFL specialist teachers and school leaders were those who were most worried about the quality of teaching, and parents and school leaders generally preferred EFL specialists.

Activities, material and curricula in the YLL classroom

Moving to studies that have focussed on the classroom, syllabi and learners, Vickov (2007) addressed how Croatian young learners experienced the problems and challenges of talking and writing about their own culture and traditions in English. The learners' main source of input was textbooks focussing on the English-speaking world, in which Croatian culture and identity hardly featured. Vickov discovered that Croatian learners had a poor command of vocabulary related to Croatian culture, and argued that learners would benefit in many ways if more attention was paid to their home culture in the early EFL syllabus.

Studies focussing on reading in the young learner classroom have included Lugossy (2007) and Chiang (2007). Lugossy (2007) discussed the use of narratives in four EFL Hungarian primary classrooms, especially from two perspectives: firstly, how teachers and young learners benefited from using authentic picture books, exploring for example how some books engage the interest of boys to a greater extent than traditional teaching materials, and secondly the way reading children's books at home affects learners' literacy development. The results showed positive attitudinal and motivational benefits for learners and teachers, positive linguistic gains, enhanced cooperation in the classroom, and enhanced attitudes to literacy among pupils and parents.

Chiang (2007) described a month-long pilot study involving 21 parents and 34 5th grade Taiwanese pupils of English whose aim was to investigate the extent to which the parents helped their children with their extensive reading. The author pointed out that little attention had previously been paid to parent involvement in extensive reading. The study revealed that parents tended to

focus on translation, vocabulary and pronunciation when interacting with their children. The pilot study led to the creation of a detailed guide to parents on how to help their children with their reading and was followed by a main study with a larger population lasting three and a half months. The main study revealed a low degree of parental involvement in children's reading. Reasons given were lack of time, and low levels of confidence among both the children and their parents.

The language of YLLs

In a study on writing, Griva et al. (2007) focussed on young learners' composing processes in writing. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods in the form of questionnaires, think-aloud protocols and interviews, the authors identified difficulties and problems 12 year-old Greek-speaking children met in their writing. They recorded and classified strategies the learners used during the planning, drafting, revising and editing stages of their writing. The data elicited a good deal of information on the behaviours, needs and strategies of young writers. Suggestions were provided on writing activities that would facilitate the composing processes of young learners.

Two studies that have looked into vocabulary acquisition in young learners are Orosz (2007) and Szpotowicz (2007). Orosz (2007) investigated whether the vocabulary development of young Hungarian learners matched the goals of the curriculum. Tests were carried out on the vocabulary growth of learners in the first four years of English at Hungarian primary schools, and the results showed that learners made satisfactory progress on a regular basis, exceeding the targets set in the curriculum. Szpotowicz (2007) recounted an experiment investigating the number of English words very young Polish learners (7/8 year-olds) remembered after one learning session. Factors considered were the effort the child put into learning English, motivation for learning the language, concentration on the task, auditory and visual memory capacity, and word difficulty and meaning. The data showed a correlation between acquisition of words and the qualities and experience of the teacher.

The learners themselves

In a study focussing on young learner autonomy, Wawrzyniak-Sliwska (2007) addressed the question of whether learner autonomy is a relevant issue in young learner classrooms and how teachers understand it. The study was based on interviews with 32 teacher trainees, 18 teachers and observations of 87 lessons given by pre-service and in-service teachers. Factors studied were the extent teachers allowed their learners to take responsibility for their own learning, the extent to which they believed young learners were capable of doing so, and the strategies employed to actually allow learners to develop their autonomy.

In another study of young learners' cognitive skills, Alexiou (2007) undertook a three-year study into the cognitive abilities and language learning of 5-9-year-old Greek EFL learners in different schools in the city of Thessaloniki.

The results support the link between cognitive skills and young learners' achievements in learning a foreign language. Certain cognitive skills, such as memory faculties, analytic skills, sound discrimination capacities, visual perception and inductive learning ability appear to contribute to the language learning of young learners. Accordingly, the author argued that teaching methods should be adjusted to match, promote or enhance the progress of young language learners.

Finally, several studies have compared young learners of two foreign languages. Firstly, Nikolov (2007) collected data in Hungary from two main sources between 2000 and 2007: large scale surveys into Hungarian pupils' language achievements in English and German and qualitative data collected in classrooms and interviews with young teachers of young learners. The quantitative data was based on 8000 pupils of English and German in each of three cohorts aged 12, 14 and 16. Strong relationships were found between achievements and intensity (number of weekly hours) and socioeconomic status indicated by parents' level of education. The qualitative data suggested that there was a considerable gap between what teachers claim to do and what they actually practise. It also indicated that practice and methodology appropriate to the age group were rarely in tune with each other.

In another study, Csizér and Kormos (2007) investigated motivation and inter-cultural contact in a large population of Hungarian children aged 13 and 14 who were studying English and German. The results indicated differences between the two languages. Learners of English showed more positive attitudes to target language speakers than learners of German. In addition learners of English had a greater degree of linguistic self-confidence, put more effort into language learning and received more support from their environment than was the case among learners of German. The results also showed that learners of English experienced wider contact with the target language through the media than learners of German. For learners with low levels of motivation, contact with the target language and its usefulness seem to be the factors most influencing motivational intensity.

Finally, Huszti et al. (2007) reported on a longitudinal study comparing the learning of English and Ukrainian in Hungarian schools in the Ukraine. The subjects were 76 eight-year-old 3rd graders who had been learning English and Ukrainian for at least two years. The learners' proficiency level in the four language skills was tested in the two languages through a number of tasks. In addition, syllabi and textbooks were analysed and teachers of English and Ukrainian were interviewed. The findings indicated that there were major differences between the opportunities to learn English and Ukrainian and that performances in English as a foreign language were superior to Ukrainian as a second language.

YLL research in Norway

In Norway, as elsewhere, the study of YLL is gradually emerging as a field of research, although in the face of a number of obstacles. Traditionally, the higher education system in Norway has associated language research with higher degrees (master level and above), and graduates with higher degrees have in turn qualified for and taken work in upper or lower secondary schools. Research associated with language development and practices in secondary schooling has in fact been widespread in the past two decades, centred in university language departments, and those carrying this out have had the support of networks within and across universities, and an increasing mass of research designs and findings to draw on. In the primary school, on the other hand, foreign language teaching (overwhelmingly English) has generally been the domain of teachers educated as non-specialists, through the general teacher education system. Although many of these have taken courses in the teaching of English, few have had the opportunity to carry out systematic research as part of their qualification. A change is unquestionably taking place, with faculties of teacher education offering specialist degree courses, and with master level courses catering for the educational needs of primary school and even nursery-level children. However, research into the language of young learners seems to have generally been taking place in a piecemeal way, often with little or no contact with other researchers; there is not as yet, an established or widespread 'research community' in this field.

It was against this background that the authors decided to put out feelers to establish just what was happening in Norway regarding YLL research. With the help of the Norwegian Centre for Foreign Languages in Education in Halden, contact was made with institutions where such research was known to be taking place or thought likely to be of relevance. A two-day seminar for those actively involved in or otherwise concerned with YLL research was arranged in Bergen in October 2007 attended by 16 participants. The seminar was intended as a launching of a Norwegian network of YLL researchers, and had as its aims:

- To establish what YLL research was being carried out, by whom and where
- To establish where researchers may have common or overlapping research fields, and how cooperation may be beneficial
- To see if distinct strands of research would emerge, giving rise to possible sub-groupings
- To share resources, tools and channels for dissemination
- To identify areas which may be neglected or in need of more focus
- To plan future events which would maintain contact within the group, and which would directly serve our needs as YLL researchers.

As the first aim was paramount at this stage, all participants who felt in a position to present actual research projects were invited to do so; eight such presentations were made. The remaining time was devoted to discussion around the other aims.

Of the projects presented, five involve English, one involves ‘other foreign languages’, and two are not restricted to any specific language(s). Five of the projects concern methods/procedures, and three the analysis of pupil language, with one project involving both. One project studies the beliefs of language teachers. The projects vary in maturation from those at their very outset, to one where a finished ‘product’ is available, and another where a process has been trialled and evaluated. An overview of the projects follows, broadly using the same groupings as in the previous section. However, the first project presented lies outside any of these particular categories, as it concerns virtually all YLL issues.

The Language Portfolio’ for pupils from 6-13 years

This is the last of three versions of the E.L.P. (European Language Portfolio) produced for the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training as a result of an extensive development project by Telemarksforskning-Notodden (Mette Lise Mikalsen). Adhering to the Council of Europe’s E.L.P. guidelines, this portfolio provides primary school teachers and pupils with a means of documenting *all* languages a pupil knows. Using language, concepts and imagery appropriate for younger learners, material is provided which helps the pupils to reflect on and document their knowledge of languages and countries where these are spoken, what they have observed of cultural differences and similarities, their use of sources and strategies, and, for a range of skills and levels, what they ‘can do’ in a language. The *Can do* checklists are linked to levels on the Common European Framework (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). There is also a dossier part to the portfolio, where pupils can store samples of their language achievements. The main text throughout the portfolio is given in Norwegian, English and one other language (selected from a very wide range), with an extra line for the pupil to write in a language of his/her choosing. Instructions for both pupils and teachers are provided.

This research was presented, not as an on-going project, but rather as a product of research, which, besides being a valuable tool for classroom use, has potential as a tool for YLL researchers, providing criteria for measuring many aspects of language learning. Its link to the CEFR is a very salient one at a time when the language of all learners is increasingly measured against this yardstick, a fact which, in itself, merits research, particularly in the case of younger learners (for whom it was originally not designed).

The starting age of foreign language learning

‘Early start in second foreign languages’ is a project carried out by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, completed in the spring of 2007 and evaluated by Telemarksforskning-Notodden (Heike Speitz). The project involved trialling the teaching of French, German and Spanish in the primary school, with starting grades ranging from year two to year seven (Speitz & Simonsen, 2008).

International research has shown that the early learning of foreign languages can be beneficial, providing regard is taken to teacher competence, methodology, integration in other subjects and continuity. The Norwegian trial has borne this out, with the evaluation showing that most of the participating teachers were determined to make learning ‘fun’, with a high level of pupil activity, while the teachers gradually placed higher expectations on their pupils. The teachers cited their own communicative language ability and language teaching skills as important contributors to the trial’s success, along with support and flexibility shown by school leadership. The pupils were highly motivated, with most describing the subject as ‘easy’, probably attributable to the communicative focus of the teaching.

The schools in the trial were given considerable freedom to develop their own approaches, as far as the basic framework and organisation of the teaching were concerned. However, two distinct approaches gradually emerged, which may form the basis of models for a continuation of the project. The *introduction model* involves shorter or less extensive teaching in a number of foreign languages, with the intention of giving pupils a taste of languages and of what language learning involves, making it easier for them to go on to make choices regarding language studies at secondary school. The *progression model* involves more or less systematic teaching in a single language over a longer period, with clear aims. Contact details concerning the participating schools can be found on the Norwegian Centre for Foreign Languages in Education’s website.

YLL teachers

‘Language teachers’ beliefs after KL06’ is another study which puts the spotlight on teachers, rather than on actual YLLs, being embarked on at the University of Stavanger (Alexandre Dessingue). This project proposes to conduct a comparative study of language teachers’ beliefs involving the major languages taught in Norwegian schools (including Norwegian as a second language). In this study, “beliefs” are defined as “*a form of personal knowledge consisting of implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught.*” (Kagan, 1992). The first part of the study will focus on a questionnaire survey in the county of Rogaland, aiming to explore in-service language teachers’ beliefs concerning the teaching of foreign languages following the implementation of the *Knowledge Promotion*, 2006. This part of the project will also look into language teachers’ beliefs about CLL (Curriculum

in Language Learning), “language as a “practical” subject” or “learning goals as defined in the CEFR”. The second part of the study will focus on qualitative research based on interviews and classroom observations. This part will aim to find correlations between teachers’ beliefs and practices. The project is at an early stage; the questionnaire will hopefully be devised before the summer of 2008 and data collection is planned from the autumn of 2008. Interviews and classroom observations in three schools in the Stavanger area are planned from the spring of 2009.

Activities, material and curricula in the YLL classroom

‘Using the Early Years Literacy Programme in Primary EFL Norwegian Classrooms’ is also being carried out at the University of Stavanger (Drew, 2007; 2008). This study investigates the challenges, advantages and effectiveness of using the Early Years Literacy Programme (EYLP), which was originally designed for English L1 teaching in Australia, in Norwegian primary EFL classrooms. The approach emphasises regular reading suited to each pupil’s ability level. Classrooms are organised on the principle of different learning centres, between which homogeneous groups of pupils rotate. The experimental school is compared with two control schools using different teaching approaches. The data is based on classroom observations, teacher interviews and assessment through Cambridge Young Learners Starters tests in third and fourth grade classes.

Since the study is ongoing, only tentative conclusions may be reached thus far. The EYLP approach has been popular among the pupils using it, has stimulated their reading interest, and has catered well for pupils of different abilities. During the study period, the pupils in the experimental school have developed their language skills, especially their oral skills, at a higher rate than those in the control schools. However, it has been demanding for teachers to practise the approach, which requires a high degree of expertise. Long term research into the pupils’ language development, writing proficiency, and attitudes to reading, would be a natural follow-up.

‘Assessing the literacy of young learners’ makes up the fifth study involving methods/procedures, also concerning early literacy, and being carried out at Høgskolen i Bergen (Angela Hasselgreen). This project is based on a longitudinal study, over two years, of the reading and writing ability of pupils between 5th and 7th grade, and currently involves two classes in Bergen. The project aims to find means of describing the reading and writing ability of pupils as they progress across distinguishable stages, loosely linked to the CEFR. The intention is that the appropriate CEFR levels (roughly A1 to B1, including in-between levels), in reading and writing, will be adapted to encapsulate what actually occurs as pupils of this age progress. These descriptions, furthermore, will be the basis of material for teachers and pupils to use in the everyday assessment of reading and writing. The methods being developed for assessing

reading are based on the 'Running Records' work in New Zealand and Australia (Clay, 2000) and, as such, share common ground with the Early Years Literacy Programme described above. Features of the texts pupils appear able to read at different levels will be identified. The assessment of writing involves close analysis of pupils' language, and is carried out in cooperation with the *Writing of Young Learners and the CEFR* project, cited below. The project is at an early stage, but from autumn 2008 will be extended to include classes in Spain, Slovenia and Lithuania, as part of the ECML (European Centre for Modern Languages) third medium term programme, 2008-2011. It will also include pupils in the Bergen area who have other L1 backgrounds; in these cases the pupils' development in Norwegian as a second language will be studied.

The language of YLLs

'Vocabulary size and growth of young learners of English' is one of the projects which has as its main focus the study of pupils' writing; this study is being embarked on at the University of Agder (Agnes Scott Langeland). Building on an investigation the researcher has undertaken into the vocabulary richness of secondary school learners of English, this study aims to analyse the vocabulary development of primary school learners of English in a Norwegian L2 context. The data is the written work of pupils in three year groups: Year 5, Year 6 and Year 7, collected at a primary school in Kristiansand.

In order to analyse the vocabulary levels of these young learners, a digital resource called VP-Kids will be used. This is a modified version of Web-VP, originally designed by Prof. Paul Nation. Classic Web-VP is a digital tool that analyses vocabulary in a text into four frequency bands depending on how frequent the words used are. The first two frequency bands in the original Web-VP programme consist of 1000 words, the third band has 570 words and the fourth band is an off-list comprised of all the words not on the other bands.

Since VP-Kids is specifically designed by Nation and Cobb to facilitate the analysis of vocabulary growth in learners' language, it has ten smaller frequency bands and an off-list category (Cobb, 2008). Each of the ten frequency bands has only 250 words, compiled by Stemach and Williams (Stemach & Williams, 1988) using a corpus of children's spoken language. This is a tool which enables a much finer-grained analysis of children's vocabulary development. This study has the potential not just to map out and track the vocabulary development of YLLs, but also to trial a tool which may be of use to other researchers in the field.

'Written English in 7th grade – selected aspects' is the second 'writing study' to be presented, being carried out at Høgskolen i Sør-Trøndelag (Tale M. Guldal and Guri Figenschou Raaen). This project takes into account the early start of English in Norway, where English is a school subject from grade one. This means that pupils have had seven years of English instruction when they start their secondary education. A question which needs to be addressed is 'How

might pupils' written English be characterised at this stage?' This project aims to find out more about pupils' competence upon leaving primary school, posing the questions: 'Which language aspects do pupils master and which aspects are still difficult?' Pupils' texts have been collected from eight different schools in a school district in Trøndelag. The texts – 172 altogether – were written in the form of a test, similar to the national tests in English that teachers were familiar with at that time (which included a test in writing).

The first stage of the project focussed on selected formal aspects which are central in the teaching of English in primary school, such as concord, the spelling of a few central function words and the genitive form. Sentence complexity has also been investigated. Sentence patterns have been found that roughly compare with patterns identified in other comparable materials. Moreover, a fairly limited range of dependent clauses has been observed, but at the present stage and with only parts of the material analysed, only limited conclusions can be drawn.

The project is still in an early phase, where the texts have only partially been examined. In the next stage, aspects such as code switching and vocabulary will be focussed on. It is also planned to collect texts from the same pupils when they reach 10th grade in order to add a longitudinal perspective to the project.

'The Writing of Young Learners and the CEFR', undertaken at AKSIS, University of Bergen (Eli Moe), is the final study to be presented. In common with the two previous studies, this project examines a range of aspects of pupils' writing, including clause and phrase complexity, vocabulary and selected error types. In common with the study of the assessment of the literacy of young learners, this study is concerned with identifying features that characterise pupils' writing as they pass through stages on the CEFR. A principal feature of this study is that it has access to a great many samples of writing from both 7th and 10th grade pupils, both rated by multiple raters on the same (CEFR) scale, through the national testing of English in 2005. This means that writing assessed to be at the same 'level', but from pupils of different ages, can be compared. Additionally, data similar to that of the 7th grade material was collected from a control group of native speaker pupils around 11 years old. The results showed distinct differences in performance between groups who differed principally in age, suggesting that certain language features of writing are related more to maturity than 'level' rated on a scale of proficiency such as CEFR. These include the use of cohesive connectors (such as *because*, *when*, etc), where the younger pupils (both Norwegian and native speaker) shared a more or less common range, which was significantly narrower than that of the older pupils.

This finding has important consequences for the criteria on which the writing of YLLs, however proficient, are judged. It is also an important step towards the necessary work needed to scrutinise the limits of applicability of the CEFR to young learners. In the presentation, a call was made for cooperation on the

compilation of a YLL corpus of written language, of which the foundation has already been laid in AKSIS.

Summary of the Norwegian research

Hopefully, this overview of the research presented at the seminar, seen in the background of international YLL research, has been able to give a flavour of what is being done in the field of YLL research in Norway. While the main aim of the first network seminar was to establish what is being done in the field, where and by whom, it was also important to address a number of other points.

The first of these was to establish where researchers may have common or overlapping research fields, and how cooperation may be beneficial. It is clear that there is a considerable degree of common ground, regarding the underlying themes and motivation of the projects and the actual data analysis. One project promotes early language start, while another aims to examining the effect of this in English. Two projects look at literacy in general amongst YLLs, and how to promote or assess this. There is a call for more insight into YLL language production, and four projects focus on this area. Several projects either directly draw on the CEFR or seek to adapt it to the needs of YLLs. Some studies, such as that on teacher beliefs, cut across all barriers, and concern anyone involved in language learning in our primary schools.

A further aim was to see if distinct strands of research would emerge, giving rise to possible sub-groupings. This has happened to some extent, in so far as a 'writing' group have now begun to cooperate in compiling a YLL corpus. Moreover, at a second – extended - network seminar at the University of Stavanger in March 2008, three distinct strands for further cooperation emerged: YLL writing, the use of texts in the YLL classroom, and differentiation in the YLL classroom. The aim to share resources, tools and channels for dissemination has started to be addressed. Tools such as the Language Portfolio, the vocabulary analysing tool, and of course the YLL corpus referred to above, are all of great practical value to YLL researchers.

In conclusion, it seems that we are, at least, on the brink of having a long-needed Norwegian research community in the field of YLL research, which, it is hoped, will be extended to include all YLL researchers in Norway.

Conclusion: YLL research in Norway and internationally

Regarding which areas can be identified which, if not being neglected in Norway, are at least in need of more focus, it is worth comparing the YLL research cited here as taking place in Norway with the international studies presented. It is to be emphasised that neither overview of studies is claimed to represent the whole picture. The international studies cited covered a wide range of topics, and while a number of these, such as starting age of second FLs, teachers' practices and attitudes, the use of extensive reading, and vocabulary, are reflected in the Norwegian network research, there remain aspects which are

not represented in the Norwegian research documented here. These include the question of who should be teaching English at this early stage: specialists or class teachers (begging the question, of course, of whether the basic training of teachers should include an FL as a compulsory element, which it does not at present). Other issues not addressed here include parents' practices and attitudes towards reading, processes in writing, pupils' cognitive skills, the use of textbooks and the effect of the curriculum. Furthermore, other areas not reported as being studied in this article include the place of literature (stories, rhymes, drama etc) in the language classroom (although this is an area which has recently been taken up within the Norwegian network), as well as a focus on the spoken language of YLLs.

YLL research, relative to 'general' research into language learning, is at an early stage worldwide. In some respects, such as the close analysis of written language, the compilation of learner corpora, the issue of the CEFR in YLL assessment, and studies of YLL literacy, it seems that the Norwegian research within the network is relatively strong. In other respects, serious gaps are evident. It would therefore appear that Norway could both benefit from and contribute to the international field of YLL research. This was exemplified at the EALTA conference, Athens 2008, where a paper presented by Hasselgreen (2008) and one presented by Papp and Jones (2008) demonstrated how each one could draw on the findings of the other. If we are to make up for lost time within this important field, cooperation both within and across national boundaries is essential.

References

- Alexiou, T. 2007. Cognitive skills promoting young learners' second language learning and their relation to learning styles. Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Blondin, C., Chandelier, M., Edelenbos, P., Johnstone, R., Kubanek-German, A., & Taeschner, T. 1998. *Foreign languages in primary and pre-school education: a review of recent research within the European Union*. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching.
- Cenoz, J. 2003. The influence of age on the acquisition of English: general proficiency, attitudes and code mixing. In M. del Pilar Garcia Mayo & M. L.G. Lecumberri (Eds.), *Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language* (pp. 77-93). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Chiang, I-C. N. 2007. Can parents help their children read extensively? Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Clay, M. M. 2000. *Running records for classroom teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cobb, T. 2008. *Ten 250-word Stemach and Williams kid spoken vocab lists*. Accessed 12.03.08 from <http://www.lexutor.ca/vp/kids/kid>
- Council of Europe. 2001. *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Csizer, K., & Kormos, J. 2007. An investigation into the relationship of L2 motivation and cross-cultural contact among elementary-school students. Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Curtain, H. 2000. Time as a factor in early start programmes. In J. Moon & M. Nikolov (Eds.), *Research into teaching English to young learners* (pp.87-120). Pécs: University Press Pécs.
- Donato, R., Tucker G.R., Wudthayagorn, J., & Igarashi, K. 2000. Converging evidence: attitudes, achievements, and instruction in the later years of FLES. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33, 377-93.
- Drew, I. 2007. Using the Early Years Literacy Programme in a primary EFL Norwegian classroom. Paper presented at the TeMoLaYoLe Conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Drew, I. 2008. Lesing og skriving i engelsk på barnetrinnet: den australske måten. In T.M Guldal, O.F.Lillemyr, G. Løkken, N. Naastad & F. Rønning (Eds.) *FoU i Praksis 2007. Rapport fra konferanse om praksisrettet FoU i lærerutdanning*, (pp.93-102). Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag.
- Griva, E., Tsakiridou, H., & Nihoritou, I. 2007. A study of the composing process and writing strategies employed by young learners. Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Harris, J., & O'Leary, D. 2007. A third language at primary level in Ireland: an independent evaluation of The Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative. Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Hasselgreen, A. 2000. The assessment of the English ability of young learners in Norwegian schools: an innovative approach. *Language testing*, 17/2, (pp. 261-277)
- Hasselgreen, A. 2008 Assessing the literacy of children: A CEFR-linked longitudinal study. Paper presented at 5th EALTA Conference, Athens.
http://ealta2008.hau.gr/conf_program.htm.
- Husztai, I., Fabian, M., & Komari, E.B. 2007. Differences between the processes and outcomes in 3rd graders' learning English and Ukrainian in Hungarian schools in Betregssasz. Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Johnson, J., & Newport, E. 1989. Critical period effects in second language learning: the influence of the maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language. *Cognitive Psychology*, 21, 60-99.
- Johnstone, R. 2007. Early languages learning: where are we now and where might we go? Keynote lecture presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, Pécs, Hungary.
- Juffs, A., & Harrington, M. 1995. Parsing effects in second language sentence processing: subject and object asymmetries in wh-extraction. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 17, 483-516.
- Kagan, D.M. 1992. Implications of research on teacher belief. *Educational Psychologist*, 27 (1), 65-90.
- Krashen, S.D. 1982. *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Exeter: Pergamon.
- Krashen, S. D. 1984. *Writing. Research, theory and applications*. New York: Oxford.
- Lightbown, P. 2000. Classroom second language acquisition research and second language teaching. *Applied Linguistics*, 21(4), 431-82.

- Lugossy, R. 2007. Real picture books in the lives of young EFL learners and their teachers. In M. Nikolov et al. (Eds.), *The TeMoLaYoLe book: teaching modern languages to young learners: teachers, curricula and materials* (pp. 77-90). Strasbourg/Graz: Council of Europe/European Centre for Modern Languages.
- Lundberg, G. 2007. Teachers in action: Action research in in-service programmes for teachers of languages to young learners. In M. Nikolov et al. (Eds.), *The TeMoLaYoLe book: Teaching modern languages to young learners: Teachers, curricula and materials* (pp. 21-34). Strasbourg/Graz: Council of Europe/European Centre for Modern Languages.
- Marinova-Todd, S.H., Marshall, D.B., & Snow C.E. 2000. Three misconceptions about age and L2 learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34, 9-34.
- Matteoudakis, M., Dvorakova, K., & Lang, K. 2007. Story-based language teaching: An experimental study on the implementation of a module in three European countries. In M. Nikolov et al. (Eds.), *The TeMoLaYoLe book: teaching modern languages to young learners: teachers, curricula and materials* (pp. 59-76). Strasbourg/Graz: Council of Europe/European Centre for Modern Languages.
- Mitchell, R., & Myles, F. 1998. *Second language learning theories*. London: Arnold.
- Moon, J., & Nikolov, M. (Eds.). 2000. *Research into teaching English to young learners*. Pécs: University Press Pécs.
- Nation, P. 2001. *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nikolov, M. 2000. Issues in research into early foreign language programmes. In J. Moon & M. Nikolov (Eds.), *Research into teaching English to young learners* (pp.21 – 48). Pécs: University Press Pécs.
- Nikolov, M., Mihalević, D.J., Matteoudakis, M., Lundberg, G., & Flanagan, T. (Eds.). 2007. *The TeMoLaYoLe book: teaching modern languages to young learners: teachers, curricula and materials*. Strasbourg/Graz: Council of Europe/European Centre for Modern Languages.
- Nikolov, M. 2007. Early modern foreign language programmes and outcomes: factors contributing to achievements of Hungarian learners. Keynote lecture presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Orosz, A. 2007. The growth of young learners' English vocabulary size. Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Papp, S., & Jones, N. 2008. Use of young learner can-dos as part of formative assessment. Paper presented at 5th EALTA Conference, Athens.
http://ealta2008.hau.gr/conf_program.htm.
- Rixon, S. 2000a. Young learners of English: background and issues. *Modern English Teacher*, 9(4), 5-10.
- Rixon, S. 2000b. Collecting eagle's eye data on the teaching of English to young learners: The British Council overview. In J. Moon & M. Nikolov (Eds.), *Research into teaching English to young learners* (pp. 153-170). Pécs: University Press Pécs.
- Shohamy, E., & Inbar, O. 2007. Effective teaching of EFL to young learners: Homeroom or FL teachers? Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Singleton, D. 2003. Critical period or general age factor(s)? In M. del Pilar Garcia Mayo & M. L.G. Lecumberri (Eds.), *Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language* (pp. 3-22). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Speitz, H., & Simonsen, T. 2008. Tidligere start med flere fremmedspråk. *Språk og språkundervisning*, 2008(1), 15-18.

- Stemach, G., & Williams, W.B. 1988. Word express: the 1st hundred words of spoken English. Novato, CA: Academic therapy publications.
- Szpotowicz, M. 2007. Factors influencing vocabulary acquisition of lower primary learners of English as a foreign language. Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.
- Vickov, G. 2007. Learners' own cultural identity in early EFL. In M. Nikolov et al. (Eds.), *The TeMoLaYoLe book: teaching modern languages to young learners: teachers, curricula and materials* (pp. 105-120). Strasbourg/Graz: Council of Europe/European Centre for Modern Languages.
- Wawrzyniak-Sliwska, M. 2007. Learner autonomy in young learner class – the teacher's perspective. Paper presented at TeMoLaYoLe conference, University of Pécs, Hungary.