Editorial:
Introduction to the special issue on English language learning in primary schools

The early introduction of foreign languages, mainly English, in pre-primary and primary education in different parts of the world is an undisputable fact in today's world, as clearly illustrated in Enever (2018). One of the reasons for this educational change is the belief in "the earlier the better" notion, which has already been shown not to hold true when linguistic outcomes are assessed in foreign language settings (see García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003; Huang, 2015). Age is just one variable among many others that need to be taken into account when assessing child language learning in educational contexts (see Butler, 2019), and that is the reason why more research on identifying those other variables is necessary.

As Oliver and Azkarai (2017, p. 62) have argued, ". . . child second language acquisition (SLA) differs significantly from adult SLA, having its own questions and issues" and, therefore, deserves to be studied in its own right. More recently, in a special issue of *AILA Review* on policy and practice in early language learning, Enever and Driscoll (2019) aim ". . . to position early language learning as *a distinctive field of enquiry within the discipline of applied linguistics and education* [emphasis added]" (p. 1). More and more interest in the topic is reflected in the publication of monographs (Murphy, 2014; Pinter, 2011), edited volumes (García Mayo, 2017; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Philp, Oliver, & Mackey, 2008), specialized journals (*Language Teaching for Young Learners*), and in the organization of thematic conferences and sessions worldwide. There is even a book series (*Early Language Learning in School Contexts*) launched by a prestigious publisher (Multilingual Matters) and an AILA research network in early language learning (www.ell-ren.org) established in 2015 by Janet Enever "with the aim of raising the profile of research in early language learning (3-12 years)."

Within this backdrop, the goal of this special issue is to advance the research agenda on child foreign language learning by sharing with the reader nine contributions that explore issues related to the impact of variables such as proficiency pairing, pair dynamics, task modality, task repetition and previously known languages on children's oral interaction. The papers also consider how young learners explore meaning in context, how word frequency and idiomacity have an impact on second language reading and how an individual variable, motivation, changes when a task is carried out individually or in collaboration. The final contribution also explores how teachers reportedly use their first and second languages in the primary school classroom. It is worth mentioning that the first four papers examine the oral interaction and the written production of English as a foreign language (EFL) children participating in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programs, which attests to the importance of this methodological approach in primary school settings in Spain. Although, as pointed out by Ellis (2014), the term *young learners* covers a range of age groups in the literature, in this issue it refers to children from 6 to 12 years old, all of them in primary school settings in Denmark, the UK, the USA and Spain.

In the first paper, "Language-related Episodes and Pair Dynamics in Primary School CLIL Learners: A Comparison Between Proficiency-matched and Student-selected Pairs," Basterrechea and Gallardo-del-Puerto explore the effects of pair formation method, that is, whether children are paired based on their proficiency level in the foreign language or whether they self-select their partner, on both the production of language-related episodes (LREs; Swain & Lapkin, 1998) and their pair dynamics (Storch, 2002). Twenty-seven pairs of 10-12-year old Basque-Spanish EFL learners, enrolled in a CLIL program, completed two collaborative tasks and their interactions were audio- and video-taped. The findings showed that the children produced more LREs that focused on meaning than on form regardless of the pair formation method, supporting previous research with EFL children (García Mayo & Imaz Agirre, 2019). Those LREs were resolved accurately much more frequently by proficiency-matched dyads, who were also more collaborative in their pair dynamics than self-selected pairs, as was the case in previous research with EFL children (García Mayo & Imaz Agirre, 2019) and EFL adults (Mozaffari, 2017).

In their contribution, entitled "EFL Child Peer Interaction: Measuring the Effect of Time, Proficiency Pairing and Language of Interaction," Pladevall-Ballester and Vraciu consider the amount of negotiation of meaning, repetition and feedback produced by 40 Spanish-Catalan EFL learners, also in a CLIL program, and the mediating effect of the variables of time, proficiency pairing and the choice of the language of interaction. Regarding time, the data were collected when the children were 9-10 and two years later when they were 11-12. As for

pairing, the children were paired up in matched proficiency dyads (N = 10) and in mixed proficiency dyads (N = 19), and the language used could be their first language (L1) or their foreign language (L2). The authors reported little effect of time but both pairing and language played a role. Thus, mixed dyads, formed by high-low pairs, negotiated more irrespective of the language they used, and L2 meaning negotiation was significantly more frequent than L1 meaning negotiation. The authors explain the higher negotiation of the high-low proficiency dyads as a result of the need to readjust the output and input of each member of the dyad in order to understand each other to successfully accomplish the task.

Martínez-Adrián and Arratibel-Irazusta study the interface between task modality (speaking tasks vs. speaking + writing tasks) and the use of previously known languages (PKL) in their article "The Interface Between Task-Modality and the Use of Previously Known Languages in Young CLIL English Learners." Fifty Basque-Spanish EFL learners (10-11 years old) in a CLIL program completed two tasks, a speaking task and a speaking + writing task in dyads. Previous research on task modality with EFL children (García Mayo & Imaz Agirre, 2019) had shown task modality effects on LREs, but Martínez-Adrián and Arratibel-Irazusta show that task modality also impacts the use of PKLs, as a higher number of PKL turns was obtained in the speaking + writing task, although it had a limited effect on the functions those PKLs serve.

In their paper "Task Repetition and Collaborative Writing by EFL Children: Beyond CAF Measures," Hidalgo and Lázaro-Ibarrola consider the importance of task repetition, a pedagogical choice that has been claimed to offer interesting learning opportunities (Bygate, 2018) in the written mode. Specifically, the researchers analyzed the written production of 20 12-year-old Spanish EFL learners who attended a CLIL program. The children wrote a text in pairs in response to a visual prompt three times over a 3-week period, and the researchers analyzed not only the LREs the children generated while writing but also their written output in terms of analytic and holistic measures. The analysis showed that most of the LREs focused on formal aspects of the language, a finding that mirrors previous research with adults completing writing tasks (García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016), most of the LREs were successfully resolved, and their number decreased with each task repetition. Regarding the analysis of the children's written output, the findings showed that their compositions improved when measured holistically, but analytic measures (i.e., complexity, accuracy and fluency) failed to echo that improvement.

Eskildsen and Cadierno report data from semi-structured oral tasks given to young learners of English in Denmark. In their paper "Oral English Performance in Danish Primary School Children: An Interactional Usage-based Ap-

proach," they combine analytic tools from usage-based linguistics and conversation analysis (Eskildsen, 2018) to assess the oral performance of two Danish primary school children. One of the children, Nicoline, the less proficient child, was 9 years old and had started learning English at 7, and the other, Bo, the more proficient child, was 11 and had started taking English at 9. The children performed two consecutive oral tasks within one single session, with the first one being a semi-guided interview with a native speaker and the second a picture-elicited narrative. The findings showed that the children's differences in their interactional competence had a fundamental impact on the interactional trajectories of the interviews. This pilot study allowed the researchers to identify both linguistic patterns and interactional practices in the two children, which will guide them in the analysis of the data from the whole cohort and in the development of an interactional usage-based approach to the analysis of oral L2 performance.

Yuko Goto Butler deals with an underexplored topic in her contribution "The Ability of Young Learners to Construct Word Meaning in Context." Although vocabulary plays a key role in reading comprehension, Butler rightly points out that there is a scarcity of research that considers children's depth of vocabulary, their ability to infer meaning from context, and how those lexical abilities impact their reading comprehension. In her contribution, she investigated those topics with a group of 61 children (9-10) in the United States, 24 monolingual English-speaking children and 32 L2 learners of English from Spanish or Vietnamese backgrounds. The findings of her study point to quantitative differences between strong and emergent readers and between native speakers and L2 learners regarding their ability to infer word meanings of unknown words in context, and how they use metacognitive knowledge to arrive at those meanings, although some of those differences disappear after controlling for the size of the children's receptive vocabulary. Butler provides practical implications of her study that teachers could take into account, such as the provision of texts with explicit contexts to provide instruction on strategies for inferring word meaning.

In their paper "Effects of Frequency and Idiomaticity on Second Language Reading Comprehension in Children with English as an Additional Language," Kan and Murphy also deal with the importance of vocabulary in the learning of an additional language. More specifically, they consider the importance of doing research on knowledge of multi-word expressions, whose high frequency can cause vocabulary difficulties for children. They recruited 25 monolingual English children and 22 children with English as an additional language (EAL) from 7-8 to 10-11 years old, who completed two reading comprehension tests, one non-formulaic (few multi-word units) and one formulaic (more multi-word units). The findings showed that both groups over-estimated their comprehension of the texts and had lower comprehension scores on the formulaic texts, that is,

the presence of multi-word expressions had an impact on both actual and reported understanding of the text. From a pedagogical perspective, the authors argue for the inclusion of multi-word units when working with vocabulary, as they clearly have an impact on literacy measures.

Kopinska and Azkarai focus on one very important individual difference, motivation, in their paper "Exploring Young EFL Learners' Motivation: Individual vs. Pair Work on Dictogloss Tasks." Specifically, in their contribution the researchers consider how the choice of task and how that task is carried out, individually or in collaboration with another partner, might have an impact on general and task-related motivation. Sixty four Spanish EFL learners aged 11-12 participated in the study. They worked on several dictogloss tasks (Wajnryb, 1990) six times throughout the academic year, both individually and in collaboration. The findings showed that the children exhibited high motivation towards EFL and the dictogloss right from the pre-test, a motivation that consolidated significantly after they finished the tasks. They also had a positive predisposition towards the task and, especially, towards collaborative work, which Kopinska and Azkarai believe should be fostered by children's EFL teachers.

The final paper of this special issue deals precisely with teachers. In their contribution, "Teachers' Self-reported L1 and L2 Use and Self-assessed L2 Proficiency in Primary EFL Education," Wilden and Porsh analyze the data gathered from a survey administered to 844 German primary school teachers regarding their L1 (German) and L2 (English) use in the classroom and whether or not there was a correlation between their self-reported use of the L2 and their professional qualifications. The findings showed that German EFL teachers reported both L1 and L2 use in the classroom, the former for management situations and the latter when they focused on foreign language learning. Moreover, the authors found a correlation between the teachers' self-assessed L2 proficiency and their L2 reported use in the classroom: the higher their self-assessed proficiency, the more the L2 was reportedly used. The findings are highly relevant against the backdrop of the need for highly qualified professionals to teach foreign languages at the primary school level (Butler, 2019).

To conclude, this special issue offers a view of some of the factors that play a role in the process of learning English in primary school from different standpoints, all of which provide the reader with a rich perspective of the intricacies involved in foreign language learning at a young age and which fully justify the call for establishing a distinctive field of enquiry which focuses on the particularities of early language learning. Pedagogically speaking, the contributions offer valuable takeaways for teachers. After reading the different contributions, teachers will have knowledge about the effects that different factors have on young foreign language learning, which will allow them to make informed decisions that

may directly impact the process. Pairing up children according to their proficiency, rather than allowing them to self-select their partners, may lead to a higher number of resolved LREs. Forming mixed-proficiency pairs will probably lead to more negotiation, which may take place more frequently in the L2 than when forming same-proficiency pairs. When children are asked to complete a speaking + writing task, they are more likely to resort to their L1s than when completing an oral only task. Children also benefit from task repetition as their written output tends to improve when measured holistically, albeit not when assessed using more analytical measures. When evaluating children's L2 proficiency, we may have to pay attention not only to the children's linguistic repertoire but also to what interactional resources they are able to deploy when asked to accomplish a given task. Children's ability to infer word meanings increases when the new word is presented in an explicit context, which helps infer the meaning of the word, but the presence of multi-word expressions hinders the understanding of texts. There is an increase in motivation when children are asked to work collaboratively. Finally, after reading the last contribution, teachers will learn that there is a tendency for them to resort to the L1 when they have to manage the class but prefer to use the L2 when they focus on the learning of the L2. In addition, the higher the perceived proficiency of the teacher, the more frequently they use the L2.

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