

The ELLiE Study: Capturing Evidence Transnationally and Longitudinally

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Background

This paper reports on the challenges encountered in the design of research methods suitable for a longitudinal transnational study. The large-scale research study of Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE, 2006-10) was conducted by research teams based in seven European countries (Croatia, England, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden), funded by the European Commission with some additional funding from the British Council and the team's respective universities. The study aimed to identify what could realistically be achieved in early foreign language learning in state schools where relatively limited amounts of class time are available for foreign language learning. A condition of the grant funding was that the study should provide indicators that could inform European policy makers, helping to shape and refine current policy.

With the aim of establishing a comprehensive picture of young children's language learning experience from the beginning of early start programmes across the seven countries involved in the study, the research team designed a multi-method framework for data collection and analysis, comprising both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This methodology enabled us to build a transnational perspective for each year of the

study, combined with a deeper, more qualitative approach to provide the kinds of evidence that can lead to insights which might not be so accessible with large scale quantitative analyses.

The study broke new ground in adopting a transnational approach to conducting research on young language learners in Europe, with data sources of sufficient scale, geographical spread and language backgrounds (including countries with Germanic, Romance and Slavonic language roots) offering findings that might be of relevance to a number of other contexts across Europe. This transnational approach allowed a focus on a broad perspective for the purposes of informing future European policy, rather than the comparative and rather more competitive picture that is sometimes generated by an international research framework such as has resulted with the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study. Importantly, a longitudinal approach was also adopted for this study, acknowledging the added value of tracking development over time as an indicator of young children's non-linear and often erratic development as language learners.

The ELLiE research began with a scoping study (2006-7) designed to assess the potential viability of a larger scale investigation. This first year allowed the research team to build an initial framework, exploring possible procedures for the subsequent years of the study. Here, I will refer only to research methods developed during the three years of the main study (2007-10).

Over the three-year period a total of 11 data collection tools were designed and administered. As shown in Figure 1, the sequence of administration included a number of instruments which were administered annually whilst others were administered either at the beginning and end of the study (school background, parents' questionnaire) or at the end of the study only (reading task).

Figure 1: ELLiE research instruments: sequence of administration (Enever, 2011, 13).

Research instrument	2007-8			2008-9			2009-10		
School background	*								*
Principal interview	*			*				*	
Teacher interview		*		*				*	
Lesson observation		*		*		*	*	*	*
Lesson observation – focal learners			*				*		
Class smiley questionnaire			*			*			*
Class listening task			*			*			*
Class reading task									*
Focal learner interview			*			*			*
Focal learner speaking task			*			*			*
Parent's questionnaire			*					*	

Given the focus of this paper on collecting evidence from young children over time and across varied national contexts I will discuss three research tools here as an illustration of how annual modifications were made in order to fully capture the developing complexity of the children’s language acquisition, whilst also responding to maturational development which required a more sophisticated tool design to ensure that learners responded to the task as fully as possible. The following research instruments will be discussed in this paper: class smiley questionnaire and class listening tasks (Parts I and II). Each of these instruments underwent a process of intense review by the whole research team throughout the study as it became apparent that annual modifications would make a vital contribution to the quality of data collected. Below, the modifications / re-design features of each instrument will be outlined, together with some reflections on the process and its effectiveness.

Class smiley questionnaire

The smiley questionnaire was administered to all children participating in the study (n=1400) towards the end of each school year. The questionnaire aimed to record evidence of children’s attitudinal responses to the experiences of foreign language learning (FLL) as these developed over time. At the design stage the team found it particularly important to work together on the selection of suitable questions to ensure they would have equal validity across all national contexts (see Figure 4 for further detail). Analysis at the pilot stage confirmed the initial suitability of all questions, with annual analysis of subsequent data providing a guide to the design of later questions. With the aim of ensuring that all children would fully understand the tasks and find the questionnaire simple and straightforward to complete, the researcher read out the questions to each class (in the children’s L1), requiring learners to only tick the smiley face that they felt represented their viewpoint (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Smiley face strip for Years 1 & 2 of ELLiE study (ages 7-9 years).

Tick one face that describes how you feel – (7-9 year olds)		
☹	☺	😊

Figure 3: Smiley face strip for year 3 of ELLiE study (ages 10-11 years).

Tick one face that best describes how you feel – (10-11 year olds)				
☹☹	☹	☺	😊	😊😊
Dislike a lot	Dislike	Neither like nor dislike	Like	Like a lot

As children in the study began to mature, the research team considered that it might be important to modify the Smiley questionnaire layout, since by the age of 10-11 years some children might already be beginning to move towards puberty and have developed some resistance to tasks perceived as ‘babyish’. Consequently, the instrument was revised to include smaller smiley face symbols, with a 5 point, Likert- type scale, allowing more nuanced responses to be inserted by the children (Figure 3). Additionally, a summary description for each of the 5 categories was added below each of the smiley face categories. This encouraged children to use their reading skills as a further support to the completion of the questionnaire.

For each of the three years of the main study the selection of questions the children were asked to respond to varied with the aim of collecting data that would reflect their stage of FLL. Throughout this three-year period three questions were retained, offering anchor points for the study which might give a reliable indicator of the extent to which attitudes to the FL might change over time (Figure 4, items 1, 2 and 3). All other questions were either modified or completely re-written for each of the three years of the study (note: the abbreviation E/F/S refers to English, French, Spanish – representing the three languages taught amongst the ELLiE study schools). The changes made will be briefly summarized below.

Firstly, the wording of item 4 of the questionnaire underwent some re-phrasing during each year (see items 4.1, 4.2, 4.3) as a result of feedback from researchers, acknowledging the comprehension difficulties experienced by some children when presented with two or more options in one sentence. The wording used in the third year proved to be more straightforward for all to respond to (clarity was particularly important considering that all questions were translated into the relevant national language).

Secondly, children were asked to comment on one favourite activity in year 1 (item 5.1). For many children it proved very difficult to select just one, so this item was adapted to allow for two activities to be identified, with an indication of a first and second most favourite activity listed (item 5.2). This revision proved to be less stressful for children to respond to.

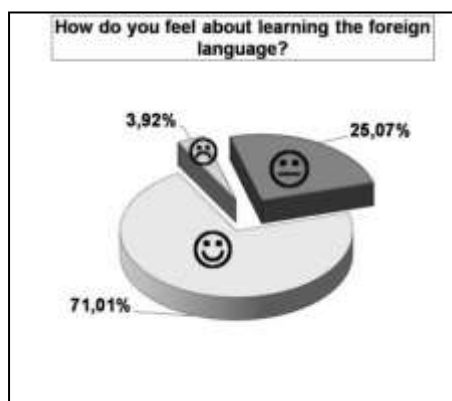
Figure 4: ELLiE motivation questionnaire: longitudinal re-framing.

Questions		ELLiE Yr 1	ELLiE Yr 2	ELLiE Yr 3
1	How do you feel about learning E/F/S this year?	✓	✓	✓
2	Do you like E/F/S more, the same or less this year than last year?	✓	✓	✓
3	How do you feel about learning new words in E/F/S this year?	✓	✓	✓
4.1	This year, is E/F/S easier, the same or harder for you?	✓		
4.2	This year, do you find E/F/S difficult, neither difficult nor easy, or easy?		✓	
4.3	This year, how difficult is E/F/S?			✓
5.1	What's your favourite activity this year?	✓		
5.2	What are your two favourite activities in your E/F/S lessons this year?		✓	✓
6	How do you feel about speaking in E/F/S this year?		✓	✓
7	How do you feel about listening to E/F/S this year?		✓	✓
8	How do you like doing your FL homework?			✓
9	This year you have been speaking, listening, reading and writing in E/F/S. Which do you like best?		✓	✓

Thirdly, items 6-9 were introduced in years 2 and 3 of the study to reflect the changing nature of lesson content and to record any evidence of its impact on children's attitudinal responses (Figure 4).

As one illustration of responses to the first anchor question, posed across all three years of the study, Figures 5 and 6 (Mihaljevic and Lopriore, 2011, 45) reflect the extent to which the children's attitudes to FL learning actually shifted over the period of the study.

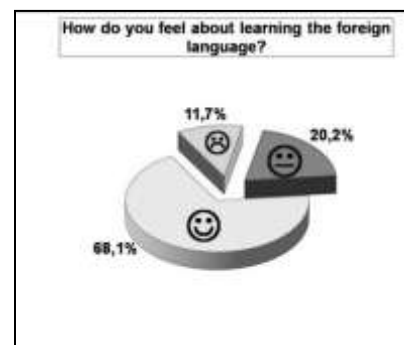
Figure 5: YLs' feelings about FLL at start of project.



The decline in levels of enjoyment from 71.01% to 68.1% was only slight, but the further decline in the percentage of children who were less certain about their enjoyment of FL learning (from 25.07% to 20.2%) and the subsequent increase in the numbers of children who considered that they no longer enjoyed learning a FL (from 3.92% to 11.7%) was statistically significant.

In subsequent individual interviews children provided many explanations of why they were no longer enjoying learning an FL, some of which correlated particularly with their questionnaire responses to items 6-9.

Figure 6: YLs' feelings about FLL at end of project.



Class listening tasks

The class listening tasks Part I and Part II were administered to all children (n=1400) at the end of each school year, coinciding with the administration of the smiley questionnaire described above. As with the smiley questionnaire, it was important to standardise task design to ensure reliability across all contexts. The listening tasks brought the added challenge of standardisation across three languages (English, Spanish and French). National, school and class syllabuses were therefore compared to identify vocabulary items which were introduced across all countries and to select frequently used phrases which the children were likely to have come across. These were then checked with teachers to provide further confirmation of their suitability. The pilot phase enabled an assessment of the difficulty factor providing a valuable guide for introducing more and less challenging item selection. Each part of the listening tasks will be discussed separately here as their construction and adaptation differed slightly.

Part I: This task aimed to measure children's developing ability to grasp the meaning of a short sentence and connect it with an illustration representing the same meaning. Following a similar format to the smiley task above, children were presented with strips of three different pictures, for which they had to circle the picture that matched the sentence read aloud (in the FL). In the first year of the study the sentence was read by the researcher as there were some concerns that young children might not cope with the pace of a pre-recorded listening task. However, in the following two years a pre-recorded reading of all sentences was used, providing a more consistent rendering of the task for all classes. The additional maturity of the children seemed to allow them to cope satisfactorily with this format, by the age of 8-9 years, even in those contexts where recorded listening tasks were not regularly used in FL classes.

Figure 7: Extract from ELLiE Listening task Pt.I (2008).



Circle the correct picture: Listening 1. How many tigers can you see? I can see 3 tigers.



Circle the correct picture: Listening 3. What is the boy doing? He's riding a bike.

As previously, some sections of the task were retained for all three years of the study to provide anchor items with the potential to provide reliable evidence of development over time (see examples of two anchor items in Figure 7).

In total five anchor items were retained throughout the three years. However, during the administration of the second round of listening tasks it was noted that a significant proportion of research subjects were finding the matching activity fairly unchallenging, indicating that a possible ceiling effect had been experienced by some children. To overcome this problem seven new items were included in the task for the final year of administration, introducing a higher level of challenge which resulted in significant discrimination between respondents (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Extract from ELLiE Listening task Pt.I (2010).



Circle the correct picture: Listening 12. "Who are these two boys?"
Girl: "They are my cousins. Mark and Jim. Mark is very good swimmer and Jim is an excellent skateboarder".

Part II: For the second part of the Listening task children were given a picture of a room containing various familiar items related to the vocabulary introduced during the school year in all study contexts (Figure 9). In the first year children were asked to listen to sentences read out by the researcher (in the FL) and mark each item with a number. In subsequent years a recorded version was used, as above. Examples of the spoken text for the first year of the study included such items as:

- Number 4, The BIKE is in the garden
- Number 5, There's some FRUIT on the table

Figure 9: Extract from ELLiE Listening task Pt.II (2008).



In the second and third year of the study it was recognised that use of an identical picture could be problematic since some children might recall the picture from the previous year and respond negatively, perceiving this to be simply a repeat exercise. To avoid this possibility some modifications were made to the picture each year and children's attention was drawn to these modifications.

In the re-shaping of this task for each successive year the research team modified the spoken text for years 2 and 3 to reflect the kinds of classroom interactions observed by the team during lessons. This included short 'conversations' between two speakers, including key vocabulary which children could identify and mark on the picture. Examples in year 3 of the study included:

1. "How many horses are there in the picture?"
"There's one horse in the picture".
2. "How many brothers and sisters does the baby girl have?" "She has two brothers and one sister".

As with the previous tasks, a number of anchor items were retained throughout all years to ensure a measure of progress over time could be observed.

Discussion

It is important to note that the Listening tasks described above were administered as tasks, not tests (similarly, this applied also to tasks in speaking and reading). For some, the distinction may be a fine one, but for the research team these tasks were designed to contribute to a holistic picture of early language education across a range of contexts rather than simply as a measure of linguistic competence. As such, it was possible, through lesson observations, parents' questionnaires, interviews with individual children and with their teachers, to build a picture of children's development as language users over time, taking into consideration attitudinal development, the rise and fall of motivation, the factors that influenced this and the outcomes over the period of the study.

In this short article I have aimed to illustrate the complexity of developing research tools that can be effectively administered across a range of national contexts, in a longitudinal study. As a research team we acknowledge that we were breaking new ground in this study and recognise the challenges we confronted. We hope to have contributed to the development of new ways of addressing such approaches to research and to have highlighted the potential value of transnational studies as a tool for sharing expertise and learning across national boundaries.

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