Early Foreign Language Acquisition: An Overview of Theory and Research

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SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU

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Abstract

The main purpose of this thesis is to present the theoretical framework and several examples of relevant studies regarding early foreign language acquisition in the world and in Croatia with the intention to raise awareness of the positive effects of learning English in preschool that could improve the future education regarding English as a second or foreign language. Firstly, the neurological and educational levels of child development are presented. Further theoretical background for early foreign language learning and acquisition is provided by examining the relevant literature on the commonly known concepts such as the Critical Period Hypothesis, the Total Physical Response method, Content and Language Integrated Learning, Project-Based Learning, etc. Next, contemporary teaching methods based on learning through play, environment, literature, and culture are explained. To complete the theoretical part of the thesis, a chronological summary of early EFL in Croatia is given.

Secondly, an overview of foreign research is provided, and it comprises eight recent studies of early language acquisition in pre-primary education. The main objective is to look into the participants, research methodology, and findings. The studies are chosen according to their relevance to the language learning areas described in the theoretical part of the thesis. The analysis reveals that researchers combine quantitative and qualitative methods that are age-appropriate and child-friendly. Even though none of the studies can ensure generalization due to small samples, their results show a positive effect of TPR, music, literature, integrated and project-based learning, as well as digitalization on vocabulary acquisition and emergent literacy skills of pre-primary children.

Keywords: early language acquisition**,** English as a foreign language, preschool education

Sažetak

Glavni je cilj ovoga diplomskog rada dati pregled teorije i istraživanja u području ranoga usvajanja i učenja engleskoga jezika, u svijetu i u Hrvatskoj, s namjerom da se istaknu pozitivni učinci učenja engleskoga jezika u predškolskoj dobi koje će poboljšati uvjete budućeg obrazovanja učenika na tom polju. Na početku se govori o neurološkim procesima vezanima uz dječji razvoj te o djetetovom razvoju kroz odgojno-obrazovna razdoblja. U nastavku se govori o poznatim pojmovima vezanima uz rano učenje i poučavanje jezika: teza o kritičkom periodu za usvajanje stranoga jezika, metoda učenja kroz pokret, integrirano i projektno učenje i sl.

Slijedi opis suvremenih metoda poučavanja kao što su učenje kroz igru, učenje iz okoline, učenje uz pomoć sadržaja iz književnosti i kulture. Teorijski dio završava kratkim kronološkim pregledom zbivanja u Hrvatskoj vezanih uz uvođenje engleskoga kao stranoga jezika u niže razrede osnovne škole te u rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje.

U drugome dijelu obrađuje se sedam novijih znanstvenih radova koji se bave proučavanjem predškolske djece u kontekstu ovladavanja engleskim kao stranim jezikom. Najvažniji kriterij za odabir radova bila je tematska povezanost s teorijskim dijelom rada. Svrha je ove analize prikazati metodologiju istraživanja te izdvojiti istraživačke instrumente koji se smatraju najprimjerenijima prikupljanje podataka u ranoj dobi te navesti najvažnije spoznaje proizašle iz analiziranih istraživanja. Analiza je pokazala da se u istraživanjima često kombiniraju kvantitativni i kvalitativni podatci dobiveni promatranjem, kratkim polustrukturiranim upitnicima, analizom dječjih radova i mapa s raznim materijalima, fotografiranjem te snimanjem audio i video sadržaja, vođenjem dnevnika i bilježaka. Uzorci ispitanika u ovim istraživanjima nisu dostatni za uopćavanje, no rezultati pokazuju pretežno pozitivne učinke poučavanja uz glazbu, pokret i književnost na usvajanje vokabulara. Uz navedeno, zabilježeno je pozitivno i poticajno djelovanje integrirane i projektne nastave na ranu pismenost i usvajanje vokabulara.

Ključne riječi: engleski kao strani jezik, rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje, rano usvajanje jezika

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, there has been an increase in research on the topic of early foreign language acquisition. In this graduation thesis, the focus is on English language acquisition of young learners. As English has become the world's *lingua franca,* it creates a global need for exploring methods and techniques for teachers to provide young learners with the best possible teaching approaches. Some countries have recognized the need for early acquisition of the English language and have implemented the English language in preschool education. In Croatia, foreign language is mandatory from the first grade of primary school, and English is the most represented. The idea of extending the same regulation to preschools should be explored because many kindergartens offer more or less integrated early foreign language programs[1]. M. Vilke (1999; 2019) wrote about more and more children learning foreign languages in kindergartens, but she felt it was not feasible to make such practices mandatory since not all children attended kindergartens. On the other hand, all children went to school. Nowadays, early foreign language programs seem to be well-accepted by kindergarten children and their parents, so many first-graders are not complete beginners in that area, which needs to be taken into consideration while making plans for teaching approaches and materials.

The main objective of this thesis is to present the theoretical framework and several examples of relevant research regarding early foreign language acquisition in Croatia and the world. The thesis consists of two main parts – an overview of theory and an overview of theory-related research. The theoretical part presents early child development regarding language, as well as the differences in language learning and language acquisition. Furthermore, The Critical Period Hypothesis will be presented, attempting to unravel the phenomenon known as "the younger the better". The theoretical part will also present some of the teaching practices that include the relationship between language and culture, learning through play, environment, and literature. The final section of this part will briefly present the previous and current situation in the Croatian context regarding early foreign language acquisition in primary and pre-primary education.

The second part introduces eight studies related to early language acquisition and the theoretical aspects described in the first part of this thesis. There will be an overview of the

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[1] Several examples from different regions of Croatia: https://vrtic-precko.zagreb.hr/default.aspx?id=51; https://vrtic-radost.zagreb.hr/default.aspx?id=50; https://vrapcic-djecji-vrtic.hr/kraci-program-engleskog-jezika/; https://www.rivrtici.hr/sites/default/files/datoteke/letak_za_engleski_program.pdf; https://www.djecji-vrtici-sb.hr/2017/03/14/engleski-jezik-u-vrticu/

eight studies that will include the number and the age of the participants, methods, and instruments used for the study, together with the most important results and recommendations for further research and advice for the teaching practice in the English language.

2. EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND LANGUAGE

2.1 Piaget's stages of development

Many of today's findings regarding early child development have been produced both to confirm and t disprove the work of Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist who introduced the theory of cognitive development. In his book *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1923), Piaget referred to basic logical abilities as *operations* and named the stages of a child's brain development. There are four stages: sensorimotor stage (from birth to two years of age), pre-operational stage (from two to seven years of age), concrete operational stage (from seven to eleven years of age), and formal operational stage (from eleven years onwards). In this thesis, the focus is on the pre-operational stage. By assessment of children from two to seven years old, Piaget concluded that "their development had not reached the stage where they could have applied the rules of logic" (Pinter, 2011, p. 8). However, Piaget's assessment and conclusions are widely criticized and considered to underestimate the ability of children under seven years old. The reason for Piaget's unclear judgment was confusing questions and tasks lacking context which restricted children to provide correct answers. Those findings should be a lesson for the future, to provide children with clear, simple, and specific questions when expecting answers to check their ability and knowledge (Pinter, 2011).

2.2. Language acquisition vs. language learning

Young children's acquisition relies on the integrated use of senses which are functioning already at birth and help them to explore and gain experience. Through the interaction with the environment, the child will develop integration with different sensorial modalities and the attribution of meaning and appropriate response to the environmental input. On the neurological level, sensory development creates support and is an important factor for early language acquisition (Daloiso, 2007).

According to Daloiso, a child's brain regions develop in the same stages, in the same order, but at slightly different moments. The maturation path is finished when the neuron density, metabolic activity, and the length of the dendrites reach typical adult levels. It happens around three or four years and that is when the myelin formation is completed. However, the frontal lobe oversees operations such as complex cognitive tasks, planning actions, and control of attention and concentration, and it is not fully developed until the age of seven. This information implies that a child requires a specific methodological approach focusing on a child's attention to acquiring a second language (Daloiso, 2007).

Maslo (2007) confirms that language acquisition is based on neuro-psychological processes, and Kramina (2000) states that it is opposed to language learning because it is a subconscious process that is more similar to acquiring the first language (but not the same). Consequently, language learning is a conscious process – the product of either formal learning or a self-study programme (Kramina, 2000). However, Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2006, pp. 234, 235) state that "it has been widely assumed that young children rely more on memory-based processes, whereas adults are more characterized by rule-based learning". Based on such findings, contemporary teaching methods are more focused on achieving the effect of acquiring than learning the second language with young children.

Daloiso (2007, pp. 23,24) states that "if a child acquires two languages between the ages of zero and eight, the representation of both languages is located in the same cerebral regions". If a child acquires the second language between the age of three and eight, the knowledge can be excellent, but it is represented partially in the same regions as the mother tongue. Moreover, if a child starts to learn the second language after the age of eight, it will be represented in different regions than the mother tongue (Daloiso, 2007).

It is important to clear out the common misconception that learning a second language from an early age can intrude on learning the first language. Alexiou (2020) points out that a child's confusion by two different languages cannot happen since exposure to a second language is limited and the child is offered linguistic stimuli but is not formally taught. Moreover, Łockiewicz and colleagues (2018) suggest that foreign language teaching should include more explicit differentiation between a mother tongue and a foreign language on multiple levels: phonological, morphological, syntactic, and orthographic to "prevent later consolidation of early errors and promote correct linguistic habits" (p. 9).

2.3. Critical period hypothesis

Singleton and Pfenninger (2019) explain that a great number of researchers rely on the fact that there is a so-called *Critical Period Hypothesis* according to which it is impossible to fully acquire the new language after the critical age. Although the hypothesis was originally applied to the first language, in the last decades, the discussion is connected to the acquisition of the second language.

DeKeyser and Larson-Hall (2005) also refer to it as "the younger the better" phenomenon which still impresses the experts because of its practical and theoretical concerns. They also point out that some authors advocate the terms *sensitive* or *optimal* instead of *critical* but without any success because the term *critical* has already become well-known among researchers and experts. They strongly advise the educational practice not to overinterpret the hypothesis for its purposes but to apply it to certain kinds of learning. The critical period research implies that "instructions should be adapted to the age of the learner, *not* that learner should necessarily be taught at a young age" (DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005, p. 88).

The highly important and debated factor of acquiring a second language is the value of introducing the second language to young children. Although it is not yet proven that the younger is better, the global need for learning specifically the English language has encouraged early introduction and learning. However, studies have shown that there is no evidence that early beginners outperform later starting learners. The reason for it could be that the teaching approach fails to equip the learners. It now can be recognized that there are factors in learning a second language that cannot be excluded from the process, such as social, psychological, and contextual factors (Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019).

Although it is argued that a child's brain is flexible, that children can absorb any language almost effortlessly, and that they can be successful in acquiring vocabulary, phrases, and structures, it could only be achieved with continuous exposure to the right kind and with appropriate guidance of an educated person. It indicates that it is important to realize that language is not to be "picked up" or effortlessly "absorbed" (Alexiou, 2020).

> An early start can confer considerable advantages on children by activating such natural languages acquisition mechanisms as they possess, by affording them more time overall and by providing them with a linguistic and intercultural experience which can have a beneficial formative influence on their cognitive, social, cultural, acoustic, linguistic and personal development (including qualities of persistence and participation) and on their sense of self. An

early start by itself however guarantees nothing; it needs to be accompanied minimally by good teaching, by a supportive environment and by continuity from one year to the next, taking children smoothly from pre-primary to primary, and from primary into secondary education. (Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006, p. 147).

Alexiou (2020) states that the teachers' language proficiency and fluency need to be high to be the right role model for language learners. Another crucial factor in the role of a teacher is being a motivator and having a strong pedagogic background since motivation is extremely important at the stage when attitudes are shaped among young learners. Having that in mind, the teachers' job is far from easy, as it is thought, but requires talent, imagination, and creativity to fulfill the children's need to keep their minds active and alive.

3. LANGUAGE AND TEACHING PRACTICES

3.1. Learning through play

Mourão (2014) explains Vygotsky's theory of play (1978) by stating that play essentially needs to be dramatic and make-believe, and that it is a source of development that creates the zone of proximal development where children act a head above themselves. For children, play relives a real experience, creating illusory freedom that allows children to be imaginative and flexible in thinking and acting. It is not to be forgotten that play should remain meaningful, and yet joyful. Mourão refers to Moyles (1989) when stating that adults interfere with the play in two ways – as planners or as mediators. Having in mind that it must be creative and child-initiated, they cannot play the children's play but can plan for it and try to create a context that supports a balance between child-initiated and adult-led learning through play. Mourão believes that it is possible to create that kind of environment that can result in target language use and development. By creating activities that are played repeatedly with different language topics, with the teacher as a play tutor, children become familiar with the format and naturally play along. The author supports her theory with a description of how these formats work in practice. An example is a well-known game – *What's missing?* which was played with Portuguese pre-primary children at the age of five who have been exposed to approximately thirty hours of English over the previous twelve months. The children were sitting around the carpet. The flashcards are placed on the carpet with the image up. Children close their eyes, and the flashcard is turned over. Children uncover their eyes and say which image is missing. The child who answers takes the lead and turns over another flashcard and the game continues. In the

example, children were guessing the shapes and the colors on the flashcard, which they have been doing for the last two weeks. This activity shows that it has a format because it contains a clear structure, a set of rules, clearly marked turn-taking roles and a script ("Let's play *What's missing*?", "Close your eyes.", "Open your eyes.", "What's missing?"). The format, in this context, is familiar to children which allows them to take over the activity, practice the role of the leader and the led, and that is essential for the later child-initiated play (Mourão, 2014).

3.1.1. *Total Physical Response*

Total Physical Response, commonly known as TPR, is "a language teaching method which is built around the coordination of speech and action" (Shi, 2018, p. 1088). After proposing the Total Physical Response method in 1969, American psychology professor James J. Asher carried out a great number of experiments to conclude, according to Duan (2021), that "TPR followed the learner's natural process of language learning, which made learning easier and more effective by not forcing the students to speak in a target language they are not yet familiar with" (p. 1323). Asher (1981) highlights the importance of extracting the stress factor while learning a second language to create a relaxed atmosphere which will later help to support long-term retention in acquiring another language and avoid negative emotions among the students toward the language.

After the experiment with young learners using the TPR method, Duan (2021) concludes that the TPR method should be applied in preschool English teaching. Her research results show significant improvement in children's attitudes toward learning the English language when using the TPR method. Research has also shown that it attracts children's attention, eliminates tension, and improves their enthusiasm for learning a foreign language.

3.2. Learning from the environment

A well-known concept introduced by Zimmer (1984) is the situational approach to language learning. It refers to learning that is related to real-life situations and close to children's everyday lives, habits, social relationships, etc. In his view, children, as language learners, need to learn how to control and master various life situations, and they need to learn how to adapt to possible changes. To achieve that in a learning environment, real-life situations can be created through play, projects, discussions, daily routines such as meals, organized visits to

various places and institutions, etc. From a child's perspective, such a learning environment includes many social interactions, decision-making, collaboration, and personal initiative but with preschool teachers' pedagogical guidance and subtle supervision.

Furthermore, Tomašević-Dančević (2013) points out the advantages of cross-curricular language teaching: "the new language is seen by the children as something normal and natural, not as something separated from the rest of their learning" (p. 108). More advantage to an approach of that kind, except gaining competence and strengthening other subject knowledge, is an opportunity for children to know more about their interests and life around them. Moreover, they build self-confidence and a critical way of thinking and solving problems in new and more effective ways by exploring and questioning, which consequently builds their motivation. Although the author focuses on connecting language learning with Art, which helps children to express themselves, she points out that it can be any subject to trigger a child's creativity of mind, by the use of integrated teaching approaches (Tomašević-Dančević, 2013).

Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010) define Content and Language Integrated Learning (commonly known as CLIL) as "an educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (p. 1). Furthermore, Ellison (2019) sees it as a complex phenomenon that can be used to develop positive attitudes toward the language and create opportunities to express knowledge in another language, which is cognitively challenging but engaging and rewarding. CLIL requires a combination of what is known as the 4Cs – content, communication, cognition, and culture, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

CLIL: the 4Cs (Ellison, 2019, p. 249) *according to* (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010)
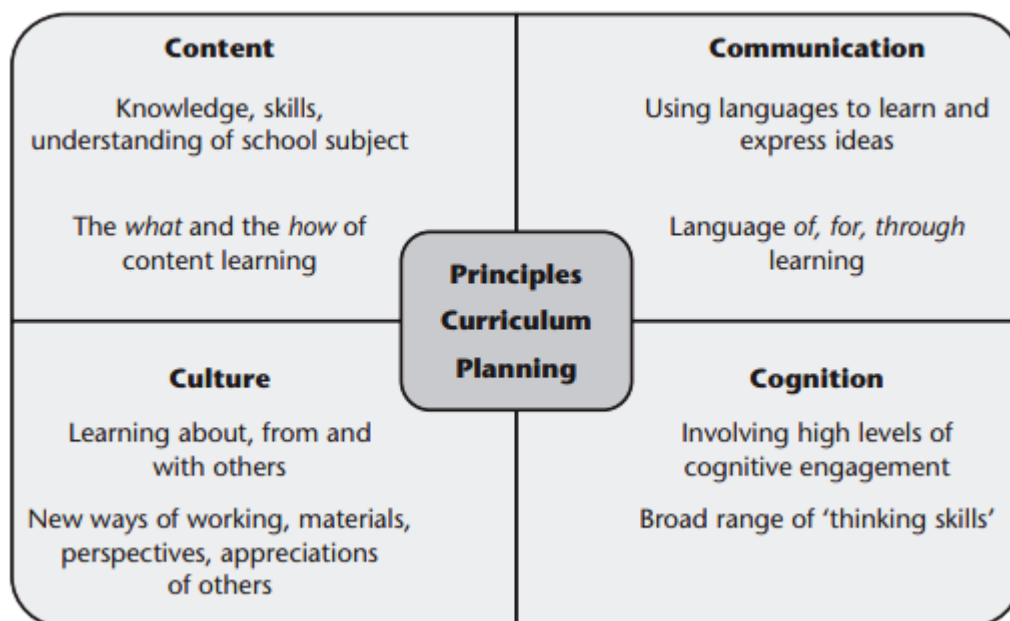
Ellison (2019) implies that CLIL can be taught by educated English language teachers who know the curricular content. They should also be prepared for methodological shifts because of the dual focus which requires sensitivity to both content and language. However, Mair (2021) concludes that there is insufficient empirical research on CLIL in preschool settings, and she invites researchers to engage in studying the benefits of CLIL, along with the question of teacher education and competences in that area.

3.2.1. *Project-Based Learning*

Learning from real-life situations is not always available, so it is necessary to design "artificial", i.e. classroom real-life situations. Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an example of such a design, and it represents an instructional approach resembling real-life situations.

Many European kindergartens are involved in collaborative eTwinning projects, which implies project-based work, and oftentimes it is delivered in English since many such projects are international[2]. As eTwinning is the largest community of teachers in Europe, it facilitates

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[2] See the article *eTwinning in Early Childhood Education and Care: what, why and how?* available at https://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/etwinning-plus/highlights/etwinning-in-early-childhood-e.htm

collaboration and professional development. In addition to the participating teachers, such networking directly affects children as second language learners because it contributes to the development of communication skills, teamwork, creativity, and other skills and qualities that contribute to the wholesome development.

While exploring the literature on project-based learning, Grossman et al. (2019) concluded that there is no precise definition of project-based learning, but agreed on some basic characteristics of the approach which include: "giving students opportunities to study a challenging problem, engage in sustained inquiry, find answers to authentic questions, help choose the project, reflect on the process, critique and revise the work, and create a public product" (p. 44).

Moreover, Grossman et al. (2019) conducted a study for the purpose of exploring and a better understanding of what student-centered active learning involves. Based on the examination, which included experts in PBL and teachers, they have established four primary goals of PBL: "supporting deep disciplinary content learning, engaging students in authentic work, supporting student collaboration, and building an iterative culture where students are always prototyping, reflecting, redesigning, editing, and trying again" (p. 44). Figure 2 shows their illustration of core practices of project-based teaching. PBL is, in their view, disciplinary (elicit higher-order thinking, orient students to subject-area content, engage students in disciplinary practices), authentic (supports students to build personal connection to the work, make a contribution to the world), iterative (supports students to reflect and revise, give and receive feedback, progress and provide feedback), and collaborative (supports students to collaborate and make choices).

Figure 2.

The core practices of project-based teaching (Grossman, Pupik Dean, Schneider Kavanagh, & Herrmann, 2019, p. 44)
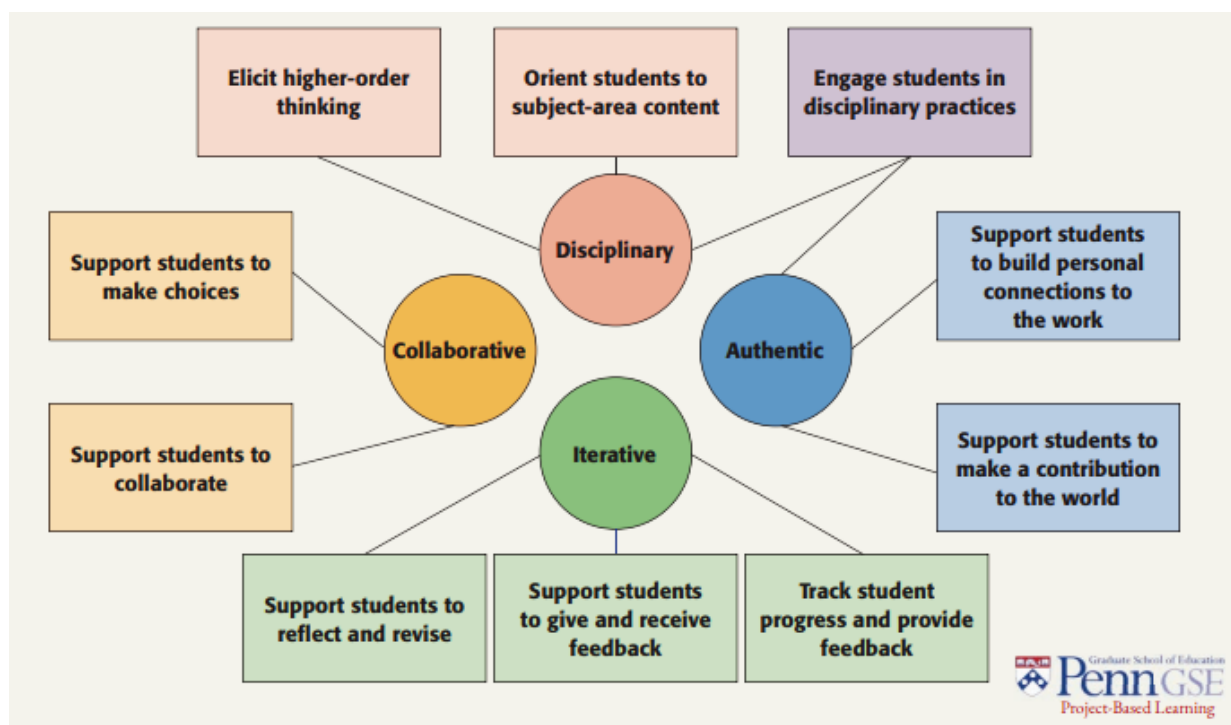
3.3. Language and culture

Driscoll and Simpson (2015) explain culture as "an all-encompassing and complex concept with a wide range of different types of definitions" (p. 169). By examining the definitions from the early 1950s, they conclude that since then we have developed the concept and that we now know that culture is everywhere. It can be presented and seen in a form of visual arts, music, and literature. Moreover, the culture can be seen in everyday behaviors, routines, and rituals. Culture influences our beliefs, way of life and perceptions. Through active and passive experiences, people learn about attitudes, values and beliefs of different groups, and adapt to different macro-cultures within a society. Children learn how to adapt, interact and modify their behavior in different settings which is an important factor associated with learning a second language to avoid miscommunication (Driscoll & Simpson, 2015).

The approach that focuses on setting up communicative activities for practical communication is the *communicative language teaching approach* (CLT) aimed at fluent communication to achieve the most important goal of language learning. It encourages the learners to talk about their interests, in authentic and meaningful contexts and creates real-life

situations that can be used outside the classroom for communicating in the target country. In that, and many ways, culture can exist in the classroom through the teacher, and interaction with others but also through the use of technology which nowadays can interpret a great variety of cultural images and scenes of interaction (Driscoll & Simpson, 2015).

In line with research-based recommendations, the European Commission provides educators with advice for good practice by stating that:

> Children should be exposed to the target language in meaningful and, if possible, authentic settings, in such a way that the language is spontaneously acquired rather than consciously learnt (European Commission, 2011, p. 17).

In other words, spontaneous acquisition of foreign language implies learning through culture because culture also defines the ways people communicate their ideas, feelings, opinions, wishes, preferences, etc. Literature is often seen through the lens of culture, and it is well-known that numerous pieces of children's literature (poems, picturebooks, etc.) can facilitate vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation, boost creativity, collaboration, and other qualities in young children, which will be discussed in the following section.

3.4. Learning through literature

3.4.1. *Picturebooks*

According to Mourão (2015), picturebooks are referred to as *storybooks*, *real books* and *real picturebooks* by different authors. The terms may differ, but the most accepted definition comes from Barbara Bader (1976):

> A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a [reader]. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page. On its own terms its possibilities are limitless (Bader, 1976).

Picturebooks are special in their interdependence on both pictures that show, and words that tell. That interdependence makes them a multimodal text which transfers the complete information to a reader. More precisely, multimodal texts are described as a combination of multiple modes such as written language, spoken language, visual images (still or moving), audio content, gestures, spatial meaning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

In English language teaching, it is important to select picturebooks that have a simple picture-word relationship, with synchronized illustrations, to provide a supportive learning context. For example, children respond well to picturebook *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin Jr. & Carle, 1967), which supports the illustrations of the animals with the words saying what they are. That type of picturebook provides a supportive context for language learning for very small children. It also has useful peritextual features – the endpapers with visual information that support the story. Those are strips of colored paper in the colors of animals as they appear in the story. It provides an opportunity for children to chant the colors and name the animal they represent. That is why it is important to point out that it is beneficial to revisit the picturebook, browse through it, and hear it more times to connect the parts and learn during exploring (Mourão, 2016).

3.4.2. *Poetry*

Bland (2015) sees potential value in poetry for learning a foreign language which can serve as "(1) a mnemonic that may be particularly useful in classroom rituals, (2) support for affective learning and intercultural insight and (3) a grammar template for the future" (p. 147). As a mnemonic, with its rhythm and rhyme it functions as a memory aid or as a template for managing situations in the classroom (calling for a child's attention by saying the lines). Poetry can support intercultural insight by allowing the learner to enter a storyworld that provides transmitting cultural knowledge. It supports affective learning with its humor and the excitement it creates among young children which makes learning more pleasurable for them. Linguistic patterns and grammar templates can be learned through the experience of a playful poetry language which children acquire through repetition and performance. The author highlights the importance of repetition for its characterization of the child's environment, language relying on repeated patterns, supporting functional literacy, and connection with the play that is endlessly repeated (Bland, 2015).

Furthermore, Bland (2015) explains the term *protoconversation* as a child-direct speech that is chant-like, engaging, and full of exaggeration, repetition, movement, and prosodic features. Young children respond well to it and enjoy this interaction, enabling them to learn effectively and with pleasure. The echo technique and its variations are recommended for memorizing poems. The teacher can invite children to repeat in different volumes, chant

rhythmically, etc. Including drama routines, body language, gestures and facial expressions are advisable for young learners.

Boyd (2009) defines all kinds of art as *patterned cognitive play* and states that "*an unpredictable combination of patterns* repays intense attention and can yield rich inferences, although finding how to ascertain all the patterns and all the meaning they imply may not be easy" (p. 90). Narrative art, such as poems and nursery rhymes, encourages human ability for "pattern-matching neural processing" (Boyd, 2009, p. 134). That is the reason why they appeal to young children, providing them with playful rhythm, rhymes and personification. They fulfill the children's cognitive need for patterns which turns into learning through familiar lines and melodies. Bland (2015, p. 152) mentions a great example of the well-known nursery rhyme:

> Hey diddle, diddle!
>
> The cat and the fiddle,
>
> The cow jumped over the moon;
>
> The little dog laughed
>
> To see such sport,
>
> And the dish ran away with the spoon.

The reason why children respond well to this nursery rhyme is its simplicity, but at the same time, creativity. Lines are catchy and full of personification, allowing children to make visualization and mental images of playful animals and objects who create a story. According to Bland (2015), creating mental images while listening or reading will be an important factor for further reading. Children will be able to create a mental model of a storyworld, which allows them to be able to read literature meaningfully.

3.4.3. *Storytelling and drama*

One of the best ways to fulfill the children's need for rich high-quality language input is to provide them with well-told stories which help them to learn from the experience. The greatest quality of storytelling is its flexibility. The storyteller can choose how to present according to the audience which draws their attention and keeps them focused. However, it is important to be careful with the mode of oracy and orality, which are fundamentals of language teaching to young learners. It is also advisable to enable the scaffolding of children's learning through story

and drama, that is, share the story over several lessons bearing in mind the nine steps shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3.
Scaffolding Children's Learning Through Story and Drama (Read, 2008, p. 7).
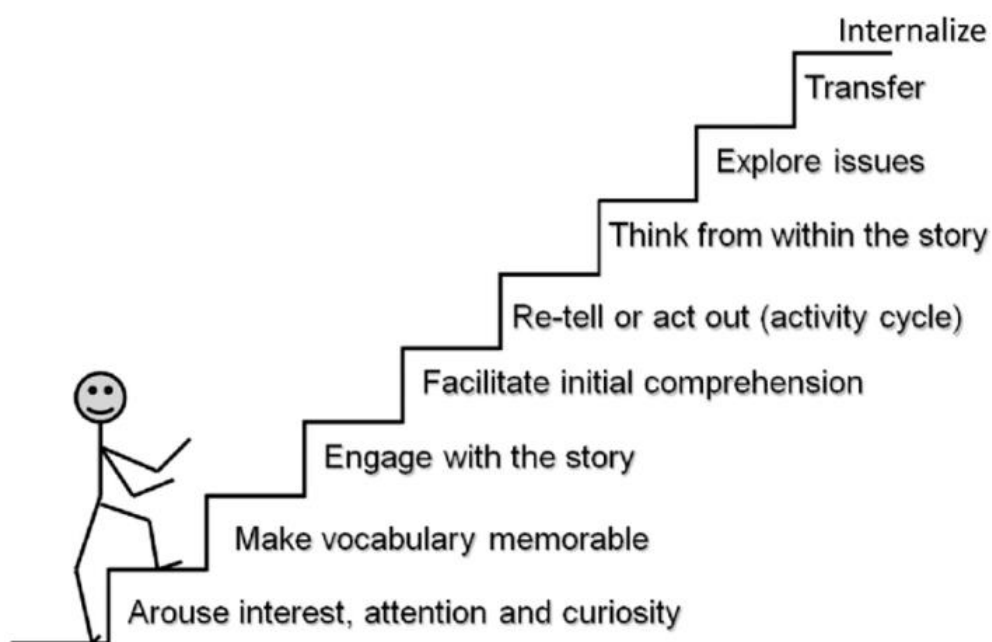
These steps should help the teachers as storytellers to present the stories with the goal of children's second language acquisition, raising awareness for critical thinking and developing empathy, as well as training their imagination to create mental images and alternative visions of possible future (Bland, 2015).

Bland (2015) describes the drama in the classroom as "a magical box of tools; the more you take out of it, the more you find inside for future use" (p. 219). She shares the experience directly from the classroom of young learners. Their teacher has created a warm-up activity where children use all different kinds of finger puppets to interact with each other. If this activity is regularly repeated, it can be meaningful for language learning by using formulaic sequences, and practicing the social, physiological and affective dimensions of language (Bland, 2015).

The above stated is a type of unscripted drama, while scripted drama contributes to language learning by children's motivated reading among the readers and becoming acquainted

with the sound patterns and meanings of a script among non-readers. The children who are not yet readers first guess or predict, then question, and then clarify the meaning (Bland, 2015).

4. EARLY EFL IN CROATIA – HISTORY, PRESENT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Nowadays, early foreign language learning is encouraged and implemented in school systems all around the world, especially the English language, as it is becoming the main language for communication due to globalization. However, the implementation of early English foreign language (EFL) in Croatian schools has its history from the early 1950s. Professor Elvira Petrović from the University of Osijek has tried to explain the path of early EFL in Croatia, focusing mainly on Osijek, in her work *Kratka povijest ranog učenja stranih jezika, Osječka iskustva* (*A brief history of early foreign language learning, experiences from Osijek*) (2004).

In the early 19th century, wealthy families had the privilege of providing their children with foreign language learning. Before World War II, German was taught to children of German or Austrian origin. After the war, children were learning the Russian language in schools, while the other foreign languages were suspended due to political reasons. The early 1950s are significant because other foreign languages like English, French and German were introduced in schools as a choice for learning besides the Russian language (Petrović, 2004).

In the late 1960s, the English language is taught to children in Osijek preschools by the English teachers educated in The Teaching Academy and sponsored by the soap factory "Saponia". Although it was a time of limited exposure to the English language through the media, children have acquired a certain vocabulary, everyday expressions, and songs by learning through play (Petrović, 2004).

During the following decades, multiple experimental projects were conducted in primary schools in Croatia, which resulted in positive effects on the students and encouraged the experts for further research on the introduction of a foreign language into primary education (Petrović, 2004). The foundations for the following project were set in several research phases by Mirjana Vilke (1976a; 1976b; 1979). They served as an introduction for the project which was carried out by Mirjana Vilke and Yvonne Vrhovac with the help of foreign language professors from The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. The project was based on the grounds of a program called *Language for European Citizenship*. In the fall of 1991 foreign languages were implemented in 12 primary schools in Zagreb which included 12

grades with a total of 352 students. Students studied a foreign language 5 days a week, an hour each day. Lessons were focused on listening and speaking and included learning by using concrete materials and elements of play. Over the next year, 4 more schools were included in the project, which encouraged other Croatian cities to join in. In 1993, there were over 50 schools included in the project on early foreign language acquisition. Education for the teachers was held in Zagreb, and the main goal was to introduce foreign language learning into the first grade of primary school. The project resulted in publishing four theoretical books (Vilke & Vrhovac, 1993; Vilke & Vrhovac 1995; Vrhovac et al., 1999; Vrhovac, 2001), textbooks and teaching materials that became internationally acknowledged but were underestimated in Croatia where teachers should have benefited from it. On the other hand, the project raised awareness regarding encouraging and educating teachers, which resulted in improvements in the Faculties of Teacher Education (Petrović, 2004; Vilke, 2007).

The important year for early foreign language learning was 2003 when the government decided to introduce a foreign language into the first grade of primary education for the school year of 2003/2004. For most of the students, it was the English language, while others decided on German (Jajić Novogradec, 2017). As stated in the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education, a holistic approach and life-long learning are vital for child development. Among the eight key components, communication in the mother tongue and communication in a foreign language are listed in the first two positions. They include the situational approach to language learning and the development of intercultural competence[3] (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja Republike Hrvatske, 2015). Today, the English language is the main second language that children learn from the first grade and has now found its way to entering preschool.

The Ministry of Science and Education states in the National Curriculum for early preschool education that the document is created by examining the examples of good teaching practices in Croatian preschools. The foundation of the practice is set by the effort of both theoreticians and practitioners by conducting multiple studies of early language teaching. The main principles stated in the curriculum are flexibility of the educational process in preschool, preschool partnership with parents and a wider community, insurance for the educational

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[3] The curriculum originally mentions 'intercultural understanding'. However, the curriculum is designed to promote the development of multiple competences in children, including the competence that includes multiple cultures. Deardorff (2006) defines intercultural competence as "the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions".

continuity, openness for the continuity in learning, and readiness for constant improvement of the practice. Some of the values that the curriculum highlights are knowledge, identity, humanism and tolerance, responsibility, autonomy, and creativity. The curriculum focuses on personal, emotional, and physical well-being as well as educational and social well-being. The key competences that are encouraged are:

1. Communicate in the mother tongue
2. Communicate in foreign languages
3. Competence in mathematics and basic competence in science
4. Digital competence
5. To learn how to learn
6. Social and civil competence
7. Being intuitive and taking actions
8. Culture awareness and expressing

The curriculum highlights the need for young children to be aware of their culture because the culture of the educational institution affects people's opinions, feelings, and actions. It affects the way they organize, shape, and support the teaching processes of both educators and children (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja Republike Hrvatske, 2015).

The National Curriculum for early preschool education is a result of positive changes in Croatian preschools over the last decade. They confirm that the stated goals are achievable and should represent inspiration and guidelines for other preschools in the process of implementation (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja Republike Hrvatske, 2015).

More and more preschools are introducing the English language into their classrooms, so it created a need for educating a new profile of specialists, that is, preschool English teachers. Consequently, a new graduate study program[4] has been accredited at the Faculty of Teacher Education that will educate new generations of early EFL practitioners and researchers in Croatia.

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[4] See https://www.ufzg.unizg.hr/2022/06/natjecaj-za-izvanredni-studij-rani-i-predskolski-odgoj-i-obrazovanje-smjer-engleski-jezik/

5. OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

The following section of this thesis is dedicated to presenting several studies dealing with early foreign language acquisition, more precisely, English as a foreign language in preschool (pre-primary) education.

5.1. Method

For that purpose, eight recent papers illustrating the EFL teaching practices and recommendations in pre-primary education have been selected using the available scientific search engines, metadata services, and digital libraries (ScienceDirect, ERIC, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar). Another criterion was that the study involves preschool children as participants since one of the purposes of this thesis is to explore the research methodology options with children at such a young age.

Following the main objective of this thesis, two research questions were formed, and they will be used as the overall guideline in this overview:

RQ1: What research approaches and instruments are used in the area of early learning and acquisition of English, primarily in preschool children?

RQ2: What are some of the main findings coming from contemporary research on early learning and acquisition of English as a foreign language?

A selection of studies is listed in Table 1, showing the main information about each research. More detailed descriptions are available in the following subsections.

Table 1.
A selection of research in pre-primary EFL

Year	Authors	Title	Participants	Research instrument(s)
2007	Andreja Silić	Creating a stimulating environment for foreign-language communication in kindergarten	- 19 (3-6 years old) 9 – boys 10 – girls	Action research with elements of ethnographic approach and case study: - participant observation - video and audio recordings

2015	Penelope Robinson, Sandie Mourão and Nam Joon Kang	English learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: an investigation of their effectiveness	- the total number is unknown 16 – Portugal (5-6 years old) X – South Korea (preschool age)	A naturalistic and mainly qualitative approach: - non-participant observation - children's drawings - photographs and video recordings - registers
2017	Fatma Kimsesiz, Emrah Dolgunsöz and M. Yavuz Konca	The effect of project-based learning in teaching EFL vocabulary to young learners of English: the case of pre-school children	28 (5-6 years old) 14 – experimental group 14 – control group	- weekly vocabulary tests - observation checklists
2018	Sara Albaladejo Albaladejo, Yvette Coyle, Julio Roca de Larios	Songs, stories, and vocabulary acquisition in preschool learners of English as a foreign language	17 (2-3 years old)	- a pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test design
2019	Ketevan Kara and Evrim Eveyik-Aydın	Effects of TPRS on very young learners' vocabulary acquisition	19 (4 years old)	- pretest-treatment-immediate posttest-and delayed posttest design - receptive and productive picture tests in one-to-one sessions
2020	Carmen Lucas, Philip Hood, and Doreen Coyle	Blossoming in English: Preschool Children's Emergent Literacy Skills in English	15 (3-5 years old)	- field notes - research diary - recordings - learners' portfolio of evidence
2021	Eleni Korosidou, and Eleni Griva	"Listen to my story, play and interact": Greek preschool children learning English in a digital environment	26 (average 5.5 years old) 16 – boys 10 – girls	- mid-term evaluation and post-test on vocabulary - a teacher/researcher's journal - semi-structured interviews with the children
2021	Ernst Magnussen and Apisak Sukying	The impact of songs and TPR on Thai preschoolers' vocabulary acquisition	72 (4-5 years old) 22 – TPR group 22 – song group 28 – TPR + song group	Mixed method research: - quantitative data (2 vocabulary knowledge tests - qualitative data (video recordings)

5.2. The outlines of selected studies

This section presents the research methodology, participants, and findings of the selected studies. They are organized according to the selection of topics and teaching approaches explained in the theoretical part of this thesis. In other words, they are presented as examples of empirical research in the area of early foreign language acquisition. One study represents TPR and songs, one represents the amalgam of literature, culture, and digital learning environment, two studies investigate reading, storytelling and songs, while three studies belong to the area of integrated teaching. The final part of the section summarizes and discusses the presented research designs and the most significant findings.

5.2.1. *TPR and songs*

Ernst Suni Magnussen and Apisak Sukying researched *The Impact of Songs and TPR on Thai Preschoolers' Vocabulary Acquisition* in 2021. Their goal was to examine the participants' receptive and productive vocabulary through the effects of songs and TPR, as well as the contribution of participants' reactions to the accompanying teaching methods.

The participants were 4 to 5-year-old preschool children in northeastern Thailand. There was a total of 72 children divided into three groups: the TPR group, the singing group, and the TPR and song group (TPR&S). The instructor, who was also a researcher, was an experienced English preschool teacher.

The study collected both quantitative and qualitative data as it was designed as mixed-method research. The quantitative data included two vocabulary knowledge tests, while the qualitative data was a result of video recordings.

Over the course of 6 weeks, for 30 minutes per day, children were expected to learn 12 target words using TPR, songs, and a mix of both methods, divided into those 3 groups. The results showed a positive effect among young learners. Researchers state that "the participants developed their receptive vocabulary knowledge more than their productive vocabulary knowledge throughout the intervention" and that "no teaching approach was significantly better than the others" (Magnussen & Sukying, 2021, p. 89). However, the authors imply that the mixed method of both TPR and songs seems as the best approach as it has the benefits of both methods and had the best scores on the productive vocabulary test. The qualitative data collected during the study revealed that the activities helped achieve the vocabulary. They were

also welcoming and engaging, and children were willing to participate without the factor of stress. To conclude, TPR, songs, and TPR&S are recommended methods in early language teaching.

5.2.2. *Literature, culture, and digital environment*

An innovative longitudinal study, *"Listen to my story, play and interact": Greek preschool children learning English in a digital environment* was conducted by Eleni Korosidou and Eleni Griva in 2021. It was designed to meet the growing requirements for alternative teaching methods to compete with the needs of technologically literate young children. The study is a part of a project that lasted two school years and included 26 preschoolers with no previous knowledge of the English language. The selected study focuses on the first year while the participants were still in preschool. The participants were 26 pre-schoolers in an urban area in northern Greece, and their average age was 5.5 years.

The main objectives were to establish whether digital storytelling and educational technology can have an impact on preschoolers' receptive language skills and vocabulary development and to identify both the opportunities for interaction and potential difficulties in multimodal and gamified learning environments.

A special syllabus with an emphasis on raising children's awareness of multiculturalism and respecting different identities was designed and implemented for the purpose of the research project. The syllabus consisted of 52 lessons intended for 27 weeks. The teaching units included colors, numbers, family, animals, food, the weather, face and body parts, and clothes. In combination with typical teaching materials and methods, the program introduced multimodal stories with audio-visual content, animations, songs, links, educational robotics, and QR codes.

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using the following research instruments: mid-term evaluation and post-test on vocabulary, a teacher/researcher's journal, and semi-structured interviews with the children. The results of the mid-term and post-test on vocabulary imply that the children effectively acquired vocabulary, although the difference in results was not statistically significant. The qualitative data collected by the

teacher/researcher's journal reveal that "DS[5] and educational tools employed in the current study had an important impact on pre-schoolers' language skills" (p. 17). By analyzing the interview transcripts, researchers found that children enjoyed learning the English language through the activities involving DS, liked the stories, attracted their interest, and encouraged them to participate.

Researchers conclude that by integrating DS and gamification techniques and using engaging and motivating content, the study proved that it is possible to make a positive impact on effective language learning and develop positive attitudes towards foreign language learning (Korosidou & Griva, 2021).

5.2.3. *Reading, storytelling, and songs*

The study *Effects of TPRS on Very Young Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition* was conducted by Ketevan Kara and Evrim Eveyik-Aydın and published in 2019. Inspired by the importance of acquiring the English language in Turkey, and the Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), researchers conducted a study with 19 four-year-old children who previously attended English classes for 6 months in a private school in Istanbul. They advocate the TPRS approach and state that "some scholars agree that TPRS provides the right theoretical framework for very young learners to acquire a language by following the principles of Natural Approach and Total Physical Response" (Kara & Eveyik-Aydın, 2019, p. 136).

The main objectives were to establish whether the TPRS produces a short-term and a long-term effect on very young learners' L2 receptive and productive vocabulary acquisition and to determine which type of lexical knowledge benefits from the TPRS instruction more in the context of very young learners' L2 vocabulary acquisition.

The TPRS treatment was carried out in the spring semester of the school year 2016/2017 and lasted for seven weeks during which the English language was taught 13 hours a week. Pretest and posttest were administered. After carefully selecting the literature for the procedure,

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[5] "Digital storytelling combines the art of telling stories with a mixture of digital media, including text, pictures, recorded audio narration, music and video. These multimedia elements are blended together using computer software, to tell a story that usually revolves around a specific theme or topic and often contains a particular point of view" (Robin, 2016, p. 17).

the researchers followed the three main steps for the implementation of storytelling with TPRS principles: (1) establishing meaning, (2) asking a story, and (3) reading.

The information was collected through 5-minute individual sessions with the participants. After collecting the data, Kara and Eveyik-Aydın found that "the mean scores of both receptive and productive immediate posttests are considerably higher than those of corresponding pretests in all weeks" (p. 140) and that results show that TPRS had both a short-term and a long-term effect on L2 receptive and productive vocabulary acquisition. They could also confirm that the receptive type of lexical knowledge benefits more from TPRS instruction. However, there are a few limitations to be acknowledged, such as a small sample, limited target vocabulary, absence of a control group, a relatively short duration of a study, only four-year-old participants, and exclusively high-frequency vocabulary. To conclude, the authors advise that all mentioned limitations should be considered in future research on the effects that the TPRS methodology could have on very young English language learners (Kara & Eveyik-Aydın, 2019).

Another study, *Songs, stories, and vocabulary acquisition in preschool learners of English as a foreign language* was conducted by Sara Albaladejo Albaladejo, Yvette Coyle, and Julio Roca de Larios (2018). They emphasize that songs and stories are becoming more and more "popular and effective resources in the preschool classroom" (p. 116). The main goal of their research is to examine the effect of the exposure to target language input in the form of a story, a song, and a combination of a story and a song on the acquisition of lexis by young preschool EFL learners. Apart from that, they studied children's behavior during storytelling and song sessions and its effect on the acquisition of new L2 vocabulary.

The participants were 22 preschool children aged between 2 and 3, attending a state school in Spain. Due to absences, there was a final of 17 children who fully participated in the study. The procedure lasted for 6 weeks and was conducted by the researcher Sara Albaladejo Albaladejo, who is also a qualified English teacher. The target vocabulary consisted of a total of 15 words. The research included a pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test with the following conditions:

> "i) story, in which the children are told a brief story ii) song, in which they are exposed to a traditional children's song and iii) song and story, during which they first listen to a new story and then to a related song" (Albaladejo Albaladejo, Coyle, & Roca de Larios, 2018, p. 119).

Some of the data were collected with the use of video recordings of the sessions to examine children's engagement during the activities. The processing of the collected data resulted in statistical significance. The researchers revealed that participants improved in developing the ability to recall the target vocabulary and that the input presentation modes had a positive effect on children's scores during the testing period. The results have shown that the most effective method for learning the vocabulary was through a story, and a combination of stories and songs. However, the results for a song as a teaching method were surprisingly low, which could be attributed to a non-relevant word choice that was presented in the chosen song.

The researchers recommend stories as a teaching resource as it provides "meaningful and comprehensible context, motivational and appealing characters and events, and opportunities for teachers to use linguistic and paralinguistic support" (p. 125). They also recommend the use of songs in classrooms, but regarding their findings, advise the teachers to develop some adjustments before listening to songs, such as contextualizing the target vocabulary.

Sara Albaladejo Albaladejo and her colleagues (2018) encourage more detailed further research with a larger number of participants with English teachers that children are more familiar with, which would facilitate the research in the productive lexical acquisition, types of songs and stories, and children's behavior features during learning sessions.

5.2.4. *Integrated teaching and project-based learning*

Carmen Lucas, Phillip Hood, and Doreen Coyle have conducted what they believe to be the first research on young native Portuguese speakers (3-5 years old) in the process of foreign language learning with an EFL pedagogic approach. The research *Blossoming in English: Preschool Children's Emergent Literacy Skills in English* was published in 2020. The main objective was "to explore to what extent the English as a foreign language (EFL) pedagogic approach is effective as defined as positively impacting emergent literacy skills" (p. 2).

The participants were 15 preschool children from 3 to 5 years old in Portugal, attending a preschool institution that follows the National Guidelines for the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum[6]. The materials for the study were prepared by following the principles of

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[6] "Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar" which states that: "within this age range, learning a second language happens in a relatively spontaneous way, as long as children are provided with suitable communication contexts" (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 61).

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The study lasted for a whole academic year through 33 English lessons that took place every Friday and lasted for 45 minutes. The data was collected by taking field notes, writing a research diary, taking recordings of the lessons, and collecting learners' portfolios of evidence.

The results have shown that "introducing English as an additional language in a Portuguese preschool setting has a positive effect on children's emergent literacy in English" (p. 14). By providing children with positive surroundings that support learning, they showed interest in reading as well as in writing a new language. This study suggests that "young children – even in limited L2 environments, as is the case in Portugal – can develop emergent literacy in English and can indeed learn much about print before formal instructions begin" (p. 22). The researchers suggest that the early implementation of the English language should be achieved by using innovative approaches, such as CLIL. Encouraged by the positive findings of the study, researchers recommend further investigation across different national contexts but advise taking a bigger sample size for the findings to be generalized.

Fatma Kimsesiz, Emrah Dolgunsöz, and M. Yavuz Konca (2017) conducted a study called *The effect of project-based learning in teaching EFL vocabulary to young learners of English: the case of pre-school children* in Turkey. Their research was based on the following questions (p. 429):

"1. What are the common techniques used in English classes in pre-schools in Turkey? Do teachers of English use PBL?

2. Is there a relationship between motivation (observation scores) and learning gains (exam scores) of the PBL instructed group and the traditionally instructed group? If so, is there an effect of PBL instruction on learner motivation?

3. Is there an effect of PBL on vocabulary learning performance of young learners at the end of an 8-week period?"

There was a total of 28 participants who were aged between 5 and 6 years, in a Turkish preschool institution, who did not have English lessons prior to the study. The participants were equally divided into the experimental and control group. The study lasted for 8 weeks, 35 minutes per day, and during that period, both groups were assessed on the weekly basis by exams and observer checklists.

The experimental group received treatment with the implementation of project-based learning (PBL) without traditional methods. The same teacher conducted lessons in the control group by using traditional materials such as TPR, songs, games, and flashcards.

The results show that "PBL instruction positively affected both learner motivation and EFL vocabulary learning gains" (p. 435). In opposition to traditional methods, children were more focused and active during the PBL instructed lessons. It provided children with quality input of the language, affected their motivation, and encouraged peer cooperation. The researchers are referring to the results of the survey which indicated that PBL is rarely used in the preschool curriculum, so they want to raise awareness of the positive effects it can create among young children if well planned. They advise the educators to get informed and start implementing PBL as it is applicable to all grade levels and "provides an active process for children enabling them to cooperate with each other" (p. 436).

Another study in this area, *English learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: an investigation of their effectiveness* was conducted by Penelope Robinson, Sandie Mourão, and Nam Joon Kang and published in 2015. It is based on the guiding principles written by one of the researchers, Sandie Mourão (2001), focusing on the one which states that "pre-primary English language teaching should include a classroom space and resources that will stimulate the use of the target language during child-initiated, free play activity" (Robinson, Mourão, & Kang, 2015, p. 7). By conducting a study that attempts to assess the value of English learning areas (ELAs) in pre-primary classrooms, the researchers were guided by the following questions:

> "1. Do ELAs, which are resourced to reflect the content of teacher-led EFL activities, have an
>
> impact on the children's learning of English?
>
> 2. What conditions or features in the ELA are most effective in stimulating target language use?
>
> 3. What evidence is there of English language learning?" (p. 9)

The participants were 16 preschool children from 5 to 6 years old in their second year of English in Portugal, and a group of preschool children in South Korea. The study started in October 2013 and lasted for 12 months including an orientation phase, an implementation phase, and an analysis of data phase.

The information was collected by a naturalistic and mainly qualitative approach such as carrying out non-participant observations, examining children's drawings, taking photographs

and video recordings, and keeping registers of how many children played in the ELAs and how often. The results suggest that "an approach to teaching English to pre-primary children that integrates teacher-led activities with an ELA that stimulates the use of the taught language, can have a positive effect on children's language development" (p. 21). They also show that the positive environment encouraged the children to use the English language. Children felt comfortable with each other and had fewer peer disagreements while they were engaged in free play activities in the ELA than in the other areas. There was a reported number of children who played by themselves but would also occasionally vocalize English words of relevance for their play. To conclude, a well-organized English learning area that contains teacher-led activities can create an effective and age-appropriate environment for early English language learning.

Another relevant study, especially for the Croatian context, was conducted by Andrea Silić and published in 2007. The study *Creating a stimulating environment for foreign language communication in kindergarten* (2007) was encouraged by the importance of early education and creating a positive and natural environment for learning a second language in preschool. The aim was to create and develop a stimulating environment to encourage preschool children to communicate in their mother tongue and in a foreign language (Silić, 2007).

The participants were 19 children from 3 to 6 years old attending the preschool institution "Potočnica" in Zagreb. The study was carried out as action research with elements of an ethnographic approach and as a case study at the same time. The researcher had opted for a systematic participant observation approach to establish, observe, understand, evaluate, and eventually alter the conditions to make changes in education regarding early language learning. During the process, the need for communication in English was encouraged in different ways such as greeting, getting to know each other, expressing feelings, giving suggestions, etc. Children were exposed to audio and video materials, songs, TPR, and games in English (Silić, 2007).

By examining the materials collected through video and audio recordings, the researcher has come to the following conclusions. Children were able to acquire and separate the two languages without the negative effects of the exposure. Practicing how to communicate unrolls in parallel to practicing and learning how to adjust to different situations. Children learn by exploring those situations which interest them. That is why it is of great importance to create a positive and engaging environment to raise the child's attention by creating natural and practical real-life situations for them to have the need for communication (Silić, 2007).

5.2.5. *Discussion*

The majority of selected studies deal with the effects of various teaching methods and materials on vocabulary acquisition in preschool children. Apart from vocabulary, children's emergent literacy skills are studied. That can be attributed to the fact that other areas of language acquisition might be more challenging to research at such a young age: the selected studies include children between 2 and 6 years of age.

Furthermore, the sample sizes range from 14 to 72 (see Table 1), which is usually not sufficient for determining statistical significance or other statistics-based conclusions.

The presented studies predominantly use the mixed method for collecting data, i.e. quantitative and qualitative data are combined to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (see Table 1). Research instruments used to collect information from preschool children need to be age-appropriate, but at the same time, sufficiently precise so that the data is valid and suitable for further analyses. The presented studies rely on ***classroom observation*** (e.g. Kimsesiz, Dolgunsöz, & Konca, 2017; Robinson, Mourão, & Kang, 2015; Silić, 2007), ***semi-structured interviews*** (e.g., Korosidou & Griva, 2021), (picture-based) ***vocabulary tests*** (e.g., Albaladejo Albaladejo, Coyle, & Roca de Larios, 2018; Kara & Eveyik-Aydın, 2019; Kimsesiz, Dolgunsöz, & Konca, 2017; Korosidou & Griva, 2021; Magnussen & Sukying, 2021). Along with that, some studies include ***children's drawings*** (e.g., Robinson, Mourão, & Kang, 2015), ***video recordings*** (e.g., Albaladejo Albaladejo, Coyle, & Roca de Larios, 2018; Magnussen & Sukying, 2021; Robinson, Mourão, & Kang, 2015; Silić, 2007), ***photographs*** (e.g., Robinson, Mourão, & Kang, 2015), ***journal notes*** (e.g., Korosidou & Griva, 2021; Lucas, Hood, & Coyle, 2020), ***learners' portfolios*** (e.g., Lucas, Hood, & Coyle, 2020), and ***field notes*** (Lucas, Hood, & Coyle, 2020). Understandably, conducting research with large samples of young children could be operationally demanding. For example, commonly used research instruments intended for adults, such as questionnaires, are easily administered and processed even with larger samples, but are not suitable for young children. To sum up, the area of early learning and acquisition of English in preschool children requires mixed research methods and child-friendly approaches and instruments, which answers the **first research question** referring to the research approaches and instruments used in the area of early learning and acquisition of English.

Apart from the child-friendly research instruments and methods, it is important to note that in some studies, preschool or English teachers were involved as researchers (e.g., Albaladejo Albaladejo, Coyle, & Roca de Larios, 2018; Magnussen & Sukying, 2021), which can be beneficial while gathering data from children who might be more relaxed during the process because they are interacting with a familiar person.

The eight selected studies reveal that effective L2 vocabulary acquisition in preschool children can be achieved with the use of **TPR** and **songs** (e.g. Magnussen & Sukying, 2021), multimodal digital **storytelling** and **gamification** techniques (e.g., Korosidou & Griva, 2021), **traditional storytelling** and songs (e.g., Albaladejo Albaladejo, Coyle, & Roca de Larios, 2018; Kara & Eveyik-Aydın, 2019), and creating real-life learning situations through **integrated learning techniques** (e.g., Robinson, Mourão, & Kang, 2015; Silić, 2007) and **project-based learning** (e.g., Kimsesiz, Dolgunsöz, & Yavuz Konca, 2017). Apart from that, the early introduction of English as a foreign language through CLIL creates a constructive and stimulating environment for the development of emerging literacy skills (Lucas, Hood, & Coyle, 2020). The abovementioned conclusions answer the **second research question** related to the main findings coming from contemporary research on early learning and acquisition of English as a foreign language. They are mostly in line with earlier research, some of which are mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis. However, all these findings should be taken tentatively because they are coming from several examples of empirical research attempting to investigate early L2 acquisition. As most of the study authors suggest, further research needs to be carried out to confirm and expand the significance of their findings.

6. CONCLUSION

A brief overview of early foreign language learning and acquisition in several countries, including Croatia, was presented in this thesis. While theoreticians are still unable to agree and support the Critical Period Hypothesis, it remains a *heated* topic for linguistics researchers. When the approach "the younger the better" is used, the majority will confirm that children can learn a foreign language from an early age without affecting their mother tongue. Theory and research provided in this thesis support the fact that children should start learning a foreign, specifically English language in preschool, before starting their first year of primary education when it becomes obligatory in most countries. Conducting research with preschool children requires careful planning and data collection, mostly through observation, picture-based

vocabulary tests, short semi-structured interviews, and other means of collecting data: video and audio recordings, children's portfolios, drawings, journal notes, etc.

The analyzed studies have shown a positive effect of age-appropriate, fun, and educative language teaching approaches on young learners. In other words, children enjoy learning through songs, literature, and physical movement. Moreover, it is recommendable to include the said teaching materials in project-based activities, integrated and digitalized activities, which facilitates creating the idea of realistic, life-like learning conditions. In that way, children are more likely to engage in active participation, improve their relationships with peers, and they can learn English throughout the process which can be beneficial to their further education. However, further research, preferably with more participants, is needed to gain a better insight into the learning requirements of present-day preschool children as foreign language learners. That is even more pronounced in the context of modern technology and digitalization, which is becoming a standard in modern language teaching.

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Izjava o izvornosti diplomskog rada

Izjavljujem da je moj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

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(vlastoručni potpis studenta)