

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

Children and English as a foreign language is a collection of chapters selected from the following three books on the Croatian longitudinal project which started in 1991 and ended in 2001:

Vilke, M. & Vrhovac, Y. (Eds.) (1993) *Children and foreign languages* (I). Zagreb: Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb.

Vilke, M. & Vrhovac, Y. (Eds.) (1995) *Children and foreign languages* (II). Zagreb: Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb.

Vrhovac, Y. (Ed.) (2001) *Children and foreign languages* (III). Zagreb: Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb.

The included chapters focus on learning English as a foreign language and the findings of the 1991-2001 Croatian national longitudinal project(s) that have provided insightful data into early learning and teaching of English in the formal school context. The findings described here have been presented and discussed at numerous conferences and have been recognised by international early language learning experts across the world as innovative, valuable and in many ways relevant to any context in which English is taught as a foreign language.

While most chapters refer to English, some offer a comparative look into the learning and teaching of French, German and Italian as well – the other three foreign languages included in the project. The texts are kept almost intact, except for minor technical and language changes made in order to make the book a coherent whole. The chapters are organised in such a way that they are grouped into five sections according to the main focus. Thus, the book consists of sections focusing on the context of the study, characteristics of young learners, classroom processes, acquisition of various aspects of English, and on outcomes of early learning of English.

The first section (*The context*) contains two chapters written by Mirjana Vilke. In the first, which was originally an introduction to the 1993 book, she offers a kind of ‘identity card’ of the project. In the second chapter she sets the scene in which project investigations were carried out.

Focusing on the young EFL learner includes three chapters. The first and the third chapters, written by Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović, present results of studies on young learners’ attitudes and motivation, and on their language learning strategies. In her chapter, Maja Rijavec offers a very interesting analysis of young learners’ characteristics and behaviour from the teacher’s perspective.

The third section (*Focusing on the young EFL learner classroom*) focuses on what is still a largely under-research and highly topical issue in early foreign language learning: classroom processes. Seven chapters are included in this section. The opening

chapter by Mija Jagatić looks into the impact of group size and intensity of teaching on early EFL teaching and learning. In the next two chapters, Lidvina Štokić and Vida Nikpalj discuss two most used teaching strategies in the young learners classroom: teaching through music, verses and drama. They offer interesting ideas and describe their own experiences in using them with the project children. Teaching the content of other school subjects through the medium of English is discussed in the following three chapters. Lidvina Štokić's chapter sets the scene for the 'language across the curriculum' approach to teaching young foreign language learners and shares her experience in teaching two geography topics in her English lessons. Mirjana Tomašević-Dančević, in two chapters, focuses on integrating Art and Environmental education into English classes. Like Lidvina Štokić, she offers evidence on how beneficial such integration can be for both English and the other subjects, as well as for development of young learners' creativity. The section ends with Majda Rijavec's chapter, in which she makes excellent suggestions for dealing with the inevitable shortcomings of textbooks for young learners.

The fourth section (*Focusing on acquisition of grammar, lexis and reading skills*) opens with a chapter in which Mirjana Vilke discusses others' studies as well as her own, which offer convincing research evidence that grammar teaching approaches should be age appropriate. Marta Medved Krajnović, in the next chapter, describes her study into introducing multi-word units to young EFL learners and what their successful acquisition requires. Reading is the topic of even three chapters in this section. In the context of teaching young learners reading is often dealt with in an unproductive way, hence this much space is devoted to this particular skill. In her two chapters Renata Šamo lays the theoretical basis for understanding reading as an interactive process (in her first chapter) and discusses the concepts of 'strategic reading' and 'strategy-oriented teacher' (in her second chapter) based on her own study with young learners. In the last chapter, Smiljana Narančić Kovač and Danijel Likar describe their study in which they found that young learners (seventh graders) can read and comprehend unabridged and unadapted shorter literary texts if they are age- and competence-appropriate.

The last section (*Focusing on linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes of early learning of EFL*) includes three chapters. Milena Kovačević offers highly revealing insights into first-graders' use of English based on data she collected by means of an oral interview she carried out with 105 project children. Mirjana Vilke, in her chapter, describes the main findings of the Croatian project at the end of the fourth year. She comments on the achieved insights regarding the best age to start learning English in school, the required teacher competences, as well as the optimal teaching conditions and procedures. The second part of the chapter presents interesting results of her study on young

learners' acquisition of personal pronouns and prepositions. In the very last chapter of the book, Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović displays findings of her research on attitudes and motivation of young learners after four years of learning English. These are presented as non-linguistic outcomes, the results that are highly important but often ignored when evaluating early foreign language learning.

We hope that readers interested in early learning and teaching of English as a foreign language will find this collection interesting, useful and stimulating.