

PREFACE

It is not often that there is a need to publish a book made up of chapters selected from three previously published books. The Croatian national research project *Investigating learning and acquisition of foreign languages at an early school age* (led by Mirjana Vilke) and its sequel *Investigating learning and acquisition of foreign languages in primary school* (led by Yvonne Vrhovac), with their unique experimental longitudinal design and involving four foreign languages, caught attention of the international audience from the very start. The interest has continued to this day. With the growing importance of English as a modern *lingua franca* teaching English to young learners has spread to practically all parts of the world. This global change, combined with a lack of systematic studies into early language learning in the formal setting, has made findings such as those of the Croatian research highly valuable.

The three volumes describing early learning and teaching of English as a foreign language to Croatian young learners from which the chapters in this book were selected – all called *Children and foreign languages* – were published in 1993, 1995 and 2001, respectively. What is quite unique to the three volumes, and to the present book, is that they offer an in-depth view into early teaching and learning of English from two perspectives: the researchers' perspective and the teachers' perspective.

The Croatian experimental longitudinal study of early acquisition of English in formal settings lasted for ten years. Three generations of first graders (aged 6-7) were followed over eight years, that is throughout their whole primary education (up to age 13-14). The wealth of data gathered during those years are used in the chapters to discuss the optimal age to introduce English into the primary curriculum, young learners' characteristics that impact language learning, key aspects of the language acquisition process in young learners, desirable characteristics of teachers to young learners, selecting appropriate language input and teaching strategies, as well as outcomes of early learning of English as a foreign language in the formal school context.

The motivation for a reprint of the chapters referring to early learning and teaching of English as a special collection emerged from the feedback we have been getting at conferences, the frequent references made to the Croatian study and the constant demand for the three volumes which are nearing the 'out of print' status.

We hope that the collection will reach all those interested in early learning and teaching of English as a foreign language and will continue to enhance the understanding of this phenomenon.