

# Teaching Speaking to Young Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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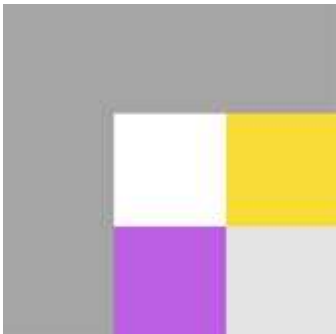
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# Teaching speaking to young learners of English as a foreign language

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**List of Abbreviations:**

AI – Artificial Intelligence

CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

CPH - Critical Period Hypothesis

DST – Dynamic Systems Theory

EFL – English as a Foreign Language

FL – Foreign Language

IELTS – International English Language Testing System

L1 – First Language

TPR – Total Physical Response

ZPD – Zone of Proximal Development

YL – Young Learner

# 1. Introduction

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A quarter of the world's population now speaks English, either as a native or non-native language. Moreover, non-native speakers outnumber native speakers at an estimated ratio of 4:1 (*The English Effect*, 2013). Croatia is among 11 European countries in which more than 90% of students learn English at all levels of education, from the beginning of schooling until graduating from secondary school (European Commission, 2023). Some schools in Croatia introduced English as a foreign language at the beginning of formal education in the 1970s and 1990s (Petrović, 2004; Vilke, 2007). However, the school year 2003/2004 marks the beginning of the mandatory foreign language education for all students from grade one of primary school. English was chosen as the first foreign language by 86% of young learners' parents (Kapović, 2022). We are deeply indebted to pioneers, such as Rudolf Filipović, Mirjana Vilke, Yvonne Vrhovac, Elvira Petrović, and Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović, who have laid the foundation for researching English language learning and teaching, as well as for training teachers of English in Croatia. Their efforts have propelled English language education in Croatia to stay at the front of modern, learner-friendly, and learning-friendly educational methodologies.

However, as the world faces huge changes due to fast globalisation and technological development, the education system needs to respond to these changes in order to meet students' needs and help them prepare for the unknown future. Literacy and numeracy remain crucial for building a solid foundation for one's agency, which "implies a sense of responsibility to participate in the world and, in so doing, to influence people, events and circumstances for the better" (OECD, 2018). In order to be fully equipped for participation in the world, the need for a common language or a *lingua franca* has never been as important as it is today. The *lingua franca* of today is English (Crystal, 2003) and, for the reasons mentioned above, it is important that all learners of English in a non-native setting are empowered to participate in world events through good mastery of the spoken English language.

This book deals with a specific part of English language teaching, i.e., teaching young learners to speak the English language in non-immersive, foreign language contexts. The reasons for focusing on young learners are a few. First and foremost, young learners are different from teenage and adult learners, and the language teaching approach requires accommodation to their age and abilities. Young learners differ among themselves – some are quite proficient when they start formal education, due to various informal language learning opportunities, whereas others are true beginners. There are the ones whom we would call very "talented" for language, and there are others who struggle to memorise and produce utterances. Many young learners are more than willing to speak, whereas others would rather stay quiet in lessons due to anxiety or shyness. It is a teacher's job to understand every learner and help them become successful users of English. As many applied linguists believe that speaking is a particularly difficult skill to achieve, especially in a country where this language is a foreign



language, it is crucial to understand how spoken language develops, how much time it takes, what factors influence the development of spoken language, and what teachers in a foreign language (FL) setting can do to enhance the opportunities for its development.

Whatever walk of life today's primary school students decide to pursue, we believe that they will need to speak English, both in their private and professional lives. In our experience, learners of English as a foreign language quite often report a lack of ability or fear to speak the language, even though they understand both spoken and written English. Creating a good foundation for the development of speaking skills is thus essential in contemporary language instruction.

This book is divided into five chapters, each focusing on a crucial aspect of teaching speaking skills to young foreign language learners. The introduction is followed by the first chapter, *Meet Young Learners*, which explores age as a significant factor in learning a foreign language, particularly in developing speaking skills. It reviews prominent past and contemporary theories of cognitive development, considering their application in current foreign language teaching practices. The second chapter, *Theoretical Approaches to Speaking as a Skill*, presents cognitive, method-based, and sociocultural approaches to FL learning and teaching. It examines the development of speaking skills in young EFL learners through the lens of these theories, highlighting their contributions. In the third chapter, *Development of Speaking in Young Learners of English*, we cover multiple topics related to speaking skill development. We start by discussing fluency and the factors that enhance it in young learners. This is followed by an exploration of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation as fundamental components of speaking skills, providing insights into their interconnections and practical implications. The section on pronunciation is more detailed, given its integral role in speaking and the extensive theoretical debates surrounding the choice of pronunciation models. Unlike vocabulary or grammar, which are universally accepted as essential to teach, pronunciation often raises questions about which models to adopt for non-native speakers. Further in this chapter, we discuss the possible effects of the environment—such as exposure, social context, and formal learning settings—on speaking skill development. We also examine learner-related factors and teacher-related factors that may influence learners' ability to produce meaningful spoken output, which is essential for developing speaking skills. Chapter four, titled *Assessment of Speaking Skills in Young Learners*, distinguishes between proficiency assessment and classroom-based assessment. It sheds light on the various challenges of classroom-based assessment and offers strategies for addressing them. Additionally, it explores the possibilities of digital assessment, self-assessment, and peer assessment for young learners.

While this book emphasises the teaching of English and includes examples from the English language, its insights are valuable for teaching speaking skills in any foreign language. Certain phenomena are discussed in the Croatian context, as the book is primarily intended for pre-service teachers and EFL teachers of young learners in Croatia. However, the examples and discussions can benefit all practitioners teaching in a foreign language context, as well as researchers interested in the under-researched issues addressed throughout the book.

Throughout the book, we strive to connect theoretical contributions with research and practical examples. We believe that a continuous dialogue between research and practice is essential for effective language teaching.

## 2. Meet young learners

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When teaching, knowing your “audience” is crucial. Imagine a renowned physicist coming to one of the teacher council meetings and talking about the geometry of rare regions behind Griffiths singularities in random quantum magnets. We, teachers, would probably have trouble understanding it for several reasons. We have never put any serious effort into understanding the topic because our profession requires different knowledge. Also, the language needed to discuss these topics is out of our reach. If the physicist happens to be a natural-born teacher, they will find a way to explain the topic by adapting the language and simplifying the ideas. Also, another reason why teachers would start fidgeting in their seats while listening about the geometry of rare regions behind Griffiths singularities in random quantum magnets is the huge possibility of not being interested in the topic and, therefore, not being motivated to listen to the lecture. They would perhaps demand an explanation of why they needed to be there and listen to the lecture when there were so many important things to discuss in the teacher council meeting.

To be a successful teacher in a young learner classroom, one needs to be aware of young learners’ characteristics that fall into the realm of their cognitive, emotional, and social development. Once this is grasped, a new world of opportunities opens up for the teacher, and they are ready to set the ground for the motivating atmosphere in which students would want to speak using a language other than their mother tongue.

### 2.1. Age of young learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) context

According to researchers and practitioners in foreign/second language acquisition, young learners are primary school children between the ages of five and twelve. Various authors have set different age limits, guided both by the findings from developmental psychology, as well as the traditional separation of child institutions into caretaking ones (such as kindergartens and nurseries) and educational ones (such as pre-schools and schools). Linse and Nunan (2005), for example, say that young learners are children between the ages of five and twelve, whereas Slattery and Willis (2001) define them as children aged seven to twelve. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) see young learners as children aged five or six to ten or eleven, whereas Bailey (2004) provides a different name for these learners, calling them “beginning” or “lower level” language learners and making a distinction between the very young learners under the age of seven and young learners aged seven to twelve. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) also emphasise this difference, putting young learners into two categories when discussing their characteristics – children aged five to seven and those aged eight to ten. Ellis (2013) clarifies the term, saying that legally young learner

is any underage learner, however, due to the rise in the number of children learning English globally, the terminology should be more specific, and we should distinguish between pre- and post- 11- or 12-year-old learners, and that a good starting point is to adopt terms commonly used in the educational systems to which children belong.

## 2.2. Young learners in Croatia

In the Croatian context, where children start learning a foreign language (mostly English) in the first grade of primary school, at the age of six or seven and continue learning it until the end of high school, at the age of 18 or 19, “young learners” would be children in the first four years of primary school. This does not mean that children in grade five (mostly ten or eleven-year-olds) have suddenly become quite mature and ready to learn independently, dealing with abstract ideas without a problem, sitting quietly for 45 minutes, mostly writing or reading, or being able to organise their learning. Children at that age are still quite playful, and their skills and abilities are still developing; therefore, we believe that despite the typical view of young learners in Croatia as children in the first four grades of primary school, it should be expanded to the pre-teenage school children, as well as five-year-olds or six-year-olds in pre-school programmes.

## 2.3. Influential theories of cognitive development

The most important thing to know about children of all ages is that they are constantly developing. This means that any traditional view of children as miniature adults with specific static characteristics that will never change is wrong and leads to a dangerous practice of overlooking the possibilities of teachers to help children grow. Child development has been the focus of studies in many areas, such as psychology, cognitive sciences, and social studies. Researchers have tried to explain how humans become who they are in their adult years and what mechanisms lie behind their intellectual, social, emotional and physical development. Foreign language teaching relies heavily on psychology findings and various social, cognitive, system, and other theories. Many approaches to teaching FLs resulted from the then-popular theory in psychology or cognitive science and have been proven more or less successful. In the next three sections, we will discuss three influential psychological theories and their implications for teaching young learners.

### 2.3.1. Piaget’s stages of cognitive development

The first widely accepted theory of cognitive development was that of Jean Piaget (1896-1980), the Swiss psychologist and philosopher whose mind was not set on the improvement of educational practices but rather on unravelling the mystery of how people learn. However, his theory of the four stages of development is perhaps the most taught theory at teacher training institutions, as well as the most

often challenged by much of the follow-up research. Roughly speaking, Piaget distinguishes between four main stages in child development and provides examples of child behaviour to support his thesis (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Children of interest in this book, or more precisely, children aged five to twelve (young learners), fall into three of Piaget's categories: up to the age of seven, they are in the *pre-operational stage of development*; from age seven to eleven, they are in the *concrete operational stage*; 11-year-olds and older are in the *formal operational stage*.

According to the reviews by Berk (2006, pp. 231-253), Buggle (2002, pp. 55-108) and Sternberg (2005, pp. 446-459), the main difference between the preoperational and concrete operational stages is in the ability to operate with the mental representation of actions that follow the rules of logic. In the formal operational stage, children are able to think about abstract concepts, hypothesise and draw conclusions. Today we know that Piaget's methodology of research (case studies) was biased and flawed in some aspects and that some of his explanations were simplistic.

As evidenced in Berk (2006, pp. 231-253), Piaget claimed that at the preoperational stage, children are prone to egocentric thinking and focus on their own viewpoint, whereas the follow-up research has shown that children are able to take other people's viewpoints at the age of four. Next, Piaget noticed that children are not able to conduct simple logical tasks. However recent research has shown that children do well on simple logical tasks if they are familiar with the topic and not burdened with too much information. Also, Piaget believed that they are not able to categorise, but they are; their categories are not as complex as those of older children and adults. Children do have problems with distinguishing reality and appearance by the age of six or seven, just like Piaget believed, but this is most probably because of the problems they have with the language of the task, not the task itself.

In the concrete operational stage, according to Piaget, children gain the ability to operate mental representations. They think more logically, which does not mean that they are able to understand everything an adult is able to understand. Their mental operations work great with concrete information they can perceive directly, such as the length of objects. They master logical concepts gradually and one at a time. Today we know that the acquisition of logical concepts is quite often a matter of culture and educational opportunities.

In the fourth stage, the formal operational stage (11 years old and older), children's hypothetico-deductive reasoning develops, and they are more able to use propositional thought (symbolic systems such as language or algebra). They are still not quite competent in abstract thinking, but this system is developing at that age. An educator must keep individual developmental differences in mind, being aware that even many adults are not able to solve some problems and never become fully operational. Also, one of the most important ideas that Piaget laid out is the idea that humans do not just react to external forces and inner strengths but rather spontaneously and constructively act upon the inner and outer, subjective and objective realities (Buggle, 2002, p. 45).

Since we are interested in the role of formal education on children's development, it is important to remember that cognitive development is not always self-generating, as one might conclude after reading Piaget's work. There is a line of evidence showing that the environment affects children's understanding and performance (see Berk, 2006, p. 252; Sternberg, 2005, p. 456). However, Piaget's window into the cognitive development of children was quite important at the time it appeared. It changed the way children were treated, and it led to today's better understanding of how children learn and develop.

In the foreign language classroom, Piaget's theory might help us understand that it is the teacher's job to provide a rich environment for children's developing minds and to be aware that children will not be able to do some tasks as well as adults. It is impossible to speed up their development, but it is possible to raise interest in something and build on the children's current way of thinking. In other words, language teachers should provide carefully chosen input which is concrete enough for children to understand and learn from and relies on the topics they are able to understand. A good teacher observes their learners and adapts the content as they grow emotionally and intellectually. They do not expect young learners to understand everything an adult would understand but try to always be aware of their capacities of understanding and abilities to react and construct new knowledge. They address their individual differences and do not expect them to measure up to normative standards or the expected average performance. Last but not least, they create a learning environment which would suit children's needs and interests.

### 2.3.2. Vygotsky's socially-oriented development theory

Another influential figure in the field of cognitive development was Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist (1896-1934) whose work was discovered in the 1970s and 1980s. His theory of development became influential through two ideas: *internalisation* and *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). Unlike Piaget, who was focused on the biological, internal aspect of a child's development, Vygotsky emphasised the relationship between the child's learning and the outside world. Through this interaction, individuals adopt or internalise the experiences, knowledge or influences they receive from the outside world. Adults, peers, teachers and other mentors are important in a child's development because they help the child reach their potential skills, something they are still not able to achieve without someone's help. This idea that there is a stage of development in which the child is almost ready to adopt new skills or perform new tasks but cannot do it without help is called the *zone of proximal development*. The cognitive and emotional support of adults is a predictor of children's mature thinking and effort (see Berk, 2006, pp. 260-261). It cannot be clearly defined, but it has served as the basis for the individual, student-centred approach in education, where learners are seen as having certain potentials (dependent upon many unique attributes) that need to be reached through *scaffolding*, that is, various methods of support in learning. Some of the tactics used in scaffolding are: breaking the task into smaller, manageable units; suggesting strategies for dealing with the problem; offering a rationale for using them; gradually withdrawing support; and turning responsibility to the child. Also, due to the individual differences between children, the foreign language zone of proximal development may be different for each child and different aspects of language (Cameron, 2001, p. 13).

The idea of ZPD, which highlights the gap between a learner's current abilities and their potential achievements with the help of a knowledgeable 'mentor', might help us understand that the teacher's role in the foreign language classroom is to offer attainable yet challenging tasks, which may help children develop and grow. If the tasks are not challenging, children may become bored. If they are too challenging, they may become frustrated. Most teachers will work with groups of students (of mixed abilities) and they would have to think of ways to differentiate the materials they are working on so that children at various development levels may still be helped to reach their potential (See section 5.2 for *formative assessment* and section 4.5.4 for *differentiation*). Scaffolding is the key to successful teaching. A successful teacher is able to lead students through the process of learning by offering support until the student is able to do the task independently.

### 2.3.3. Information processing approaches to cognitive development

*Information processing approaches* is a term used to describe a large field of study into human cognitive processing based on the idea that humans are instances of physical symbol systems. It is impossible to summarise years of research into human information processing and reduce it to a chapter in a book; therefore, we will provide a very general overview of its main ideas and try to point out the most interesting conclusions of research into children's cognitive abilities as opposed to those of adults.

The main idea behind the information processing approaches is that humans can manipulate symbols and symbolic structures via a complicated set of cognitive processes. Symbolic capacity or competence is the ability to use one thing to represent another. For example, a yellow circle on a child's drawing represents the sun. Symbols are culturally shared, which means that we understand each other's symbolic representations. When it comes to the functioning of our minds, we receive input from the outer world, and it becomes symbolic in our minds. There are no objects in our heads - just ideas of these objects. Symbolic functioning in humans begins around the age of three. De Loache (1987) performed an experiment in which small objects were hidden in a room and children were provided with the model room (with the objects hidden in the same places as in the real room) to find the objects. Two-and-a-half-year-olds could not do it, but three-year-olds could. Thus, at the age of three, humans begin to develop their symbolic structures.

Symbolic structures have never been precisely defined, but researchers have a consensus that structures can be connected to other parts of the structure (see Klahr, 1992, p. 280). In other words, symbols in our minds are connected on multiple levels. This is how we know everything we know. For example, when we want to talk about a topic, there is a set of words or language chunks we will use, a set of rules we will very quickly apply to our speech, a set of ideas that form in our mind about this topic, a set of images, and many other interconnected elements. They all rush to become connected, and voila! - we are speaking to our friends about our favourite food, book, music, or other topics.

These abilities develop in humans, and researchers in many fields have tried to give answers to the question of how this happens. Information-processing approaches share the main assumptions (Klahr, 1992, p. 274) that

1. children's mental activity involves processes that manipulate symbols and symbolic structures,
2. this occurs within a system,
3. development occurs because the system is able to modify itself.

Of course, they do not deny the influence of external factors influencing our learning. Society, parents, and teachers have a role in children's learning. If children are left to their own devices - and there are unfortunate cases of that - they never fully acquire the language due to the so-called language deprivation. One of the most famous cases is that of Genie (Pinker, 1995, pp. 296-297), a girl who had not acquired her first language in early childhood due to neglect and abuse. When her case became known to the childhood authorities, she was 13 years and seven months old, and despite the instruction and care, she was unable to fully acquire the first language and develop more sophisticated social skills. However, in ordinary social and emotional circumstances, children learn due to external input *and* the ability of their cognitive system to develop. Research supporting these ideas was done in many fields using various methods. It began with Piaget and neo-Piagetian research, which focused on observing structural changes. Then, with the advance of computer technology, much of the research focused on creating computer models that would "learn" and imitate the cognitive architecture of human minds. Finally, the connectionist models appeared - a movement in cognitive science that tries to explain human cognitive structure via artificial neural networks - simplified models of the human brain (for more information, see Berk, 2006, pp. 271-311; Klahr, 1992; Sternberg, 2005, pp. 461-471). All the models assume that our cognitive system takes information from the environment and encodes it in symbolic form. Then, a number of internal processes operate on it. Thus, we record, store and retrieve information. Computer and artificial neural network models are "taught", similarly to how humans learn, and researchers generally agree that, although some changes appear abrupt, learning happens gradually. Our cognitive system gradually attains domain-specific competencies as a result of relevant learning opportunities (see Berk, 2006, pp. 275-276).

Of course, computer-generated networks are not as complex as human learning because they cannot focus on relevant information, make plans, hypothesise, or understand when additional information is needed for the audience reading the texts. Take the example of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots. Although they can answer any question, their "training" has not been sufficient to understand and use all the nuances of human behaviour, such as subtle humour, change of heart, digressions, intuitive guesses, and similar. The human mind is an exquisitely wonderful phenomenon (we will not call it a machine, on purpose), and there is still no computer in the world that can do the same thing our minds can.

Regarding the cognitive functioning of young learners, as information-processing approaches see it, we will present some evidence that their cognitive functioning is different from that of adults. This is important because adults tend to forget what it was like to be a child. When teaching or interacting with children, they often focus on their abilities, thinking that children, as “miniature adults”, can do the same things they can if only they try hard enough. However, the truth is different.

The first line of work related to the differences between children and adults focuses on the fact that the quantity of knowledge of adults often surpasses that of children. Also, the structure of their knowledge is different and more successfully organised. When children have more knowledge of something than adults (e.g. rules of a game), they will outperform them on a range of tasks. Nevertheless, the truth is that generally, adults have a larger knowledge base than children. This does not necessarily mean their processing is more powerful (see Klahr, 1992, p. 279). With age, the capacity of short-term memory and long-term memory increases, as well as the extent and effectiveness of strategy use (Berk, 2006, p. 273).

Regarding problem-solving strategies, studies have shown differences in their use by children and adults. Children aged four and five were observed for 11 weeks to discover whether they would develop new problem-solving strategies and begin to use them to solve similar problems. Even though children discover new strategies, they do not start using them on the following tasks. They return to the less sophisticated strategies and use the new ones sporadically. When they receive help from an adult, they rely on their help in the following tasks. Also, the “discovery” of new strategies happens both after success and failure in solving the task (see Klahr, 1992, pp. 315-316). Berk (2006, pp. 278-279) describes Siegler’s model of strategy choice, according to which children try various problem-solving strategies and eventually let go of the ineffective and slow ones. Also, this model reveals that different children think differently. However, the general rule is that problem-solving strategies help develop new thinking methods if children have enough experience solving problems.

When children and adults are compared regarding the time it takes to search their short-term memory, age differences are large and consistent: adults do it much faster. One of the explanations is that adults are more efficient in using various strategies to find task solutions (Klahr 1992, pp. 307-310). However, as children grow, their performance speeds up. With the advance of age, children’s attention also becomes more selectable, adaptive and planful (Berk, 2006, p. 280). However, young learners are easily distracted and rarely able to focus long on a task or focus on specific details. This inability to control internal and external distracting stimuli is linked to the development of the cerebral cortex.

All of the findings above are important in teaching speaking to young learners. Up to the reach of adulthood, at approximately 19 years of age, children are in a state of constant development. Something that seemed impossible to them at one point becomes possible at another. The growth of their cognitive abilities is especially present in early and middle childhood. Some stages of their development are similar, but often children differ in their store capacities, knowledge base, strategy use, attention, and planning. The processing capacity is limited at any given time; attention, metacognition, and planning are still de-



veloping and this will reflect on their achievement in all areas, including speaking in a foreign language. They are different types of learners than adult learners, and they need support in the development of multiple mechanisms that will help them learn and grow both linguistically and cognitively. In a foreign language classroom, we need to observe the behaviour of our students and help them when our help is needed. The materials and activities need to be encouraging and slightly challenging so that children feel interested and that the learning actually happens. Children are still not good at cognitive self-regulation (monitoring progress towards a goal, checking outcomes and redirecting unsuccessful attempts); in other words, even if they know what they should do to succeed, they do not always do it. Teachers need to help them develop strategies for more successful storing and retrieval of information. Many times, children remember simply because they take part in a daily activity. This is a good starting point for any foreign language activity that develops speaking skills, especially singing, Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, storytelling, or role-play. Finally, since children's attention is not as developed as that of adults, a teacher needs to be creative in making their lessons diverse and interesting. She needs to provide opportunities for children to take a break between two cognitively demanding activities. When assigning projects<sup>1</sup>, she needs to be aware that children cannot plan long-term projects themselves (at least the majority of children) and that they need clear instructions and much support at each step of project realisation. The fact that children can recognise words or understand them does not necessarily mean that they are able to recall them when needed. Repetition and recycling ensure memorisation.

Exposure to a foreign language outside the class seems to be a crucial factor, which will be discussed in section 4.2.1. of this book in more detail. As with any other skill, language skill develops through the workings of our minds (receiving, storing, processing, and retrieving information), and input is as crucial as learners' learning strategies and psychological attributes. As stated by Cameron (2001, p. 20), foreign language learning depends on what children experience; therefore, "teachers need to identify the particular opportunities of a task or activity and then develop them into learning experiences for the children".

## 2.4. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)

It is a common belief that children are better learners of foreign languages than adults and that an early start is a guarantee for successful foreign language acquisition. Many parents involve their pre-school children in institutionalised language learning practices believing that it is crucial to start foreign language learning as early as possible. The Critical Period Hypothesis, first set out by Lenneberg (1967) and later investigated by many (for the overview see Biedroń, 2023b) has been one of the main reasons for early foreign language learning introduction into educational systems worldwide. It is described as a period of heightened sensitivity when it is possible to gain a native-like level of proficiency in a language (which does not mean that it necessarily happens), therefore success in the acquisition of a second lan-

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1 In the Croatian context, *projects* are long-term assignments given to children for homework and are very popular at the moment. However, children often struggle with the assignments and parents need to help them. The reason behind it is that teachers do not set ground for children's independent work.

guage steadily declines throughout the lifespan (Hakuta et al., 2003), meaning that the later one starts learning the second language, the less successful one will be in acquiring it. Again, there are examples of native-like proficiency despite late onset, but the majority of the population fits into the Critical Period Hypothesis, with the newest evidence Hartshorne et al. (2018) found that grammar-learning ability is preserved by the age of 17.4 and then begins to decline steadily.

However, the early start at preschool age or early primary school age is not a guarantee of better language acquisition. Even though it seems that children pick up languages easily and effortlessly, there is no plausible evidence supporting the claim. Young starters do not outperform late starters when they learn a foreign language exclusively in the classroom (Ortega, 2013, pp. 16-17; Vilke, 2015, p. 26), especially in terms of productive skills (Petrović, 1997). Flege and Bohn (2021) argue that the Critical Period Hypothesis for FL speech learning does not explain age-related effects in research. They argue that differences between late learners and native speakers cannot be attributed to the loss of neural plasticity, as the adult brain retains considerable plasticity for FL speech production and perception processes (e.g., Callan et al., 2003; Callan et al., 2004; Ylinen et al., 2010). Furthermore, Singleton (2005), after giving an extensive overview of the development of the notion of the Critical Period Hypothesis, claims that the term itself is “misleading” (p. 269) and agrees with Thompson (2001) that, as much as the hypothesis may be appealing, it is challenging, if not impossible, to precisely determine the parameters of sensitive periods due to the intricate nature of the behavioural systems in young children.

The Critical Period Hypothesis was also based on an incomplete evaluation of foreign-accented FL production, as many early learners still speak with detectable foreign accents even after decades of primary FL use. Late learners’ foreign accents grow stronger following the closure of a critical period, and many immigrants who speak with a foreign accent have not yet received enough FL input or received too much foreign-accented FL input to reach their full potential (Flege, 2019). Lenneberg (1967) believed that foreign languages require conscious effort to learn, especially for late learners who have smaller lexicons and untuned phonetic categories. The Critical Period hypothesis assumed that FL learners cannot automatically access language-specific phonetic properties from mere exposure to FL sounds. However, it has been shown that late learners can access phonetic details without special tutoring or using cognitive processes not previously used for first language (L1) acquisition (Flege & Hammond, 1982; de Leeuw & Celata, 2019; Song & Iverson, 2018). Muñoz and Singleton (2011) elaborated on the extensive range of variability linked to the promotion of the Critical Period. They have thoroughly examined the concept of onset age and emphasised the often overlooked significance of input quality and quantity, as well as learners’ attitudes and motivation, inadequate comparison with native speakers, contextual, socio-affective and cognitive factors, and neurolinguistic dimensions of FL acquisition. They suggest a looser link between FL acquisition processes and CPH would offer a more diverse perspective on the issue of FL attainment.

Still, there are advantages to an early, pre-puberty start: learners “attain a good command of the phonetic system with a limited corpus of structures and vocabulary”, and it provides them “with a feeling

of security and self-confidence in the use of foreign language” (Vilke, 2015, p. 19). Furthermore, in today’s world, when English has become a *lingua franca* (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2009) or the language of international communication, and when the advance of worldwide communication via the internet and various social media has brought the English language to every home, children are more likely to be exposed to it at a very early age, watching cartoons and age-appropriate videos in English. Thus, they are either intrinsically motivated to use the English language, or there is a need for those who are not, to “keep up” with their peers who start communicating in English at a very early age. The educational setting now, more than ever, seems to simply respond to the needs of young learners for the acquisition of the English language as *lingua franca*.

### 3. Theoretical approaches to speaking as a skill

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The word speaking is used to convey many different aspects of that complex phenomenon. Broadly used, speaking is a uniquely human capacity to use words to convey information, thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. Sometimes we say that our pets speak, such as parrots or cats, and we know that many animals communicate in the most fascinating ways. However, the human ability to communicate through spoken language is incredibly complex compared to the communication systems used by other species. We know thousands of words in our native languages, and we can combine them and produce an infinite number of meaningful sentences. There are more than six thousand languages in the world with different grammar rules and unique syntax. We can speak about abstract concepts, ideas, and emotions. We communicate knowledge and culture through language. Sometimes we speak multiple dialects and languages, at different levels of proficiency.

In the foreign language learning context, *speaking* is defined as one of the four language skills. It is a productive skill (along with writing), as opposed to listening and reading, which are receptive skills. Productive skill implies that the language is generated or produced by the learner, whereas receptive skills are the abilities of learners to understand the language. It is an oral skill, as opposed to the written ones - reading and writing (see Bailey, 2004, p. 2). In the EFL literature, this skill is referred to as *speaking skills*, *oral skills* or *oral proficiency*. Linse and Nunan (2005) say that speaking is the most difficult skill to acquire because it happens in real-time, and there is an expectation of speaking at that particular moment without much time for revision of what you want to say. Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2006, p. 139) agree that speaking is one of the most challenging of the four skills since it involves “a complex process of constructing meaning”. We would like to add that it is inseparable from other language skills, e.g. listening skills or reading skills because communication involves other people saying something or asking us questions and we need to understand them and respond; or writing skills because spoken and written signs are like two sides of the same coin – or in de Saussure’s (1966) terms, they are the “signifiers” or ways to express the concept or the “signified”.

Contemporary language learning theories and approaches to language teaching understand that learning the language requires a more complex approach than that of vocabulary repetition, grammar practice, pronunciation practice and translation between the foreign language and mother tongue. In the overview by Bailey (2004, p. 3-5), four competences are emphasised as important in the contemporary approach to language teaching: communicative (being able to use the language in various real-life situations), sociolinguistic (using the language in every social context), strategic (developing strategies to cope with difficulties in expressing themselves or learning different components of language), and

discourse competence (being able to fill in the basic content of their speech with various discourse markers). Also, the speaker needs to speak continuously without much effort (i.e., be fluent) and use the appropriate language structures and vocabulary (i.e., be accurate).

When faced with the challenge of teaching beginner learners to speak, all of these goals seem as something that is only going to be possible in the far future. However, the beginner levels of learning are extremely important in setting the foundation for a confident user of English, who will be able to communicate and adapt in real-life situations and get their message across. Therefore, a successful teacher must understand the cognitive processes that underlie the process of speaking (an FL), as well as the theoretical underpinnings of the methods used in a young learner classroom.

Theoretical approaches to speaking in FL address different phenomena. For the sake of the review of the approaches that we find important for language teachers and pre-service teachers of young learners, we will divide them roughly into the three strands of research and theoretical development: cognitive, method-oriented, and sociocultural approaches. Under cognitive approaches, we wish to describe several influential theories and models that deal with the process of speaking, relying on the first language acquisition processes and recent evidence about the functioning of the human brain and behaviour from psycholinguistics and cognitive science. Under the method-oriented approaches, we will present those that focus on FL acquisition as a part of language teaching and discuss the effectiveness of methods for teaching learners to speak in an FL, particularly in non-immersive or foreign language contexts. Finally, we will turn to aspects that could be encompassed within the broader concept of sociocultural approaches, whose focus is effective communication within a community and that draw on socially-oriented cognitive development theories, sociology, sociolinguistics, and cultural psychology. Surely, all the fields are immense and they will not be presented in detail but rather in regard to their meaning and importance for the development of speaking skills of young learners of a FL.

### 3.1. Cognitive approaches to the process of speaking of young FL learners

The so-called *cognitive turn* in linguistics has become important for the understanding of speaking processes, both in first and second language acquisition. It started with Chomsky's (1972, 1986) famous Universal Grammar, which postulates that we learn the language due to an innate grammar module. Even though it was very influential in general linguistics, it did not deal with the questions of applied linguistics, nor provide any explanation of how children learn their second language(s) (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

In the 1970s, as a reaction to Chomsky's Universal Grammar, a school of linguistic thought called *cognitive linguistics* started to emerge that discarded the modular, computational view of mind, and accepted the view that language is a part of general cognitive abilities. It has attempted to discover general principles that govern all aspects of human language and draw on knowledge about the mind and

brain from other disciplines. It encompasses various theories, whose underlying belief is that language knowledge is a structured inventory of symbolic units of certain form and meaning, that can be more or less complex and more or less abstract. Here we will discuss two L1 theories that are applicable to the acquisition and the process of speaking of FL, Tomasello's Usage-Based Model of Language and Levelt's Blueprint of the Speaker, as well as the Complex Systems Theories' view of language learners, particularly the growth of their speaking skills.

### 3.1.1. Tomasello's Usage-based Model of Language Acquisition

Even though L1 and FL learning are different, because learning an FL means that there is already an inventory of symbolic units at hand, some accounts of L1 language acquisition have been useful for understanding how to approach young learners. Since they are different from adult learners in many ways (see Chapter 1), the development of FL speaking skills may, to some extent, follow the natural path of childhood language acquisition. Tomasello (2003, pp. 295-305) assumes four sets of processes that are involved in children's language development. The first and perhaps most important, because they underlie all the language development processes, are *intention-reading* and *cultural learning*. Apart from imitating the social behaviours of adults, children "read" and imitate communicative intentions, as well. Therefore,

(...) the foundational process of language learning is hearing an adult utterance, reading the communicative intention embodied in that utterance, segmenting that communicative intention into component parts (in most cases), and storing the comprehended utterance and components. This is how all concrete pieces of language must be learned if they are later to be used conventionally and creatively in novel communicative circumstances. (Tomasello, 2003, p. 297)

This ability remains at the heart of FL learning at an early age. Children imitate the teacher's behaviour and read their intentions, even though they do not necessarily understand the utterances they hear in the classroom. As long as the communicative intentions are clear to young learners (e.g. Saying "Sit down" and doing it multiple times, until children understand this utterance as a cue to sit down), learning by imitation and intention reading will happen.

Furthermore, Tomasello posits that children create abstract syntactic constructions out of the concrete pieces of language they have heard through *schematization* and *analogy*. While the concrete pieces of language for concrete functions are imitatively learned, schemas are formed in children's minds which are not simply the storage of concrete language units, but a kind of abstract "slots" which can be filled with other yet-to-be-learned or creatively used pieces of language. To exemplify, let us assume that children learn the sentences "The car is red", "The dress is blue", and "The sun is yellow" by imitation. The schema that would be formed is "X is Y" in which X is an object and Y is a colour. If children can name other objects or colours, they will fill these abstract slots with the known pieces of language. This may lead to errors as well if the schema for plural form has not yet been formed and they assume that "is" is

the typical part of the schema that does not change. In that case, they might use it for plurals, too, and say “The cars is red”. So, teaching needs to encompass exposure to plural forms as well. Also, it should not be forgotten that FL learners already have schemas developed through their L1, which makes the process of new language learning easier (Swan, 1985a).

The next two processes of language development, according to Tomasello, are *entrenchment* and *pre-emption*. Entrenchment refers to the fact that some behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, becomes frequent and habitual and we always do it the same way if it has been proven successful, whereas pre-emption refers to learning what not to say; by listening to others, we unconsciously make conclusions about the choice of utterances. For example, if the teacher says “Good morning” during the daytime, and “Good evening” when it is dark outside, children will “grasp” the right way to greet depending on the time of the day, due to frequency (she does it every time) and preemption (not saying “Good morning” when it is dark outside).

Finally, Tomasello posits *functionally based distributional analysis* as one of the processes involved in language development. It is the pattern-finding process or a categorisation process that is fundamental to human psycholinguistic processing. Linguistic items and structures are understood as symbols with form and communicative function, whereas the communicative function is especially important. To show how this process might work in terms of the development of speaking skills, we will provide a very simplified example. In order to establish some classroom routines, the teacher may repeat the same phrases in every single lesson, such as: “Look at the whiteboard, please”, “Repeat after me, please”, or “Let’s sing a song”. The categorisation processes that could be the result of this exposure could lead to the use of these phrases in other contexts by learners, such as the use of “Let’s” for inviting someone to do something, or the use of “please” for asking. In the words of Tomasello (2003, p. 98)

usage-based approaches expect children’s learning to be more gradual, piecemeal, and lexically dependent—with the acquisition of particular linguistic structures depending heavily on the specific language to which a particular child is exposed, and with generalisations coming only after a fair amount of concrete linguistic material has been learned.

In terms of language production in their first language, children either produce relatively fixed expressions or routinised expressions based on a schema, or they use bits and pieces of language that have a communicative function via symbolic integration. Multimorphemic fluent units of speech are the basis of children’s speaking competence; so, the child does not employ rules of language to combine words and morphemes, but she rather starts with ready-made language constructions and combines them or fills in the abstract slots in their schematic representations with novel linguistic material to fit a communicative situation. Therefore, Tomasello calls the utterance-level constructions the “major target of children’s early language-learning efforts, a major way station on the road to more adult-like linguistic competence” (Tomasello, 2003, p. 310). Around the age of three, as the communicative needs get more complex, these preplanned elements of speech are combined with online revisions. This leads to

problems with fluency, which happen due to the bigger need for planning and the change in planning strategies. This is, again, applicable to some extent to FL speaking. Much of the young learner FL pedagogy consists of the repetition and recycling of vocabulary or constructions of various sizes so that they become routinized and ready for use in novel situations. Also, grammar is learnt through exposure, repetition of structures, and varying of the “variable” elements, without the use of metalanguage or explicit grammar teaching. In other words, when children are not ready for a different approach to learning, classroom instruction often has characteristics of first language exposure and acquisition. Of course, due to many other factors that play a role in gaining the ability to speak an FL (listed in Chapter 4), young learners are sometimes much less successful at oral production in FL in comparison to their L1.

### 3.1.2. Levelt’s Psycholinguistic Model

An influential L1 model of spoken language processing is Levelt’s Psycholinguistic Model or Blueprint of the Speaker (1989, 1999). It sees spoken language as a set of processes that are mutually codependent and equally important for speech to happen. These processes are very complex in themselves and there is a complex relationship between them.

Speech begins with the *conceptualisation* of what a speaker wants to say. It involves the intention to speak, and the selection of information. In order to do that, the speaker needs to have access to procedural knowledge (if X then Y) and declarative knowledge that is stored in long-term memory. For example, if a classroom situation requires the young learner to react to illustrations of animals, they need to know that they are expected to say which animal they see (if you see a lion, you must say “a lion”), they need to know which animal they are seeing (the so-called encyclopaedic knowledge), before speaking even happens. Since microplanning is most possibly language-specific (De Bot, 1992), e.g., contains information about the language in which the utterance is to be produced, beginner learners of an FL might find the first phase of speaking challenging due to the fact that their conceptualisation is L1 dependent. There is a lack of linguistic repertoire that might enable them to “think in the FL”, as the learners are often advised to do, or to construct the message in an FL. In fact, the question of whether there is a single set of concepts for multiple languages a person speaks, or a unique set of concepts for each language a person speaks has been debated since the famous Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis<sup>2</sup> and the more recent account by Cook (2003, pp. 6-11) presents multiple possibilities of the organisation of concepts in a bilingual mind, ranging from total separation to complete integration of concepts in different languages. Neither are plausible, since both languages are in the same mind, however, users can keep them apart. Therefore, the integration occurs at different points of the “integration continuum”, which may vary across different parts of the language system (e.g. separate phonology vs. integrated lexicon), is prone to individual variation, and may differ from one situation to the other. As far as young learners of an FL are concerned, their conceptual system is L1 dependent until they start learning FL. At that point, integration of lexical items for concepts might occur, however, it will take time for learners to acquire new lexical items and integrate them into their mental lexicon.

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2 Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity claims that the language we know structures our understanding of the world. For more see Lee (1997).



The next phase of speech processing is the *formulation* phase, which is closely connected to conceptualisation, because after deciding what to say, speakers seek the lexical items that contain the meaning in their mental lexicon<sup>3</sup>, activate syntactic building procedures (which again require access to procedural knowledge), and prepare a phonological speech plan via phonological encoding. The Formulator, as Levelt (1989, p. 11) puts it “translates a conceptual structure into a linguistic structure” and the “end product of the Formulator becomes the input to the next processing component: the Articulator” (p. 12). Again, if the learner’s mental lexicon does not contain a linguistic counterpart of a concept, the formulation phase in an FL will not even begin or the learner will turn to code-switching (De Bot, 1992), or the process of shifting from one language to the other. For example, if the learner wants to ask the teacher whether they should open a workbook, but he does not have the structure “Should we” in his FL repertoire, he might say “*Trebamo li*<sup>4</sup> open the notebook?” The lack of syntactic-morphological knowledge and phonological knowledge may lead to anxiety, especially in individuals who are very self-conscious about their FL proficiency (Nguyen, 2024). At its core, drawing on one’s L1 knowledge when starting to learn a new language is a positive phenomenon, because learning happens under the assumption that meanings and structures are going to be broadly similar to those in one’s own language until there is evidence for the contrary (Swan, 1985a).

There are ways to overcome the challenges in the first two speech phases. First of all, to aid conceptualisation, teachers must carefully choose the topics that are relevant to young learners so that there is a base of “world knowledge” which would spark their interest to speak. Young learners like to talk about themselves, their interests, their loved ones, their pets, and similar. Secondly, they need to create situations in which learners would be given the chance to use simple, well-known FL utterances to respond to the teacher’s communicative intentions. For example, a small number of animal vocabulary items might be introduced via a song or a rhyme, and then the same set of items might be presented visually saying “This is a...”. Children will be motivated to speak (intention), able to plan their utterances, and will not lack the needed concepts. Obviously, for them to be able to take part in more complex conversations, this has to be repeated with other sets of words/utterances, language has to be revised, and the complexity of communicative context needs to be gradually built. More on the teacher’s role in the development of young learners’ speaking skills will be said in section 4.4.

After the formulation phase, follows the *articulation*. Shortly after or during conceptualisation and formulation the phonetic plan is created and stored in the so-called articulatory buffer, a temporary storage device that “retrieves successive chunks of internal speech (...) and unfolds them for execution” (Levelt, 1989, pp. 12-13). The execution of the articulatory plan depends on the circumstances of articulation and the product of articulation is “overt speech” (Levelt, 1989, p. 13). The circumstances of articulation that are quite important for young learners may be the fact that sometimes young learners still deal with articulation disorders in their L1, which may affect their articulation skills in FL. Some may stutter;

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3 The lexicon, as linguists commonly define it, refers to the component of a language that encompasses the meanings, phonological and orthographic forms, as well as the collocation and colligation patterns of specific elements within that language (Singleton, 1999, p. 15). Mental lexicon is traditionally seen as a stored mental representation of the lexicon we know.

4 Equivalent for “Should we” in Croatian

or simply lose their front teeth which may lead to articulation problems. This does not necessarily mean that there is anything wrong with the conceptualisation or formulation phase.

Even though it is sometimes very difficult for teachers to pinpoint why a certain child has trouble speaking in an FL, they need to know that a “break” of communication may appear during any of the above-described processes. Chapter 4 deals in detail with the factors that influence the development of speaking.

The last process which takes place when speaking a language is *self-monitoring*. Levelt (1989) separates it from language production, saying that it is a component of language comprehension. The speaker is also his own listener and has access to his internal and overt speech. He checks whether the production of speech matches the communicative situation and his intentions. Self-monitoring is manifested in self-repairs, which Levelt (1983, 1989) divides into covert self-repairs (false starts, hesitations, pauses) and overt ones (verbalised reformulations). A longitudinal study by Verhoeven (1989) analysed the number and frequency of repairs, corrections and repeats in the spoken language of children from the age of six to age eight, whose mother tongue was Turkish and who had been learning Dutch in an immersive context for two years prior to the study. The study provided insight into the processes underlying spoken FL. With the progression of age, there were fewer phonological corrections and more syntactic and semantic corrections, which made authors conclude that with advancing years children have fewer problems with planning and execution at the phonological level and that the mastery of FL productive phonological skills occurs relatively early. On the other hand, the increased amount of semantic and syntactic corrections and repeats was found to be positively related to their oral proficiency, which either means that they become better at monitoring or that the use of monitoring becomes more urgent with higher proficiency. Also, interestingly, the mental strategy for syntactic and semantic corrections was shown to be positively related to the child’s general cognitive skills.

Levelt (1989, pp. 20-22) also discusses the difference between the processes in terms of automatization, saying that formulating or articulatory procedures are automatic processes that run on their own resources and do not require the speaker’s attention. Words and larger linguistic units are selected with very high speed from the mental lexicon or long-term memory, and articulation occurs at a speed rate of fifteen phonemes per second. On the other hand, conceptualisation and monitoring demand attention and awareness using working memory, whose capacities are limited. Levelt’s model discusses L1 processing. However, FL relies heavily on working memory and attention, even during the formulation and articulation phase, especially among speakers with lower levels of proficiency (De Bot, 1992). According to the Trade-off Hypothesis (Skehan, 2009), speakers only have limited capacities in terms of attention to the processes of a speaking task, so the control function of attention prioritises certain performative aspects over the other. Performances that are under limited attention will become erroneous. Since the goal of speaking is the transfer of a message, more attention will be directed to meaning and less attention is available to complexity or accuracy of the spoken language.

Simard’s (2022, p. 34) up-to-date discussion of adaptations of Levelt’s Blueprint Model to FL oral pro-

duction ends with recommendations for practice saying that, in order to lessen the demand on memory and attention during conceptualisation, learners should be given more preplanning time. For the help during formulation and articulation phase, they need to have knowledge, desirably automated, and have enough time for planning.

To sum up, for young learners to conceptualise, formulate and articulate an utterance in FL, learners need a lexical repertoire, morpho-syntactic and phonological rules, which need to be available for automatic retrieval, so that attention and the resources of working memory are spent on the non-automatic processes of conceptualisation and monitoring. It is clear that FL oral production of young learners will need to revolve around familiar topics, and include expectations that would require the use of well-known language only. Their production needs to be supported by preparatory activities that would help them retrieve the needed language and by giving them time for preverbal and verbal planning.

### 3.1.3. Complex Systems Theories and the development of speaking in FL

Chaos/Complexity Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) and Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) (De Bot et al., 2007) are two theories that share the common feature of seeing the language as a system, consisting of many subsystems (phonology, vocabulary, more languages) and being embedded in larger systems (cognition, human being, speech community).

DST explains language learning through the idea of “growth”: in order for growth to take place there must be something that can grow (so-called “minimal structural growth condition”, see De Bot et al., 2007, p. 11) and there must be resources to keep the process of growth (internal, such as the capacity to learn, conceptual knowledge, motivation, or external, such as supporting environment, language used by the environment, and other). These resources are limited and interlinked, and there are compensatory relations between different types of resources (a learner might have a lack of aptitude, but strong motivation). Some “growers” are connected, e.g., the development of lexical skills and the development of speaking, because the more words one knows, the more fluent they will be, and the more one uses the words, the better they will remember them. The “carrying capacity” or the “state of knowledge that can be attained in a given child’s interlinked structure of resources” (De Bot et al., 2007) explains why there are different growth patterns, and why the same learning operation leads to different outcomes in the long run, depending on the starting point and the learning rate.

The theory has attracted much attention from researchers recently, however the research mainly focuses on written language, for the practicality of it. The spoken language research is limited, and some of the conclusions were summarised by Lowie and Verspoor (2022, pp. 43-45). As expected, planning time positively affects language complexity. Accuracy and fluency are interconnected (connected growers) – at the early stages of language development, learners lack resources, and that slows them down, but with time, accuracy and fluency develop at the same rate. The development of complexity, accuracy, and

fluency occurs in a non-linear and self-organising fashion under the influence of other systems (such as motivation). Fluency seems to be most sensitive to contextual changes. The same learning opportunities lead to various learning results, because even “minute differences at one point in time may lead to large differences over time in a non-linear developmental trajectory” (Lowie & Verspoor, 2022, p. 44). In terms of pronunciation, the development is also not linear, nor is the variability in the production intentional, but rather functional – the learner attempts to produce a target sound, with more or less success on different occasions. This, however, leads to change.

Complex systems theories are far more encompassing of the many factors that influence the development of the spoken language than the other cognitive, method-oriented and social approaches described here. Language learners are seen by Larsen-Freeman (2007, p. 35) as natural systems that are “dynamic, complex, nonlinear, unpredictable, sensitive to initial conditions, sometimes chaotic, open, self-organising, feedback sensitive, adaptive, and have strange attractors that are fractal in shape”. The other, more detailed description by De Bot et al. (2007) is given below.

From a DST perspective, a language learner is regarded as a dynamic subsystem within a social system with a great number of interacting internal dynamic sub-sub systems, which function within a multitude of other external dynamic systems. The learner has his/her own cognitive ecosystem consisting of intentionality, cognition, intelligence, motivation, aptitude, L1, L2 and so on. The cognitive ecosystem in turn is related to the degree of exposure to language, maturity, level of education, and so on, which in turn is related to the social ecosystem, consisting of the environment with which the individual interacts. For any system to grow, a minimal amount of force or resources is needed. In addition, resources are compensatory. For instance, a low aptitude may be compensated by high motivation or vice versa. Each of these internal and external subsystems is similar in that they have the properties of a dynamic system. They will always be in flux and change, taking the current state of the system as input for the next one. A small force at a particular point in time may have huge effects (butterfly effect) and a much stronger force at another point in time may not have much effect in the long run. Each system has its own attractor and repeller states; however, variation is inherent to a dynamic system, and the degree of variation is greatest when a (sub)system moves from one attractor state to the other. Flux – growth or decline – is non-linear and cannot be predicted exactly. (De Bot et al., 2007, p. 14)

In other words, many factors may lead to language acquisition and speaking development and many may hinder it. A study by Lowie et al. (2018) supports this description of a language learner. The study investigated the development of speaking skills of identical twins over eight months and showed that language acquisition and speaking development is an “individually owned process” (105). Despite the same genetics, and experiences with language learning, the twins displayed much inter-learner and intra-learner variability. The authors conclude with recommendations for practice, saying that assessment of speaking needs to be continuous because of the dynamic nature of speaking development, and that single oral exams should be avoided. Also, short-term interventions cannot predict future development. The development of speaking skills is a work in progress at all levels of FL learning. Finally, since the development of speaking is so individual, classes should be small to cater for individual “language

coaching” opportunities. The language, they say, cannot be taught, only acquired and learners need to be provided with personalised opportunities for communicative interaction. In section 4.5.4., we will give some suggestions of how this could be at least partly implemented in the classroom context, and in Chapter 4 we will discuss many aspects of the learner’s “cognitive ecosystem”.

## 3.2. Method-oriented approaches to young FL learners’ development of speaking

There are numerous speaking development approaches whose focus is not to explain the very process of speaking, but the impact of a particular teaching or learning method on the development of speaking in FL. They are often divided into “traditional” and “current” (e.g., Alonso, 2018), even though they are still, at least to some extent, used in (E)FL classrooms.

### 3.2.1. Direct Method

One of the approaches to teaching that is focused on the instruction of spoken language is the Direct Method (see Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It is a teacher-centred method that relies on the idea of immersion and the use of target language only. Vocabulary and idioms are taught using realia or pantomime, and grammar is taught inductively. Common direct method techniques are listening activities, exposure to vocabulary, idioms and language structures, question-answer exercises, reading out loud, speaking practice, dictation, and student self-correction. The problem with this method is that foreign language learning does not take place in an immersive context and it cannot be artificially created, unless the teacher is impressively skilful. Young learners may not appreciate FL use only, for it is cognitively too demanding and, instead of inspiring communication, it may lead to students closing off and becoming less communicative (Macaro & Lee, 2012).

Krashen’s (1982, p. 22) Natural Approach shares many features with the Direct method. Krashen states that production ability is not taught directly but emerges as a result of comprehensible input. Early speech will not be accurate, but over time and with more input, the acquirer’s accuracy will develop as well. Simultaneously, Long (1980) proposed the so-called Interaction Hypothesis, which emphasises the importance of comprehensible input, adding that learning happens when a non-native speaker is exposed to the comprehensible input provided by a native speaker, and the non-native speaker notices (intentionally or unintentionally) the difference between their and native speaker’s output and modifies it. According to Schmidt (1990), there are more factors that decide whether acquisition would take place, e.g., types of tasks and whether they will make the learner attend to certain linguistic features, the features themselves that may be more or less marked, or unusual and surprising to learners, the influence of learner’s L1, or the learner’s individual differences. In other words, noticing and modifying one’s own output does not necessarily happen during interaction. Also, obviously, FL teaching does not presuppose native speakers as teachers.

### 3.2.2. Situational Language Teaching

The Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching were established out of the need for the systematic selection of what should be taught in an FL course, gradation of its complexity, and choosing the best presentation techniques. The principles that were reflected in textbooks by prominent British textbook writers were the following, as listed in Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 39):

1. Language teaching begins with the spoken language. Material is taught orally before it is presented in written form.
2. The target language is the language of the classroom.
3. New language points are introduced and practised situationally.
4. Vocabulary selection procedures are followed to ensure that an essential general service vocabulary is covered.
5. Items of grammar are graded following the principle that simple forms should be taught before complex ones.
6. Reading and writing are introduced once a sufficient lexical and grammatical basis is established.

The knowledge of structures and their use in the given situations is at the basis of this approach, and it sees learning to speak (or use language in writing) as habit formation; with enough repetition, structures will be memorised and ready to use. At the beginner level of learning, learners listen and repeat, and the teacher makes sure that they do not form incorrect habits. Today we know that it is impossible to learn without the existence of the so-called interlanguage, or the “attempted” native language that contains errors, language transfer, simplifications, and generalisations (Selinker et al., 1975), so the strict adherence to the recommended practices of Situational Approach may, in fact, lead to speaking anxiety due to unrealistic expectations of learners. However, many of the practices of this approach are still quite present in EFL classrooms: listening to an example of a pattern repeatedly; choral imitation; individual imitation; isolation and practising of difficult items; building up to a new model using known patterns; elicitation using mime, prompt words, pictures, gestures, etc.; substitution drilling by individual students; question-answer drilling; correction, either by a teacher or a peer; self-correction (Davies et al., 1975, pp. 6-7).

### 3.2.3. Silent Way

Developed by Caleb Gattegno, this approach sees teaching as serving the learning process, so we may say that it is learning-centred. When learners are faced with a new challenge, various inner processes are mobilised, so the teacher should build on something that learners already know, let students attempt to solve the problems in front of them and provide help only when necessary. Silence is a tool, and the teacher speaks only when necessary. Instead of repetition, it uses various charts and a set of so-called Cuisenaire rods<sup>5</sup> to reinforce memorisation. This approach, as Gattegno (2010) claims, may be used with all ages from the age of seven and it introduces writing quite early on. Elsewhere in the book (p. 112), he says that after a year of language learning, in an oral exam, a learner will be able to give correct answers to questions about themselves, their families, education, etc., using a good accent and making only minor mistakes. Also, they will be able to describe most of what they see in a picture, including the relationships that concern space, time, and number. There is no proof of this since Silent Way has been widely ignored by the research community. The only available account of how it works in practice is that by Varvel (1979), a sceptical observer of a few weeks of Silent Way lessons in Japan. Despite this, some methods of the Silent Way seem interesting enough to be included in this context. The first one is the successful use of rods for learning. In his words,

rods can be as versatile as the students' or teachers' imaginations. In the class observed, the rods served as such disparate things as a family, a train with a caboose, a piece of candy and different types of fruit: a banana, an apple and an orange, using the corresponding colours respectively. It is true that other types of visual aids or concrete objects can be used, but their use is pretty much limited to what they actually portray and they lack the flexibility and versatility of the rods (Varvel, 1979, p. 492).

Such objects that encourage “pretend play” seem to be very useful for encouraging young learners to speak. If a teacher works in a school that cannot afford versatile visual materials or realia for learning, they can use rods, blocks, or any other simple materials to encourage pretend play. According to Varvel (1979), the play raised students' interest in problem-solving, extending to breaks during which they discussed how something should be said in English. If problem-solving activities are used occasionally and cautiously, with regards to the emotional readiness of young learners to deal with frustration when they cannot solve them, they might lead to more independence in learning.

Secondly, even though we do not see how the Silent Way may lead to the development of speaking, we are aware that sometimes teachers feel the urge to speak too much in the classroom, feeling responsible for the lesson flow. It is a good idea to add “silent minutes” from time to time, especially after a round of teaching on a topic, to see what would happen. In section 4.4.3., we present some research on the teacher vs. student talking time and give ideas on the creative use of teacher silence.

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<sup>5</sup> These are coloured rods of different lengths that were originally used in teaching mathematics.

### 3.2.4. Total Physical Response (TPR)

This approach to language instruction was developed by James Asher who follows the ideas first discussed in psychology about the importance of strong traces which would enhance memorization and recall of information. Asher (1977) believes that these traces are best achieved by the combination of verbal and motor activity, and suggests activities that would not only enhance memorization of vocabulary and grammatical structures but also make them available for use in novel situations. From then on, TPR has been widely used in young learner FL classrooms. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), practitioners use TPR in combination with other approaches to teaching for reasons that are not necessarily related to the theories behind it.

Asher (1977) claimed that the majority of the grammatical structures and numerous vocabulary items can be learned through teachers' use of imperative, which, according to him, is the central structure in the organisation of learning and language use and the sentences focus on meaning, rather than on form. In TPR, the stress is on memory-motor associations and the ability of their recollection. Language items are introduced gradually, where learners listen and perform. They are allowed to speak in their own time when they are ready (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Its effectiveness for speaking has not been extensively studied, but the existing studies claim that it is more effective for the overall motivation of students, their motivation to speak, and the amount of speaking than traditional approaches (Davidheiser, 2002; Singh, 2011)

### 3.2.5. Communicative Approaches

In the contemporary era of Communicative Language Teaching, which has been prevalent since the 1980s, the speaking skill has emerged as a basic skill, with communicative competence as an important sign of language proficiency.

The British Communicative Approach started off in the 1970s by British linguists working for the Council of Europe on establishing the units that learners of English as a *lingua franca* need to complete to be awarded certain credits. According to Roberts's (2004, p. 18) account, the approach focused on the syllabus-design and was not theoretically-driven, and its main ideas were the information-gap activities, learning by doing, and the use of authentic materials. Later development of the approach went in the direction of favouring communicative competence over grammatical competence, saying that there is a difference between knowing the words and structures of sentences, and knowing when to use these sentences and what different meanings they might have in different situations (the so-called propositional meaning vs. function).



In his book *Communicative language teaching today*, Jack C. Richards (2006, p. 2) sees it as a “set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom” and examines each of these issues in more detail. It is, as Swan (1985, 1985a) notices, devoid of reliance on a single theory, and focuses on the practical view of learners’ needs and the role of materials and methodologies used in an FL classroom that facilitate the development of skills that learners need to communicate orally or in writing in the target language. The emphasis is the knowledge of language use (purposes, functions, variation according to the setting, production of different types of texts, maintaining communication, and similar). Methodologically speaking, the teacher has the role of the facilitator who will (Richards, 2006, p.13):

1. Make real communication the focus of language learning.
2. Provide opportunities for learners to experiment and try out what they know.
3. Be tolerant of learners’ errors as they indicate that the learner is building up his or her communicative competence.
4. Provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency.
5. Link the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together, since they usually occur so in the real world.
6. Let students induce or discover grammar rules.

Within these methodological principles, different tasks are developed that focus on either fluency or accuracy, and the practice is either mechanical (drill and repetition), meaningful (use of structures in meaningful activities), or communicative (the exchange of real information where the language that will be used is not completely predictable (Richards, 2006, p. 16).

Within the communicative approaches, different methodologies are pursued as a means of developing communicative competence, such as the Task-Based Approach (Bygate, 2009), which sees speaking as a medium for learning *and* teaching, and a process that involves various socio-psychological subprocesses. Spoken language is a product of these processes. Task-Based Instruction (TBI) has gained popularity, seeing tasks as primary units to be used in syllabus planning and teaching. The definitions of the term *task* used in this context vary. However, its key characteristics are that learners do the tasks using their existing linguistic resources, that their outcomes are not solely language-learning-related, that language acquisition may occur during a task, and that tasks involve a focus on meaning and very often on learner-learner or learner-teacher communication.

The clearest account of the task-based approach used in the young learner classroom is that by Cameron (2001, pp. 21-27). Since young learners of FL are mentally active learners, who “work hard to make sense of what teachers ask them to do”, but “can have problems making sense of some of the activities in which they are asked to participate” (Cameron, 2001, p. 21), the author believes that the environment that the teacher creates need to be careful of the *task demands*, and that *support for learning* needs to be provided accordingly. Many times, besides the *language demands* (e.g., finding the vocabulary to express themselves, putting the words in the right order, pronouncing the words, using appropriate language structures, being fluent), the task may place *cognitive demands* on learners (e.g., recognising what is happening in the picture, working out a chart which contains information that should be used in speech, and similar). If they are required to work in pairs, this places *interactional demand* on them. *Involvement demand* is present if the child needs to work on the task for a certain time to finish it. If the movement is involved, it places *physical demands* on learners. So, when the teacher wants the child to say something, and the child does not respond as expected, the teacher must consider whether demands other than language are stopping the child from production. When it is clear what seems to be “blocking” the production, the teacher needs to provide appropriate support. For example, if the child is missing vocabulary, vocabulary pre-teaching would be crucial for the task completion. If the child cannot understand the chart, some guidance in L1 would be very helpful. This is in line with Levelt’s (1978) claim that procedural tasks can be made more or less demanding by varying the pressures on students undertaking them. For any task, therefore, preparation is as important as the core activity. Task-based instruction is perhaps the backbone of young learner teaching and FL speaking development. Tasks are efficient for the promotion of fluency if they provide contextual support, have familiar or involving topics, pose a single demand, are closed, and have a clear structure (Ellis, 2003, p. 127). Also, to promote fluency, teachers need to provide learners with the language and the content of the talk (Bygate, 2009) which is all done in the preparation phase.

This being said it is clear that even very young learners may take part in the communicative activities. They will not be cognitively or linguistically over-demanding, but they will promote communication in FL. Proficiency is, in Cameron’s (2001, p. 51) words, the “overall effect of many separate uses of the language, in each of which ways of talking or understanding are selected and adapted to fit the specific situation or task”. With more time and more language use, linguistic, cognitive, interactional and other demands will become more complex.

Finally, even though we are deeply in favour of the switch towards the more speaking-oriented approach such as the communicative approach, we feel obliged to mention Michael Swan’s *Critical look at the communicative approach I and II* (1985, 1985a), for it answers some questions that still create confusion among teachers who have adopted this approach, either willingly or due to demands of the national curriculum. For example, teachers are often confused about the place of grammar in communicative language teaching, wondering if the “traditional” mechanical practice of language structures should or should not be a part of the teaching methodology. This is what Swan says:

Language is not only a set of formal systems, but it is a set of systems, and it is perverse not to focus on questions of form when this is desirable. Some points of grammar are difficult to learn and need to be studied in isolation before students can do interesting things with them. It is no use making meaning tidy if grammar then becomes so untidy that it cannot be learnt properly. (Swan, 1985a, p. 78)

Even young learners need to practise the use of some structures through mechanical drill before they are able to use them in “real” communicative activities. Mechanical drill of structures should not be confused with the explicit teaching of grammar, which is not recommended for young learners. We are under the impression that some of the beliefs of communicative instruction have been misinterpreted or taken too literally. To be metaphorical, there is no cooking without the ingredients, and neither linguists nor practitioners have ever said that. Quite the contrary, one of the teacher’s roles on Richard’s (2006, p. 13) list is to “Provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency”.

Also, according to Spada and Lightbown (2020, p. 122), within the communicative approach, there is a possibility that learners end up speaking a language that lacks grammatical accuracy because “they are understood by their teacher and peers and they do not feel motivated to move beyond their current level of language use”. We have heard teachers in seminars expressing the same concern, and it is a valid concern that needs to be addressed; however, we must keep in mind that learners differ in their language learning aspirations and goals, and that, at early language learning levels, setting a solid foundation for a confident and motivated language learner is crucial. Those who are really interested in language and need to use it on a daily basis will probably develop their vocabulary and grammatical accuracy through use. Primary education is supposed to build grounds for a confident learner who is ready for the basic use of the foreign language and further language learning, either in institutions or autonomously.

### 3.3. Sociocultural approaches to the development of speaking of young learners of FL

Recently, various sociocultural approaches have gained popularity in language teaching, drawing on socially-oriented cognitive development theories, sociology, sociolinguistics, cultural psychology, and other fields. The research within these approaches is multifaceted and it does not focus on oral development through a linguistic, psychological or cognitive lens (as a process whose product may be measurable in some ways), but as a means of socialisation (Surtees & Duff, 2022).

An example of such an approach to language teaching is Burns and Seidlhofer’s (2020) belief that second language instruction needs to focus on the more natural exchange patterns in language, as the spoken discourse is not sentence-based but rather utterance-based, with utterances being verbal expressions of various lengths (from “Oh” to a monologue). According to the authors, learners need to be taught how to take turns and use discourse strategies, such as clarifying, checking, summarising, or adapting to points made by other speakers. Also, they should be sensitised to dealing with power relations.

At first sight, the goals of sociocultural approaches may seem far-fetched for the young learner population due to their lack of linguistic repertoire. However, the social factors that may influence oral production are not to be disregarded. Also, there are socially relevant verbal and non-verbal elements that are teachable, even in the young learner context. In the following paragraphs, we will turn to both of these issues.

If the young learner classroom is seen as a community, then there most certainly exist relationships between the members of the community that either facilitate or hinder oral proficiency development. For example, if the teacher is not tolerant towards the inaccuracies occurring in the learner's speech, this might cause learners' speaking anxiety. Young learners are often not aware of their peer's needs, and in their wish to be seen by the teacher, they might start speaking even if the other student is asked to speak, thus robbing shy or less proficient students of the opportunity to plan their speech. They are not particularly good at offering support or giving positive feedback in English lessons, and they would scold their peers and express impatience and disrespect for their contribution in pair work (Kos, 2023). It is important to create a positive classroom atmosphere that would be nurturing for the development of the speaking skills of all learners. The ways to do it are discussed in section 4.4.6.

Besides the classroom relationships, other aspects of socio-linguistic competences need to be attended to in the young learner classroom. Sociolinguistic research of FL pragmatics deals with the research of forms and genres in relationship to social and situational variables, such as registers, intercultural encounters, or various social situations. This competence develops through observation, experience, and socialisation (Surtees & Duff, 2022). Language teachers are often encouraged to develop this competence, along with the four language skills. For example, the current Croatian *Subject curriculum English as a foreign language* (2017) is divided into three domains: *Communicative language competence*, *Intercultural communicative competence*, and *Language learning autonomy*. Within the first two domains, learners are guided and encouraged to develop the knowledge of styles and registers of spoken (and written) language, negotiate meaning and communicate with speakers of different cultural backgrounds. In the young learner classroom, this competence may be developed using simple and straightforward examples, such as rehearsing short dialogues between friends or family members vs. those between strangers, where titles such as "Mr", "Mrs", "Miss", or "Ms" would be taught. Introducing authentic speakers from various parts of the world may be done via YouTube Video, making sure that the language is simple and the topics are age-appropriate (e.g., children talking about their school, family life, hobbies, etc.). Children can say what questions they would ask these children, what they know about the countries they come from, and similar. From our experience as teachers of young learners, we know that learners sometimes use swear words in the classroom, without realising that they are "bad" words. When that happens, teachers should take a moment to explain that some words from games, songs or movies, may not be used in the classroom. These are just a couple of examples of how styles, registers and linguistic and cultural variety can be addressed within young learners' speaking development, and creative teachers will surely find many opportunities for their learners' development of socio-cultural communicative competence.

## 4. Development of speaking skills in young learners

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When people say that someone speaks English well, they probably refer to a couple of criteria: the person is able to express themselves in an interrupted flow of words, they know what to say and when to say it, they do not struggle to find the right words, and it is comfortable to listen to them, because they are easy to understand. Sometimes we hear people saying that someone is really talented at languages, or that they have learned the language quickly or easily; but there are others, who feel uncomfortable speaking for various reasons. In this chapter, we discuss all of these aspects of the development of speaking skills in regard to young learners. First, we define fluency, what it consists of, and how attainable it is to young learners of English. Then we turn to vocabulary, language structures, and pronunciation as the important building blocks of spoken language that lead to a confident speaker, focusing on the possibilities of the acquisition of these building blocks by young learners. We discuss the environmental factors that influence the development of speaking skills of young learners, such as input, exposure, social and cultural context, and formal education, as well as the learner-related factors, i.e., language aptitude and some important learners' individual differences. Finally, we talk about the teacher's role, which is crucial for all learners of English as a foreign language at the early levels of learning, especially the ones who seem to fall behind.

### 4.1. Development of fluency

The “quality” of speech as a product refers to “features commonly associated with performance, such as fluency, complexity and accuracy” (Bygate, 2009, p. 409). Section 4.2.2. is devoted to accuracy and spoken grammar and how it develops in young learners, and section 4.2.1. discusses the acquisition of vocabulary as one of the building blocks of fluency. In this chapter, we turn to fluency, as the prototypical quality associated with speaking. In a wider sense, fluency is “an ability in the second language to produce or comprehend utterances smoothly, rapidly, and accurately” (Segalowitz, 2003, p. 384), however, the narrow definitions of fluency include only a few features, such as pausing, hesitations, and speech rate (Luoma, 2004, p. 89). If the speed of delivery is interrupted by pauses, it either means that the speaker is trying to select or access the next word or phrase within an utterance, or that the talk is more socio-cognitively demanding (see Bygate, 2009, pp. 409-410). Since the young learners' repertoire of available linguistic units for speaking in a foreign language is not huge, the expectations of fluency are realistic only if there has been a significant amount of preparation for the particular speaking task. Research by Ortiz and Ramón (2019) has shown a significant improvement in learners' oral proficiency after they have prepared via pair work, using various information gap tasks (spot the difference,

exchange information by posing questions and giving answers, and similar). Task repetition, or doing the same task in a slightly varied fashion, also leads to increased fluency (Sample & Michel, 2015). The same study has shown that young learners who exhibit more diverse vocabulary or use more complex syntactic structures also make more errors or exhibit less fluency. This signifies that fluency alone is not enough for the assessment of a learner's proficiency and that it develops gradually. Also, even though learners display a higher level of metalinguistic knowledge or ability to apply rules in focus-on-form tasks, during spontaneous use of language they will not apply these rules (Spada & Lightbown, 2020, p. 121). This is a part of spoken language development and it needs to be taken into consideration during assessment (See section 5.3.).

According to the Dynamic Systems Theory (Section 3.1.3.), accuracy and fluency are interconnected (the so-called connected growers). At the early stages of language development, learners lack resources, and that slows them down, but with time, accuracy and fluency develop at the same rate. The development of complexity, accuracy, and fluency occurs in a non-linear and self-organising fashion under the influence of other systems (such as motivation). Fluency seems to be most sensitive to contextual changes. The same learning opportunities lead to various learning results, because even “minute differences at one point in time may lead to large differences over time in a non-linear developmental trajectory” (Lowie & Verspoor, 2022, p. 44).). It is encouraging for teachers that children with positive feelings about speaking are more fluent than children with negative feelings (Szpotowicz, 2012), which means that keeping the learners motivated to speak may be the teacher's “tool” for speaking development. Also, pre-task planning has a positive effect on learners' fluency and online planning (Aaj et al., 2023). For the promotion of fluency, therefore, it is a good idea to provide learners with the language and the content of the talk (Bygate, 2009). Task-based instruction (section 3.2.5.) is efficient for the promotion of fluency if tasks provide contextual support, have familiar or involving topics, pose a single demand, are closed, and have a clear structure (Ellis, 2003, p. 127).

## 4.2. Building blocks of young learners' (YLS) speaking skills

Since speaking assumes the existence of a mental lexicon (discussed in section 3.1.2.), schemas (3.1.1.) and the phonetic plan (3.1.2.), this part of the book will be devoted to “the building blocks” of speaking skills, or the knowledge that learners need to have to speak. The most important “ingredient” of a speaking skill is vocabulary, however, speaking is also a way to acquire vocabulary. Therefore, we discuss what constitutes young learners' vocabulary, how much vocabulary they can learn in a formal context, what it means to know a word for young learners, and how vocabulary learning and speaking are interconnected.

### 4.2.1. Vocabulary

Vocabulary is seen as “the core component of all of the language skills” (Long & Richards, 2007, p. xii.) and it is especially important in young learner language instruction. Young learners' vocabulary

consists of single words, multiword lexical units (e.g., “catch up”), and lexical chunks (e.g., “I’m sorry”). Lexical chunks are seen as very important in FL instruction since they serve many language functions and are remembered as ready-made units (Wray, 2002; Tomasello, 2003).

Nation (2001) states that the vocabulary of native English speakers is estimated to grow with approximately 1000 word families<sup>6</sup> per year in childhood, and a university graduate is estimated to have mastered a vocabulary size of about 20,000 word families. To be able to read a novel or newspaper in English, 8,000 to 9,000 word families are needed. As far as the daily spoken language is concerned, 3,000 word families are needed to understand 95% of what has been said (which does not guarantee perfect understanding). When it comes to animated movies, such as *Shrek* and *Toy Story*, we need to know 4,000 word families to understand 95% of the movies, which would not lead to perfect understanding. If we are to understand 98% of the movie, we need 7,000 word families. Today, there are young learners who watch cartoons in English; this does not necessarily mean that they understand everything that is being said to them since children are very good at guessing the meaning from contextual cues. However, understanding at least part of the above-described word families, gives them an advantage in the development of speaking skills over their peers, for the receptive (passive) vocabulary size is a predictor of overall speaking ability (Enayat & Derakhshan, 2021).

According to Orosz (2009), it is possible for young learners to explicitly learn six words per hour of instruction and the yearly uptake depends on the number of hours per year. Young learners, like adult learners, enhance their vocabulary knowledge in terms of *range* and *sophistication*. On the one hand, students acquire an expanding lexicon by learning a rising number of new words in the language classroom (*range*). Simultaneously, they encounter terms with different levels of frequency in usage (*sophistication*). Young children typically learn and master common words like “bird” and “book” at an earlier stage compared to less common ones like “falcon” and “fiction.” In their study on early language development among English language learners in grades K-2 in Canada, Roessingh and Elgie (2009) discovered that these learners quickly acquired a few hundred high-frequency English words and developed fundamental academic language. However, they were found to be lacking in low-frequency words that are commonly used by young native speakers. The findings of their study indicated that the YLs relied significantly on the initial 250 high-frequency words to communicate their intended message (Hsieh & Wang, 2019, p. 31). Children learn vocabulary implicitly, too, by being exposed to teacher’s speech, media, picturebooks, oral storytelling, etc. (Hestetræet, 2019). Not all children have the opportunity for informal, out-of-school exposure to English, therefore using English as much as possible in the classroom, including storytelling and picture book reading activities may increase children’s exposure to other than basic, high-frequency vocabulary.

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6 Words are counted as *lemmas* or as *word families*. Lemmas consist of a head word and some of its most common inflections, and possible reduced forms. Examples of inflections are the plural, third person singular present tense, past tense, past participle, present participle, comparative, superlative and possessive forms. Word families are larger units also categorised under a head word. They include all the forms of a lemma, as well as other closely related forms, e.g. affixes *-ly*, *-ness* and *un-* (Nation, 2001, p. 8).

According to Nation (2001, p. 22), to know a word is to know its form, meaning, and usage. Knowing the word's form means knowing the phonological and graphological aspects of a word and what constitutes the word. Through the explicit teaching of vocabulary in FL lessons, teachers work on learners' pronunciation and reading-out-loud skills, which both may be seen as sub-skills of speaking. Pronunciation will be discussed in section 4.2.3. in more detail, and for the time being, it suffices to say that segmental (practising the sounds of a language) and suprasegmental (practising stress in words and utterances, and intonation) phonology is developed simultaneously with vocabulary acquisition. Learning about the written forms of words while teaching vocabulary orally is also significant for young learners. English is a highly non-phonemic language (graphemes or written symbols do not correspond to the phonemes, e.g., "cow [kau]") and reading words is not taught the same as it is taught in phonemic languages, such as Croatian. There has been an ongoing debate among the theorists of reading development in the English language about the best way to teach it: from the level of phoneme up or by relying on the appearance of words as whole symbols (Papp, 2020). In Croatia, the second approach is applied; word cards are widely used along with picture cards and saying the words out loud, assuming that children will remember the graphic representation of the words as a whole. Later, with the development of reading and writing skills in L1, spelling practice is introduced in FL instruction, but again, it is done holistically, without attention to phonemes. Children are taught that English is different from Croatian and that sometimes what they hear and see will not be the same, so they learn how to say, read and write the words one by one, as they learn them during instruction. Therefore, reading the words (and later texts) out loud is important in young learner instruction as a way to create strong links between the graphic and phonological features of words.

Knowing what the word means involves everything that it conveys, what the concept expressed by the word encompasses, and which words are associated with it. There are many models that try to explain what knowing a word means. Pavičić Takač (2019, pp. 17-40) gives an overview of the models, which, among other important aspects of knowing the word, points to the distinction between receptive (passive) and productive (active) knowledge. Young learners' mental lexicon, or the memory system which stores a large number of words accumulated over a longer period of time (Hulstijn, 2000), can hold words that learners can recognise but are still not able to use in production. The receptive-productive knowledge cannot, however, be characterised as either "all or nothing" but rather as expanded along a continuum of knowledge, with varying degrees of receptive and productive knowledge at each end (Laufer, 1998; Laufer & Paribakht, 1998). Receptive knowledge is believed to be larger than productive vocabulary, to develop before the productive vocabulary, and at a faster rate, but there is still no agreement whether there is such a difference and, if there is, whether it is significant (Melka, 1997). Assuming that there is a difference, some researchers have concluded that whether the word will transfer from the receptive to the productive vocabulary depends on the frequency of its appearance and use (Laufer & Paribakht, 1998; Webb, 2007). Thus, vocabulary learning and speaking are marked by a bidirectional relationship: speaking is possible due to the existence of vocabulary knowledge, but it is also a medium through which learning of vocabulary happens. If teachers want their learners to acquire vocabulary and use it productively, they need to create opportunities for vocabulary use. Thus, many times, spoken language cannot be observed as something "final" and assessed as such; it is quite often



simply a learning/teaching tool, since young learners' teaching relies heavily on speaking, especially at the early stages of learning. In Vermeer's (2000) study, lexical richness was investigated in the spontaneous speech of young learners of Dutch and compared to the standardised tests of productive and receptive vocabulary. The results are interesting because the type-token ratio<sup>7</sup>, which is a widely-used measure of the lexical richness of spoken texts was not proven valid; standardised tests have shown greater lexical richness of participants. In other words, spontaneous speech is either not a suitable research tool for lexical richness (i.e., when speaking learners cannot demonstrate their full vocabulary knowledge) or, as the authors suggest, some other aspects need to be looked for, such as the difficulty of the words used. Laufer (1989) and Laufer and Paribakht (1998) additionally introduce two aspects of producing knowledge, namely *controlled* and *free productive knowledge*. Controlled productive knowledge refers to the capacity to generate words in response to a specific stimulus, such as a task, whereas free productive knowledge relates to the unrestricted utilisation of words in language production (Pavičić Takač, 2019, p. 21). Teaching young learners vocabulary through speaking usually exploits the first capacity and the ultimate goal of learning the language is the use of free productive knowledge in everyday situations.

Word's usage refers to its grammatical function, collocations, and any limitations in its use, such as register and frequency. At early levels of learning, this is not taught explicitly. Various tasks are used that would get learners exposed to words with different grammatical functions and collocations, and help them use them in simple communicative activities. The vocabulary of young learners of EFL is not huge, but their mental lexicon is already built up of words in their mother tongue and related concepts. So, in speaking FL, learners should already have at their disposal the *conceptualization* (see the discussion of Levelt's Psycholinguistic Model in section 3.1.2), but they might miss the lexical items during the *formulation* phase. Lessons for young learners usually revolve around teaching vocabulary and structures that will eventually be used (e.g., describing a picture) or personalised (e.g., using the vocabulary to describe one's own experience). Use of words and their personalisation, according to Thornbury (2002), are also two principles of vocabulary learning, along with repetition, recall, visualisation, use of mnemonics, attention to the words, connecting the words with emotions, learning a smaller number of words at a time, learning the words in alignment with one's learning style and rate, and semantisation (being exposed to the word four times in a lesson in various contexts and then being exposed to it at least once on the next couple of occasions). Teaching vocabulary, as it is obvious from these principles, is done through exposure to words, their repetition (to enable students to memorise them and to practise pronunciation, which is a certain "sub-skill" of speaking), and recycling through speaking (e.g., saying what is in a photo or illustration, guessing the word, saying the words out loud during a memory game, etc.). Furthermore, Nation (2013, pp. 1-2) proposes four strands for the teaching and learning of vocabulary: meaning-focused input (exposure), meaning-focused output (spoken interaction or writing), language-focused learning (explicit study of high-frequency vocabulary items), and fluency development (recycling and consolidation of the well-known vocabulary). Thus, vocabulary learning and speaking are mutually dependent, that is, there is not one without the other.

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<sup>7</sup> the ratio obtained by dividing the types (the total number of different words) occurring in an utterance by its tokens (the total number of words)

As learners' language experience grows, their vocabulary grows and they become more competent users of the language. Vocabulary size and depth are two different "measures" of one's vocabulary. The first one refers to the quantity of words one knows, and it is often called the vocabulary breadth or vocabulary quantity, and the other one is used to describe the quality of one's vocabulary knowledge, or what the learner knows about the word, even though the real consensus on what lexical depth means has not yet been reached (see Pavičić Takač, 2019 for a more detailed discussion of the terms). The depth of vocabulary knowledge is a predictor of the appropriate use of lexical items in context (Ranalli, 2012) and of fluency and coherence in speech in adult learners (Enayat & Derakhshan, 2021). Meara (1996) adds the ease with which a word can be accessed to the size and depth of vocabulary, which aligns with the *dual-processing model* (see Ullman, 2001) in psychology, according to which the memory system consists of declarative and procedural memory, which are interconnected. *Declarative knowledge* (also called "knowledge-that") would be the knowledge that "ball" means "lopta" in Croatian, that it is pronounced [bɔ:l], and that its visual symbol or grapheme consists of four letters: *b, a, l, l*), whereas the *procedural knowledge* or "knowledge-how" refers to "doing" (e.g., saying the word and knowing what it means; using the word in context). As learners progress in FL learning, the size and depth of vocabulary, as well as the ease of retrieval of familiar words will grow. Words in the lexicon will become linked (learners will know that some words "go together"), and the more words have been learnt, the more connections will be created in the mental lexicon (Milton & Fitzpartrick, 2014, p. 7).

To achieve independence in young learners' speech and to help them become real "users" of the language (irrespective of the level of proficiency), teachers' constant task in teaching English is to help students store words, phrases, language chunks and simple sentences or any "word groups that are intuitively seen as being formulaic sequences, that is, items stored as single choices" (Nation, 2013, p. 479). Multiple studies have consistently shown that there is a positive correlation between the level of language proficiency and the overall lexical knowledge of FL learners. Additionally, it has been established that the ability to effectively communicate in a language is closely linked to the lexical competence (Nation, 2001; Read, 2000; Hsieh & Wang, 2019).

The communication approach (discussed in section 3.2.5) has been the prevailing method in FL instruction in recent decades and is often described as lacking the explicit teaching of vocabulary (see Pavičić Takač, 2019, p. 44). However, in practice, early levels of learning vocabulary still very much rely on explicit teaching, but unlike in the traditional fashion of translating or learning lists of words with their meaning, it is done using age-appropriate techniques and materials. Spoken language is integral to these methods since children imitate the words they hear, repeat them in different contexts, and then use them in game-like or communicative activities. Another aspect of the communicative approach seems to induce debates among practitioners, and that is the emphasis on authentic communication. Sometimes it is believed that authentic communication in the classroom, in which both teachers and learners are "themselves", is not possible due to the basic nature of learners' vocabulary. Of course, it is questionable whether any classroom communication is truly comparable to communication "in the wild" (Sundqvist, 2009), but striving towards authenticity is the goal of communicative teaching. Thus,

when a teacher enters the classroom, looks at their students, waves their hand, and cheerfully exclaims: “Hi! Hello! It’s so nice to see you all!”, this is a small communicative activity, which is the beginning of many ‘conversations’ the teacher and students will have. Teaching formulaic language, such as “Here you go”, “May I?”, “Sorry?”, “Let’s go”, and similar, creates a basis for classroom communication. We have seen teachers having useful phrases displayed on the wall and pointing to them when a student is in need of the phrase, and it seems like a great idea to support vocabulary growth and oral skills.

This chapter attempted to describe ways in which the development of speaking skills is intertwined with vocabulary learning and acquisition in a young learner context. For a more detailed treatment of vocabulary acquisition in FL, see Cameron (2001, p. 72-95), Hestetræet (2019), Linse and Nunan (2005, pp. 120-136), and Pavičić Takač (2019, 2023).

## 4.2.2. Grammar

Grammar is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses form, meaning and usage (Batstone, 1994; Ramirez, 1995) and it is an integral element of both productive and receptive language skills at all levels of FL education, and within any of the teaching approaches. The differences between the levels are obvious in the complexity of structures that are taught, as well as the choice of methods. One of the main principles of young learner instruction is not teaching grammar explicitly nor in isolation from the four language skills, but rather through introducing grammar as a part of functional activities and helping learners notice the structure and practise its use during output (Puchta, 2019). Furthermore, Puchta (2019, p. 203) says that “outcomes of conveying grammar to younger students can only be measured by how well your students can understand a new structure in context – and later, whether or not they can use it meaningfully in their production”. Thus, speaking is a medium for teaching/learning of grammar, as well as the product whose “quality” partly depends on the meaningful use of grammar.

Up to the age of adolescence, children follow a different order of acquisition of grammar than adults, relying more on imitation skills, repetition and implicit learning (Pinter, 2011) and process-oriented output tasks, such as cognitive play with the linguistic patterns (Bland, 2015), which is the common feature of children’s rhymes, songs, and poems that they readily recite and remember. Nunan (2005, p. 45) says that children tend to ‘grow their grammar’, not learn it as a formal system and Cameron (2001, p. 100) distinguishes between ‘external grammars’ (the grammars in grammar books and teaching materials) and ‘internal grammars’. Thornbury (2001, p. 43) sees grammar as a process, not a product or “a body of facts about the language that have to be learned and then taken down off the shelf, so to speak, every time an utterance is produced or interpreted”. Celce-Murcia (1991, p. 463) argues that children tend to learn holistically and therefore “little explicit grammar instruction is needed”. All of this means that, in practice, a lot of grammar learning at early stages will be done through speaking. The same as with vocabulary (see section 4.2.1.), language structures are introduced and presented to learners with the focus on their meaning and making sure that children understand what is going on (e.g. Showing the

learners a picture of children playing and saying sentences such as “Charlie is running”, “Rita is listening to music”, etc.). Krashen’s (1982) comprehensible input idea is crucial here; the meaning of words needs to be transparent to learners for a structure to be noticed. Children learn these simple grammatical structures as “rote-learnt chunks of language” that are later “broken down and reconstituted”, as Cameron (2001, p. 104) points out. So, in order to remember the structures as such, a lot of repetition and recycling needs to be done in the classroom, applying the principles of vocabulary learning (4.2.1). First, learners will repeat after the teacher or the model, and eventually, they will use the same structure to orally describe similar situations. The structure will be expanded by introducing plurals (e.g. “Children are running”) and the whole procedure will be repeated. At that point, some of the explicit teaching will come in handy, however, when it comes to young learners, there will be no explanation of rules and no metalanguage. Teachers will help learners “notice” words inside chunks and how to replace them with other words. Such *focus on form*, or *consciousness-raising* (Rutherford & Smith, 1985) supports activities of observing, hypothesising, and organising knowledge within the language system (Batstone, 1994; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Schmidt, 1990, 1995; Spada, 1997; Swain, 1993), as long as it is carefully adapted to the ways young learners learn. In the above-mentioned example, the attention to form may be done by writing IS and ARE on the blackboard, displaying pictures of some activities, and asking children to say what is going on in the pictures. The vocabulary is already familiar, the sentences have been said out loud before, and now children will say them again, this time focusing on the choice of the helping verb. Teachers need to be supportive and still scaffold by drawing one figure next to the word IS and two or more figures next to the word ARE, to help children notice the difference in this particular grammatical form. Thus, speaking is used as a medium for grammar learning and practice. As usual, games, songs, rhymes, role-play, and other motivating activities may be used to draw children’s attention to particular language structures and help them make use of these structures in oral production. When the structures become more complicated, and the teacher feels the need to explain to learners how to use a structure or why there is an error in their speech, they may opt for explicit feedback and *code-switching* (the use of mother tongue), keeping the concepts as simple as possible and digestible to learners. So, they will not talk about Present Continuous as a tense that is used to describe what is happening now, but simply remind their learners of the structure itself, by giving a similar example, showing the familiar picture of the activity, and scaffolding them in other useful ways to help them use the correct structure. Some structures will be learnt incidentally, without much attention to them, and some will require attention. According to Puchta (2019) there is a difference in learners’ incidental learning of grammatical features with and without functional value. As an example, he discusses the ending -s which will be important for the task of distinguishing between the picture of one apple and that of six apples; thus, its functional nature will help learners acquire it incidentally. On the other hand, the ending -s in the third person singular has no functional value; it is used only for grammatical correctness and it may go unnoticed by learners. Again, through speaking, this may be practised with learners. For example, the teacher may display pictures of individual children and pairs/groups of children, a few verbs with or without the ending -s, presented on word cards, with the ending -s written in a different colour, and the pictures of objects, and challenge children to say at least eight sentences. They will want to beat the challenge and they will produce sentences. If the sentence they say is not grammatically correct, the teacher may just nod their head as if saying ‘no’ or shrug their shoulders, waiting for the children to correct themselves;

if this does not help, the teacher may point to the right word card, and help children say the sentence correctly. The activity will end with praising them for the number of sentences they have produced as a class.

When looking at oral production as a “product” of language learning, in spontaneous, non-practiced speech, students might not adhere to the rules they have learned, meaning that their interlanguage has not yet changed in accordance with the explicit knowledge they have. Accuracy, as well as fluency, develops over time, and if we accept the proposal of the Complex Systems Theories’ approach (section 3.1.3), that accuracy develops in a non-linear and self-organising fashion, we will be able to understand why some structures have still not become a part of learners’ procedural knowledge (Ullman, 2001), despite the many lessons that have been devoted to practising of the structure. This is particularly important when deciding what to assess in speaking (see section 5.3.1.); accuracy is often included in the assessment of spoken language, but the teacher needs to make an informed decision on how much emphasis will be put on the element of accuracy in speech and what expectations they have of learners in terms of outcomes. For example, the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) descriptor of grammatical accuracy says that at the A1 level a learner “shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structure and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire”.

Szpotowicz (2012) analysed the young learners in the fourth year of learning EFL during an information gap activity which required learners to ask and answer questions, and 40% of them did not even attempt to ask questions. The students, as the researcher admitted, were not used to asking questions, which means that to have certain expectations of learners regarding the grammatical structures in their oral performance, these need to be attended to in lessons and practised. Explicit grammar instruction does not improve language use, even though it improves language awareness (Bouffard & Sarkar, 2008, p. 21). Different aspects of language learning are interdependent. There is a positive correlation between lexical diversity and syntactic complexity of young learners of EFL (Szpotowicz & Lindgren, 2011). Grammatical competence is higher in learners who were supported by their parents to learn English outside school, which leads to the assumption that exposure to the language is also an important factor in the development of grammar. Formulaic input is beneficial since young learners use language as formulaic chunks (Szpotowicz, 2012). Some structures will be remembered as a whole, just like vocabulary, through repetition and recycling, but it does not mean that it will immediately lead to schema acquisition (see section 3.1.1. about Tomasello’s Usage-Based Model of Language Acquisition). Also, expecting learners to use full, grammatically correct forms every time they speak, especially when the focus is on the development of conversational skills, might lead to unwanted effects - anxiety and unwillingness to speak. The concern regarding the accuracy of grammar usage during spoken communication has been identified as a significant contributor to speaking anxiety (Rahmat et al., 2020). Also, time pressure negatively affects the learners’ oral accuracy (Aaj et al., 2023). Teachers’ knowledge about the cognitive mechanisms included in verbal communication helps alleviate some of the stress experienced by the learners (Goh, 2018) (the information is provided by the theoretical approaches described in Chapter 3).

The “quality” of speech as a product refers to “features commonly associated with performance, such as fluency, complexity and accuracy” (Bygate, 2009, p. 409). Apart from inaccuracy, spoken language is marked by *spoken grammar* (Biber et al., 2002; Goh, 2009; McCarthy & Carter, 1995, 2017; Leech, 2000). It is a term for the “manifestation of systemic grammatical phenomena in spoken discourse that arise from the circumstances in which speech (i.e., conversation) is characteristically produced” (Cullen & Kuo, 2007, p. 363). Its study developed with the corpora study of natural spoken English discourse (Brazil, 1995; Carter & McCarthy, 1995, 1997, 2006), which has shown that spoken language has certain distinguishable features. It is spontaneous with minimal preparation (Goh, 2018), so it lacks well-organised and fully cohesive sentences, often relying on conjunctions and blurring sentence boundaries. It is marked by many disruptions that occur throughout the speaker’s speech, such as false alerts, interruptions, second thoughts, spontaneous speech, repentances, and others (Crystal, 2003). Its syntax is less rigorously structured in comparison to written sentences (Leech, 2000; Thornbury, 2017).

This means that, in a spontaneous communicative situation, during a conversation, the following will occur (after Biber et al., 2002):

1. speakers will rely on the shared context and will not use the same forms as in the written language (e.g., teacher: “What’s this?”, learner: “A ball”.)
2. due to shared context, speakers will avoid elaboration (e.g., Student spills some water on the floor and says “I’m sorry”)
3. there will be attention signalling (raising hands, making eye-contact), initiation (“Teacher, may I...?”, or “Peter, tell me, what’s Sarah doing”), responses (“Sure”, or “Maybe riding a bike”)
4. there will be reduced forms, pauses, repairs, etc. (“What’s this?”, “Hmmm...maybe...riding a bike”, “Ride...riding a bike.”)

From the viewpoint of the rules of written language, many of these sentences would be seen as ungrammatical. But from the *spoken grammar* perspective, they are perfectly acceptable in speech (McCarthy & Carter, 1995). Reciprocal speech exchange, listening, negotiating meaning and prompt responses to one another’s contributions are all features of classroom foreign language speaking (Brown & Yule, 1989). As it was already established, speaking occurs in real-time and the processing ability constraints and time constraints lead to the utilisation of spoken grammar (Goh & Burns, 2012; Goh, 2018). In classroom situations, learners are placed at a dual disadvantage - they already possess limited language resources and, in addition, are instructed to adhere to principles of written grammar, thus being given an unachievable goal of speaking in flawlessly structured, complete sentences (Mumford, 2008).

To sum up, the usage-based and communicative teaching approaches, which focus on the use of language (in potential real-life situations), and rely less on explicit methods (Ellis, 1998), are the most obvious choice for teaching grammar to young language. A significant amount of grammar teaching and learning occurs through oral communication, thus speaking is not just a product of learning, but also a medium for grammar learning. When it is viewed as a product, many factors that affect the accuracy need to be taken into consideration: the processes that occur during speaking and what learners are able to pay attention to while speaking, the amount of vocabulary and formulaic language they own, how well structures have been practised and whether they have become a part of procedural knowledge, whether time pressure or any other kind of pressure is hindering the accuracy of oral performance, etc. As far as the choice of structures and methods are concerned, we may agree with Hu (2012) who suggests that teachers should follow their instincts and beliefs when it comes to grammar teaching, as long as they are aware of the abilities that come with a certain age, and understand the differences between written and spoken grammar.

### 4.2.3. Pronunciation

Pronunciation is integral to speaking, and it encompasses pronunciation of sounds as the smallest units of spoken language (*segmental features*), as well as the use of stress on syllables, words, or longer language units, or intonation in speech (*suprasegmental features*). This chapter discusses the possibilities of FL sound acquisition, factors that influence pronunciation acquisition, and the differences between the EFL and ELF (English as a *lingua franca*) approach to teaching pronunciation.

As claimed by the revised Speech Learning Model (Flege & Bohn, 2021, pp. 64-66), learners can never perfectly match native speakers' sounds. As discouraging as it sounds, teaching pronunciation is necessary, for serious neglect of pronunciation standards may lead to a break in communication or difficulties for listeners. Flege and Bohn (2021) claim that FL sounds are learnt by forming new categories of the sounds non-existent in one's L1, and it happens under four conditions: the quality of input, the quantity of input, the dissimilarity of the FL sounds from the closest L1 sounds, and how precise the category was specified when FL learning began.

Early onset is therefore beneficial, because of the longer exposure to language, but it is not the only prerequisite for the acquisition of FL sounds. Moreover, there are examples of late beginners who have acquired native-like pronunciation, and this may serve as a motivation for language teachers to work on their accent and make it either more native-like or more intelligible, depending on their choice and foreign language "philosophy", which we will discuss by the end of this section.

Besides age, many other factors may influence the acquisition of FL pronunciation (see Table 1), some of them being internal and depending on the learner, and others relating to factors outside the learner. As usual, many of these factors often exert a combined influence on a learner's FL phonology, which will be discussed below.

**Table 1**

*Factors influencing the acquisition of pronunciation, based on Kenworthy (1987, p. 4; Wrembel, 2008; Zhang, 2009; Celce-Murcia et al.; 2010, and Szyszka, 2017, pp. 17-25)*

Foreign language context cannot be compared to naturalistic context and children will not simply pick up the native accent if the exposure is not substantial (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1977). In the FL con-

Environment	Learner's characteristics
mother tongue	general → age, learning styles, learning strategies
teacher's pronunciation	linguistic → phonetic coding ability
teaching styles	cognitive → memory, ear perception
the amount of exposure to FL	psychological → ego permeability; language anxiety; personality (introvert/extrovert)
previous learning opportunities	sociolinguistic → motivation, attitude

text, teachers are usually non-native speakers as well and have the same L1 as young learners. One's L1 may be similar or different from FL in a couple of aspects. English and Croatian, for example, are similar in so far that they both belong to the so-called stress languages, in which the pronunciation of certain syllables is emphasised within a word. However, in Croatian language, multisyllabic words are usually stressed at the first syllable, whereas in English, the stress can appear in different positions within a word, even on the last syllable (Hudeček & Mihaljević, 2019). This difference between the languages may lead to the transfer of stress from L1 to FL, especially in words that are similar in the two languages (a typical example is the word “computer”, which sounds similar in Croatian, but has stress on the first syllable: “*kompjuter*”). Early age of onset is beneficial for word stress assignment (Zembrzuski et al., 2020), and the first year or two of teaching young learners pretty much revolves around vocabulary learning through rhythmic exercises, such as songs, rhymes, simple tongue twisters, and similar.

Due to similarities and/or differences between L1 and FL, different speakers may be more or less sensitive to the phonological features of their FL. For example, sensitivity to the duration of vowels in FL depends on the learner's native phonology (Chládková et al., 2013). When sounds do not exist in L1 phonology, learners assimilate them to the closest minimally specified phonemes with matching features in their underlying representations in the L1 (Broselow & Kang, 2013, pp. 529-531; Hawkins & Lozano, 2006). Croa-



tian learners, for example, substitute the voiced dental fricative /ð/ with /t/, /z/, /f/, /d/, /z/, /v/ or /g/ in different words, apply hypercorrection and use /θ/ and /ð/ in words such as “daughter”, “mat”, or “adore” or /w/ as a realisation of /v/, use dental /d/ and /t/, replace the sound /æ/ with /e/, replace the English diphthongs with monophthongs, etc. (Josipović, 1987, 1989), which points to the reliance on the Croatian phonological system.

The exposure to non-native variants of English only might have a long-term effect on the perception and production of the FL sounds, as was exemplified in the study of the Sinhala, German and Dutch speakers of English (Iverson et al., 2008). Despite the early start, Sinhala speakers struggled with accurate identification and production of the English /w/ and /v/, a contrast non-existent in their native language. The participants were early starters (age five) and had been exposed to English in their native context for 28 years, however, they moved to England around the age of 24. It seems that their early experience with non-native English may have led to poor sensitivity to differences between /w/ and /v/ in English. In other words, if they are not exposed to other speakers of English, children might acquire their teacher’s phonology.

However, the good news is that learners do not need to learn the language in the immersive context to acquire the FL phonology; it is possible in the classroom setting, as well (Díaz-Campos, 2004). Phonetic training will bring gains, however, it must be performed carefully, with attendance to young learner’s abilities and needs, because attendance to rules while speaking might make learners self-conscious and influence their performance (Dickerson, 1986). The use of the so-called infant-directed speech or foreigner-directed speech, during which a speaker increases the differences in categories, adds to the improvement of discrimination of non-native contrasts (Escudero et al., 2011). In teaching, such use of language is called *teacherease* (see Dunn, 2013) and refers to simplified language, slightly exaggerated in terms of pitch and exhibiting a slower speech rate. Learning takes time, especially in terms of production, and some huge or immediately visible results of phonetic training are not to be expected (Kissling, 2013).

Besides the learning context, young learners are still under the influence of developmental factors which work in combination with L1 transfer (Hecht & Mulford, 1982). Phonetic coding ability, or the appropriate discrimination of the target language sounds and the formation of proper symbol-to-sound and sound-to-symbol associations, is a component of language aptitude (see section 4.3.2) and there are differences between learners in terms of natural endowment or the opportunities they had for its development (e.g., their parents did not read to them in their early childhood). It is possible to develop the phonetic coding ability since all healthy people can process acoustic (nonspeech) material. The differences appear in the speech-specific ability to discriminate between contrasting phonemes (Díaz et al., 2008), i.e. one’s speech perception system does not give relevance to the difference between two contrasting vowels, such as /a/ and /a:/. If this is not noticed and practised, there is a loss in neural transmission which may have a long-term effect on the acquisition of FL sounds (Golestani & Zatorre, 2009). Higher phonemic awareness and the development of reading and writing are interconnected (Janssen et al., 2011; Stuart, 1999), which means that phonemic awareness will develop faster once reading and writing are introduced in FL teaching.

Sometimes, phonological features of one's FL speech depend on psychological factors, such as learner effort (Hammarberg, 2010). According to Moyer (2017), exceptional learners are deeply invested in the learning of the target language; they identify with it, are comfortable with assimilation, take pride in their FL abilities, and use FL whenever possible. In terms of pronunciation, they seek and incorporate feedback, practice sounds and enjoy mimicry, strategise ways to improve their accent and accept difficult experiences as part of the process. Similarly, Losavaio (2023) concludes that higher phonemic awareness is the result of personal drive and interest, finding opportunities for exposure to the language, giving attention to FL phonological features, and trying to incorporate these features into one's pronunciation. Since a teacher is quite often the reason why children like some subject, her attitudes and ability to motivate may be of great importance.

Furthermore, Guiora et al. (1972) found that one's ability for empathy predicts the authenticity of pronunciation and in their later work postulated the concept of "permeability of language ego boundaries", or the ability of a speaker of two languages to "move back and forth between language and the 'personalities' that seem to come with them" (Guiora & Acton, 1979, p. 199). This was later incorporated into Schumann's (1986) acculturation model as one of the affective factors influencing second language acquisition. Language ego corresponds to the development of the ego, therefore young learners will more readily play with the language and will not mind assuming other identities as much as adults do. This does not mean, however, that it will remain the same throughout years six to 12. As children open up to the world of English, they might start identifying with different groups of speakers, for example, their online gaming partners. Since people are susceptible to the so-called Chameleon effect, or "non-conscious mimicry of the postures, mannerisms, facial expressions, and other behaviours of one's interaction partners, such that one's behaviour passively and unintentionally changes to match that of others in one's current social environment" (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999, p. 893), this may lead to the ability to change their accent in different contexts of use (Taquil et al., 2018). Thus, there is a possibility that the children who have already acquired some phonological features such as /θ/ and /ð/ go back to saying /t/ and /d/ in order to "fit in". Psychological and social factors are, thus, often intertwined.

Finally, pronunciation learning never stops, or as Flege and Bohn (2021) have put it, there is no "end state" in learning the FL phonetic system as long as there is phonetic input.

#### *4.2.3.1. The choice of teaching model*

Lately, there has been a change in the attitude towards native varieties of English as models for teaching EFL. Traditionally, they were considered a favourable choice; in Croatia, it was usually the British standard variety, or *received pronunciation* (RP). Textbooks contained information about other varieties, but the accompanying audio texts were spoken by British speakers and the use of other speakers, especially those who speak English as the international language, was considered a bad choice. Today, there is more awareness of the fact that language learners will most likely speak to more non-native than native speakers in their business-related encounters or while travelling, and the proposal of the expansion of

Kachru's<sup>8</sup> (1985) model by the inclusion of "the fully competent speaker of English as a *lingua franca* in the centre" (Ur, 2010, p. 87) has influenced teaching EFL. English as a lingua franca (ELF) is "a specific communication context in which English is the common language of choice among speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 200). As Seidlhofer (2011, para. 8.59) explains, unlike foreign language learners who strive to adopt and adapt to the pre-existing norms of the native speakers, users of English as a lingua franca establish ad hoc norms "that are adequate to the task and commensurate to the command of the linguistic resources they have in common".

Therefore, teachers today have a choice, either to uphold to any of the Inner-Circle varieties, or to follow another line of pronunciation pedagogy which has grown on the concept of *intelligibility* or *comfortable intelligibility*, first discussed by Kenworthy (1987), and later developed into a "*lingua franca core*" by Jenkins (2000). Intelligibility is defined by Kenworthy (1987, p. 13) as "being understood by a listener at a given time in a given situation" but it depends both on the listener and the speaker. Factors that influence the intelligibility of a speaker, according to the same author, are moments of hesitation, lack of fluency, unusual stress, rhythm or intonation, sound substitution, deletion, or insertion, the way words are linked, as well as some speaker habits that the listener may find unusual. On the other hand, the listener factors are related to familiarity with the accent and the ability to use contextual cues, even for native speakers (Bent & Holt, 2018).

Jenkins (2000, 2002), when discussing intelligibility issues, focuses mainly on the communication between non-native speakers of English, studying the pronunciation-based issues which lead to miscommunication and the ways speakers adjust their pronunciation to suit the listener (e.g., when realising that the listener does not understand them, they would replace the "non-standard" version they have been using with a more "standard" one). Jenkins goes on and suggest a list of crucial and non-crucial features of intelligibility or Lingua Franca Core (see Table 2).

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8 According to this model, there are three circles of World Englishes: the Inner Circle, made up of the places where English is the official language and its speakers provide the norms (such as UK, USA, Australia, Canada); the Outer Circle, where they speak official non-native varieties, mostly because of their colonial history - their varieties differ from the Inner Circle varieties because they challenge the norms of lexis, syntax and pronunciation (e.g. India, Jamaica, Nigeria, etc.); and the Expanding Circle, where English is the foreign language and speakers usually follow the rules established by the Inner Circle (e.g. Croatia and most of the European countries, China, Russia, Brazil, etc.).

**Table 2***List of core features in pronunciation intelligibility adapted from Jenkins (2000)*

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**Consonant sounds**

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- all consonants are necessary except /θ/ and /ð/ for which possible substitutions are /t/, /d/, /f/, /v/, but not /ʃ/, /dʒ/ or /z/
- dark /ɫ/ is not necessary (e.g., “milk” --> /mɪɫk/ or /mɪlk/; “little” /'lɪt.əɫ/ or /'lɪt.əl/
- /r/ (a rhotic retroflex approximant) should be pronounced as in General American pronunciation; it should be pronounced everywhere it occurs in spelling (e.g., “far” /fa:r/, “Marty” /ma:rti/)
- /t/ needs to be carefully pronounced between vowels (e.g., “Italy”) and in clusters in the middle of words (e.g., “winter”). It should not be “flapped” /ɪdali/, nor replaced with a glottal stop
- /p/, /t/, /k/ must be aspirated when occurring in initial position in a stressed syllable (e.g., /p/ in “present”)

**Consonant clusters**

- must not be simplified at the beginning of words (e.g., “strong” should not be pronounced /srɒŋ/)
- when they appear in the middle of the word or at the end of the word, they can be simplified if it makes articulation easier, but only according to rules of elision that apply to native varieties (e.g., “postman” may be pronounced /'pəʊs.mən/)
- when learners struggle with producing consonant clusters, they may add a very short schwa vowel, but must not stress it (e.g., “strong” --> /'sətrɒŋ/)
- learners can add a short schwa at the end of a word ending with a consonant, if it does not create a word that exists in language (“harp” --> /hɑ:rpə/, but not “hard” /hɑ:rdə/)

**Vowels**

- length contrasts must be preserved, both in monophthongs and diphthongs (“ship” vs. “sheep”; no vs.)
- quality of vowels is less important, but must be consistent (e.g., “cat” /kæt/ or /ket/)
- when a vowel occurs before an unvoiced consonant, it should sound slightly shorter than when it occurs before a voiced consonant (e.g., “kit” vs. “kid”)
- /ɜ:/ must be pronounced accurately

**Word groups and nuclear stress**

- speech must be divided into meaningful tone units (or thought groups)
  - within these tone units, speakers must stress words appropriately, to provide emphasis or contrast (e.g., “It is my dog” vs. “It is my dog”).
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Jenkins does not include syllable stress or intonation as features which lead to better intelligibility. She does, however, include fluency or general confidence as an important feature for being intelligible, which we may add, refers to any speaker of any language (mother tongue included).

In terms of intelligibility, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2012) suggests that there is a difference between the intelligibility of speakers due to the types of pronunciation errors, the so-called global and local errors. Global errors, as described by the author, are related to segmental and suprasegmental features such as mispronunciation of sounds (e.g., “jazz” pronounced as /dʒes/) or mis-stressed syllables (e.g., “foreign” pronounced as /for’in/), whereas local errors are described as idiosyncratic mispronunciations of words (e.g., “foreign” as /fo’rejn/, “blood” as /blut/, etc.). A lot of local mistakes, especially if their meaning cannot be assumed from the context, lead to much lower rates of comprehensibility, whereas global mistakes do not have that effect. In other words, teachers need to understand the difference between errors which affect and those that do not affect intelligibility and this may help them decide what pronunciation aspects to practise and teach, as well as correct during learners’ performance.

To our knowledge, there is no research on the intelligibility of Croatian speakers’ English to either native or non-native speakers. As far as the study of core/non-core features in Croatian learners of English is concerned, the data is restricted to a couple of studies with primary school students in grades five through eight (e.g., Josipović Smojver & Stanojević, 2013). Croatian students have issues with aspiration (even the successful students), are inconsistent in the use of *flapping*<sup>9</sup> and *rhoticity*<sup>10</sup>, and less proficient participants cannot distinguish between some monophthongs and diphthongs. Their fluency develops over four years, and some pronunciation issues disappear (e.g., the use of /æ/ stabilises) (Josipović Smojver, 2015).

Even though the British standard is the usual model in schools in Croatia, Croatian university students’ (majoring in English) could not identify South England speakers (Vančura & Alić, 2022) among many. They were the most successful in identifying Croatian and Southern USA speakers which testifies to the influence of the out-of-school exposure to Southern USA variety, and the exposure to Croglish, or the English language of Croatian speakers in the formal, classroom setting. Also, Croatian students are acceptant of other accents. The feeling of inadequacy in terms of pronunciation is present in low-proficiency students (Novak Lađarević, 2019). Also, female students and those majoring in English seem to be more concerned about their accents and willing to put an effort into learning to pronounce like native speakers (Stanojević & Josipović Smojver, 2011).

If the choice of language is viewed from a pedagogical, rather than ideological perspective, teaching against a norm simplifies the journey of achieving pedagogical purposes, especially at early levels of learning English. With time and higher FL proficiency, the topic of English varieties needs to be introduced into the EFL curriculum. For example, the *Croatian national curriculum* (2016, pp. 4-7) emphasises the importance of intercultural communication competence that “leads to the ability to notice and interpret similarities and differences among cultures and efficient and context-appropriate communication with speakers of the foreign language which leads to the building of harmonious intercultural

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9 Flapping is the preservation of intervocalic /t/ (Josipović Smojver, 2015, p. 51).

10 Rhoticity in English pertains to the articulation of the consonant /r/ in all instances where it appears, whereas non-rhoticity denotes the omission of the /r/ sound in specific instances when it should be pronounced (Costa & Serra, 2022).

relations". Interculturality assumes "comprehension of and communication with speakers of English language of various cultural backgrounds" and, among other outcomes for students, it means that students will be able to "communicate effectively and context-appropriately with native and non-native speakers of English". However, this competence should be achieved by the end of high-school education. In terms of the pronunciation-related curriculum outcomes at early stages of learning, in the first four grades of primary school, Croatian learners should be able to:

- repeat (or use) frequent words and (very) short and simple sentences imitating the English phonetic system
- imitate the intonation of a simple sentence.

The curriculum document does not specify which English phonetic system it refers to, so teachers must make the choice.

To sum up, pronunciation acquisition is dependent on many various linguistic, cognitive, social, and psychological factors that must be taken into consideration, especially when young learners are concerned. This age group is very sensitive in terms of motivation to focus on form, therefore, in terms of phonology, we would rather not talk about teaching it to young learners, but drawing attention to the target phonological features of FL speech by immersing the learners into language as much as possible and helping them notice its features and practise their use. A general rule is to keep things playful, sometimes even theatrical, be respectful of learner differences, and not expect miracles to happen. Since classroom exposure and experiences are crucial for the learners who are otherwise not exposed to the FL, the teacher has a significant role in several areas:

1. To develop tolerance towards individual varieties, teachers should create a welcoming atmosphere for the specifics of learners' accents that do not hinder communication. Teachers need to make informed decisions on when, why and how they would correct one's pronunciation (e.g., "local" errors, or idiosyncratic pronunciation which will affect intelligibility). Pronunciation awareness development needs to be done in a way that would not make the learners anxious about their pronunciation or make them "shut down" but rather help them adopt the specific phonemes when and if they become ready.
2. Teachers need to be aware that children may have some speech disorders and be helpful. If needed, they should research how to approach children with speech disorders. They should keep in mind that, at that age, children experience milk teeth loss, which affects sound production.
3. When asking children to repeat after them or the model, teachers need to make sure that learners have heard the word correctly and that all of them are saying it correctly. During choir prac-

tice, some mistakes may go unnoticed, so the teacher needs to find non-invasive ways of checking the pronunciation of each child.

4. At early levels of learning, teachers need to find materials that would provide exposure to speakers who speak slowly and make good use of stress and intonation to make their speech intelligible. Stories, songs, or rhymes with age- and level-appropriate content are a suitable choice.
5. Teachers should always talk positively about the differences between Englishes around the world and avoid stereotyping people based on their accents.
6. It is suggested to motivate learners to use language outside the classroom. For example, a teacher may create a list of free and reliable online resources for learning and practising the language and share them with parents. Parents often want to provide extra FL practice for their children but they do not have enough knowledge to choose level- and age-appropriate materials.
7. Teachers should be good role models and stay enthusiastic and motivated because this has a significant effect on their learners.

### 4.3. The effect of environment on speaking development

The development of speaking skills is dependent on the context in which language is learnt. In the following sections, we discuss the development of young learners' speaking skills in relationship to out-of-learner factors: exposure, social and cultural context and formal instruction.

#### 4.3.1. Input and exposure

Foreign language context (learning English in a country in which it is not an official language) differs from the naturalistic context (learning English in a setting where it is the official language or one of the main languages of public communication) in many ways, particularly the amount of (native-speaker) input. In immersion programmes, when a learner spends a certain amount of time in an English-speaking community, early starting age, the time spent there, and massive exposure lead to long-term benefits (Muñoz, 2008). Foreign language context is not considered significant exposure, therefore other factors seem to predict the ultimate proficiency in English, such as the length of exposure and the amount of implicit knowledge (Gotseva, 2015). Lately, we are becoming aware of the huge influence of informal learning through the use of media. It seems that children, by being interested in any content delivered

in English acquire the language spontaneously and sometimes are already quite proficient in the first four grades of primary school. The research on the relationship between informal learning and EFL proficiency of young learners (ages four to 12) is scarce. A Swedish study with 11 to 12-year-olds (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012) and a study of eight-year-olds in Denmark (Jensen, 2016) have found a strong correlation between gaming with English input and English-as-FL proficiency, especially for boys who played more and played different games than girls. It is, however, not clear from the studies whether their prior knowledge of the language has contributed to their ability to play the games, or whether the playing of the games led to increased proficiency. A Belgium study with 12-year-olds who have not had formal instruction in EFL by De Wilde and Eyckmans (2017) has also confirmed a link between gaming/computer use and EFL test scores, especially in listening comprehension. 40% of students had very high scores (A2 level of CEFR) in listening comprehension and 10-25% in other skills. They did not find any gender differences. Interestingly but not surprisingly, watching TV with subtitles was not linked to higher proficiency which is different from the ELLiE study results (Muñoz & Lindgren, 2011). However, observing the habits of today's children it seems that smartphones, tablets and different gaming consoles have taken over and children spend less time watching TV. As far as informal, incidental learning is concerned, it stays the same - some children learn English as a foreign language through exposure to content in English simply because they are interested in the content, not because they are eager to learn a new language. Exposure to English in society through the consumption of cultural products, such as games, music, TV shows or movies seems to be even more important than school efforts (Azzolini et al., 2020).

### 4.3.2. Social and cultural context

The cultural context of today's world seems to push children towards early bilingualism, even if they live in countries where English is not an official language, such as Croatia. There is, at the moment, little evidence in terms of research to prove it. A small study of six preschool children in Croatia whose parents did not teach them English intentionally (Harwood & Omar, 2021), has shown that exposure to cartoons, video games, tutorials, gaming videos and music videos at preschool age prompts children to engage with the content verbally, repeating words or singing, and non-verbally, following the narrators' prompts (dancing, jumping, etc.). As a result, they speak English with their friends, or by themselves during pretend play, while riding a bike, and it can go on for hours. This resonates with personal experiences of family members' or friends' children and our children (but we could be "accused" of influencing them, even though there was no deliberate teaching, we never spoke English with our children and they did not attend English lessons prior to the beginning of primary school). Some young learners are quite confident and proficient speakers of English, and it has nothing to do with schooling, but with a special type of non-intentional language acquisition. Children did not choose to learn English, nor did they have any intention of doing it. Their FL developed due to availability and exposure to the multimodal content and huge interest in the content (e.g., in Harwood & Omar, 2021, parents reported that some songs would be played over and over again). Content in the English language is not attractive to all children, and is sometimes not available, and educated and well-off parents seem to have more positive attitudes towards English learning and provide more home exposure to English (Azzolini et al., 2020; Lopriore & Krikhaar, 2011).



As a result, teachers face mixed-level classrooms at the beginning of formal English learning, which poses challenges in the choice of materials, vocabulary, and teaching structures and in adhering to the curriculum created for true beginners (see section 4.4. for the possible “treatment” of this challenge).

Furthermore, in the European context, according to the comparative study of drivers of English Language Competence among adolescents in 14 European countries (Muñoz & Lindgren, 2011), Croatia is a country with a high language distance<sup>11</sup> from English, meaning that Croatian is not similar to English. In such countries across Europe, learners’ English language competence is lower than that of their peers in countries with smaller language distance from English, and the age of onset seems crucial for oral proficiency development (Azzolini et al., 2020). Besides the language distance, an environmental factor that seems important is whether learners have opportunities to speak with other native or non-native speakers of English. If not, the most significant amount of input and opportunities to speak for many learners in the foreign language context is during English lessons. Children who play games online seem to be in advantage over others, regarding their motivation for learning English, self-assessed ability, and self-reported speaking strategies (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014). Again, this resonates with the experiences of many parents of young learners in Croatia, who quite often hear their children speaking English while playing interactive computer games online and who often say that their children are “very good at English” or “speak English as if it were their mother tongue”.

The social context of speaking opportunities for young learners in a foreign language context, therefore, seems to be extended to online social reality, and its effect on their speaking skills must not be neglected.

### 4.3.3. Formal instruction

The research on young learners (aged six to twelve) of English in a foreign language context is not abundant (in comparison to the research on young learners in a naturalistic context) and the situation gets more complex when looking for evidence from studies of oral skills – they are difficult to perform on a large population, so there is not much data on the speaking competences of young EFL learners. A Swiss study (Hoti et al., 2009) with 3rd-grade students who were instructed in English for a year has found no class effect on students’ speaking skills. The predictors of the vocabulary range and the length of students’ utterances were: reading skills in L1, students’ reported use of learning strategies, positive attitude towards English-speaking countries, and internal affective factors, such as the lack of fear of mistakes and finding English lessons easy. Their utterances were from one to nine words long, and only 20% of students were able to produce 9-word-long utterances.

On the other hand, a study by De Wilde et al. (2021) with Dutch children at the onset of their EFL instruction (age 10 to 12) and two years later (age 12 to 14) has revealed that the learning context and

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<sup>11</sup> Language or linguistic distance is a concept involving the degree of dissimilarity between two languages. While there is no definitive method, it is crucial in linguistic research like phylogenetic studies, dialectology, and second language acquisition (Gamallo et al., 2017).

the availability of the FL have much larger impact on FL proficiency than cognitive variables, such as working memory and analytic reasoning ability. More learning happened when students were instructed for a longer period. Also, despite the different starting points in terms of speaking skills, all students reached the A2 CEFR level after two years. The study reports the “ceiling effect”, meaning that they were not tested for a higher level, and it seemed that some students would have exceeded the A2 level. What seems to be an important implication of this study is that, no matter how different our students are in terms of their FL abilities at the beginning of schooling, they will all show progress, and the instruction time and other external factors (using media, reading in English, etc.) seem to be more important for successful language acquisition and the gain of speaking skills than students’ general cognitive abilities. The exceptions are L1 knowledge and phonological short-term memory (the ability to maintain verbal information in the working memory for a few seconds), implying that the development of early literacy (which is something that English teachers have no control of) is very important for all children. School factors are particularly important in countries with languages distant from English (Azzolini et al., 2020).

## 4.4. Learner-related factors of speaking development

Besides the previously mentioned factors, there are others that affect students’ proficiency and willingness to speak. In literature, they are called individual factors or individual differences (see Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 53-67), and here we discuss the concept of language learning aptitude which may explain why some learners struggle with language acquisition and speaking, as well as some research dealing with the individual differences among young learners in terms of speaking skills.

### 4.4.1. Language learning aptitude

Teachers are well aware that not all their students exhibit the same “talent” for languages; the study of differences among learners has given rise to the notion of *language aptitude* in foreign language literature. A meta-analysis of research on language aptitude (Li, 2016) has shown that it overlaps with intelligence, but may not be equated with it. Also, it is distinct from motivation or language anxiety, and it affects the executive working memory (not the phonological short-term memory). Also, higher language aptitude leads to higher general proficiency, but it is not as important for vocabulary learning and FL writing. Even though the construct has not been unifiedly defined (see Ameringer et al., 2018 and Biedroń, 2023a for overviews of research and theoretical grounding), it needs to be taken into consideration in teaching English as a foreign language. For example, research by Lehner (2018) has shown that high language aptitude compensates for infrequent FL input. In other words, learners of a second language with high language aptitude may achieve high proficiency in a short period and maintain it even when their contact with the language has been reduced. Early start is not as important to them as it is for learners with low language aptitude. In teaching, this means that special attention needs to be given to students who do not seem naturally talented in language. Their later oral proficiency depends on the input and development of the components of language aptitude: phonetic coding ability (matching

phonetic images with orthographic symbols, storing them and retrieving them from memory), grammatical sensitivity (recognising grammatical functions and matching them to different sentence structures), inductive language learning ability (making hypotheses about possible language rules) and rote learning ability (making associations between linguistic forms and meaning, rehearsing them, storing and retrieving). These abilities, as can be assumed, are not related to the foreign language exclusively, therefore it is advisable to discuss with colleagues and general teachers how learners can be supported in the development of these abilities in their mother tongue as well.

#### 4.4.2. Other individual differences

Individual differences are never straightforward and they are often interconnected. We will focus on the ones that have been researched in relation to oral proficiency among young learners. Some important factors contributing to students' English proficiency are gender, language aptitude, motivation for learning English, and attitudes toward English.

There is a line of research that has reported gender differences in EFL acquisition and attitudes, but, again, not many have focused on young learners. According to Azzolini et al. (2020), European girls generally outperform boys in English language competence. However, in a study where boys and girls were compared across skills they had received through structured English instruction focused on the development of bilingualism in the Spanish community, the differences were observed in reading comprehension skills, and not oral skills (Tong et al., 2011). Gender differences in motivation for learning English show that young girls (5th grade) rate themselves as more interested, efficient, engaged, and goal-oriented in English language learning than boys, but these differences wear off with age (Yeung et al., 2011). It seems that young boys learn more English from gaming (with oral and written input) than girls, but girls are not at a disadvantage since they seem to be gaining more than boys from the formalised learning environment (Jensen, 2016). The same author also suggests that the extensive engagement of boys in gaming, helps them keep up with the girls. Girls' results of L1-to-FL and FL-to-L1 translation tests suggest that they, more than boys, learn incidentally from watching English-subtitled television and movies (Kuppens, 2010). The out-of-school exposure to English varies across genders for 12- to 14-year-olds: boys are mostly exposed through gaming, and girls through watching movies and series with subtitles in English and listening to music (Muñoz, 2020).

In a formal setting, thus, excluding the out-of-school exposure, girls seem to be gaining more from the type of instruction typically used in schools. Lower levels of vocabulary acquisition by boys in the formal setting may lead to limited oral proficiency. If this is the case, the choice of teaching methodology must be reflective of the interests and learning styles of both genders.

Also, one of the inner factors that may influence spoken production in the classroom is willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998), a multilayered psychological phenomenon that is perhaps also

culturally conditioned (e.g., females are more willing to communicate in the classroom in a French study, whereas, in a Taiwanese study, those are males, according to Lee et al., 2021). We witnessed a few cases of young learners who never speak in English lessons because they never speak in school. They pay attention and do the written assignments, but when they need to speak, they remain silent. This is an issue that is beyond the English teachers' expertise and requires the attendance of experts, and it is not a common phenomenon, but it is something that teachers may face in their careers.

Even young children can feel anxious about using a foreign language in lessons, making mistakes, or being graded (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, pp. 75-97). The anxiety grows with age, and 11-year-olds are more anxious than six-year-olds. Teachers must create a friendly and encouraging learning environment to reduce classroom-related anxiety. Young learners generally have very positive attitudes and high motivation for learning English as a foreign language, but their likes and dislikes of certain elements of the learning process change over time and are quite individual (Mihaljević Djigunović & Lopriore, 2011). According to the same study, they arise as the result of the introduction of new activities, difficulties with language learning, comparison with peers, metalinguistic awareness, or changes in self-concept, and are related to achievement in oral production. Positive attitudes and positive self-concept are predictors of lexical diversity in oral production, as well as of the preference for speaking, singing, reading and games, which all require active use of vocabulary. Furthermore, the study showed that highly proficient students enjoyed group work, which also implies active use of vocabulary.

Young learners' motivation to learn English either for internal use in their country or for future use outside their country depends on the socio-educational context (Nikolov, 2000; Sougari & Hovhannisyan, 2013). Particularly, the study revealed that in Greece, unlike Armenia, young learners are motivated to learn English to be able to speak it with people around them and tourists. Croatia is also a tourist country and many people in general have very positive attitudes towards learning foreign languages.

## 4.5. Teacher's role in the development of speaking

Learning how to speak a foreign language is a constant work in progress - even native speakers may learn a trick or two about becoming successful speakers. In a foreign language context, teachers often have a significant role in the development of language skills (speaking included) and motivation to learn the language throughout the education process. In our experience, university students who have been learning English since the 1st grade of formal education in Croatia, often report that it depended on the teacher how much they spoke or how anxious or non-anxious they were about speaking in the classroom. Sometimes, they were not off to a good start at primary school, but at later stages of learning they improved, with the change of the teacher and them becoming more independent in learning; sometimes they report that in primary school they had a feeling of being successful in speaking, but later in high school there was too much focus on form, and not enough encouragement to speak. Every individual experience is quite different from the other, but teachers always play some role, either in learning or attitude towards English as a school subject.

Generally speaking, a teacher's role in the young learners' oral development in English is to make sure that there is enough exposure to the language, to make sure basic vocabulary and grammatical structures are thoroughly learnt and often used in communication, and to make learning enjoyable and meaningful. It seems straightforward but being a young learner teacher requires a lot of knowledge and effort:

Each age range of "young learners" has its own specific requirements with regard to teaching methodology, course structure, materials, learning environment, and appropriately qualified teachers. Teaching a pre-literate four-year-old requires a very different set of specialised skills and teaching approaches to teaching a 14-year-old in order to create the optimal conditions that are conducive to learning. (Ellis, 2013, p. 76).

As it was discussed in sections 2.1. and 2.2. the term young learner is used differently in different contexts, but they are generally seen as different learners from adult learners; however, as the above quote says, the age-differences among young learners and their needs, interests, and ways to stay motivated for learning are huge, as well. Understanding who they teach is the first prerequisite of being a successful teacher, to choose the appropriate topics and materials, tasks and teaching methods, which we discuss in this chapter. Also, as we have repeatedly said throughout this book, a big challenge for teachers today are mixed-ability classes, therefore a section in this chapter is devoted to differentiation. We discuss the talking time of teachers vs students, as there is evidence that the output is very important for speaking development, and when lessons are reading- and writing-based, or teacher-centred, there is less possibility for the use of spoken language by individual learners in the classroom. Finally, we turn to teachers' needs in terms of professional development. which will make up for the possible lack of instruction on all the factors that lead to raising self-confident speakers of English as a foreign language.

### 4.5.1. Choice of topics and materials

Teachers are often constrained by the curriculum or authorities in terms of the choice of topics and materials used in EFL teaching. The autonomy of teachers ranges from complete autonomy in terms of the syllabus creation and the choice of materials to the opposite, where the choice is made by the authorities and teachers need to follow the prescribed programmes and use textbooks chosen by authorities. In Croatia, for example, there has been a turn towards more autonomy through a more relaxed and general curriculum, but teachers choose a textbook (out of several approved by the Ministry of Education). They are allowed and encouraged to use other resources and skip parts of the textbook, as long as the curriculum outcomes are met.

The usual topics that can be found in textbooks for young learners revolve around the young learners, their interests, places and objects in their surroundings, and concepts that they understand. As they grow up, topics get more diverse to include different aspects of the world knowledge, which makes English a school-subject that is, perhaps, most connected to all the other subjects in young learners' curriculum (e.g. music, art, geography, ecology, science, maths, IT, etc.) and very often oriented to the development of

various skills (e.g. how to behave in a shop, buy a bus ticket, make a DIY hat, play a game, etc.). There are differences in interests of young learners, both among the learners at the same level of study, as well as the learners of different ages. Some children will pursue their very specific interests (e.g., the interest in bugs, or dance) and possibly know more English vocabulary related to that topic than the teacher. Six-year-olds might still be interested in picture books, but they would not be as appealing to ten-year-olds anymore. To create bonds between the teacher and students, as well as to create a supportive atmosphere between students, which is crucial for their motivation to speak in lessons, teachers need to find out about their learners' interests and adapt to them. Sometimes, it is more useful to do a little bit of research rather than assume what they like or rely on suggestions from books on teaching, because different times and cultures affect children's lives, as well. Here are some ideas on how teachers might do it:

1. Put up a big poster in the classroom and ask children to draw their favourite toys on the poster. Update it every couple of months to find out how learners' interests change. Older learners may be asked to write down their favourite cartoon, song, musician, celebrity, sports figure, game, story, etc.
2. At the beginning of each school-year, teachers may ask parents to fill in a short online questionnaire about their child's interests. It should be short and user-friendly, and say that the teacher's goal is to know their children better so that teaching can be adapted to their interests.
3. Make exit cards asking students what they would like to do next time in class, e.g., 1. a song, 2. a story, 3. a group game. If learners cannot read, the teacher can draw symbols and explain what they mean. It will make learners feel heard, whereas the choices of activities on the exit cards are still made by teachers (and thus useful in the topic that needs to be covered).
4. Have a "Teach the Teacher Day", during which learners will teach the teacher about their interests, the language they use, what it is like to be a child (and teachers have forgotten about it), etc. They can be offered a choice to do it in English or their L1. Everybody will feel welcome and the ones that are proficient in English will be given a chance to shine.

The teacher's task is to spark some new interests as well, and authentic materials, such as stories, cartoons, songs, short movies, or various hands-on activities are welcome, as long as they are age-appropriate and beneficial for language learning. The problem with authentic materials is that there is often a mismatch between their appeal to learners and their language level (e.g., *Winnie the Pooh* is more interesting to very young learners, but the language is too demanding for many of them). This can be overcome by adapting the stories or finding adapted readers, videos and songs online.

Unless there are English textbooks, teachers will have to prepare their materials. Apart from teaching speaking, the materials will have to accommodate the other three skills. Therefore, long-term planning

and short-term planning are crucial. The curriculum needs to be built carefully towards achieving particular outcomes because learning a language happens gradually. Planning includes creating opportunities for learning and practising elements that are necessary for speaking (such as vocabulary items, pronunciation, and grammar), as well as opportunities for spoken language use and real communication or situations that imitate real communicative situations. Planning is important for the choice of activities as well. If the curriculum is topic-oriented, the teacher needs to plan carefully how to connect the outcomes to the topic. A successful teacher will know what type of task leads to a certain outcome, how to “set the scene” and prepare learners for the task, and what to do as a follow-up to make the learning meaningful.

A critical approach to available materials (textbooks or various online resources) is a trait of every good teacher. There is a saying that a cup can only hold so much water, and it describes the textbooks very well. They cannot contain everything that learners need. They are many times great support because they contain useful audio-, text- and visual-materials, and lately, a lot of digital materials, too. Some textbooks are equipped with amazing teacher’s books, as well, that provide many ideas on how to use the textbook in different ways and how to scaffold learning. However, many times, teachers need to bring additional material and create additional tasks to support the learning. Instead of being textbook-oriented, teachers need to be learner-oriented, or learning-oriented, and ask themselves “Under which circumstances will learning happen and how can I support my students in learning?” Since books are a written medium, it often seems as much attention is given to reading and writing, whereas a smaller number of tasks is devoted to speaking. However, the written tasks may usually be easily adapted into speaking tasks.

Finally, many online resources are available today, but they too need to be critically evaluated in terms of their language-level, age-appropriateness, and benefits for the development of speaking skills. Digital tools are useful for independent learning, and they are quite often designed for this purpose. As technology develops, many tools and apps are developed that enable spoken communication, as well, such as the apps that turn speech to text, or enable messaging via recorded voice-messages. Recording videos with spoken content, or audios (e.g. classroom podcasts) is already a part of many English language classrooms. Digitally-adept teachers find ways to use digital tools as a connecting, rather than alienating element in classroom communication in English.

#### 4.5.2. Evaluation of tasks and teaching methods

Teachers make long-term and short-term plans that they wish to accomplish over some time. The plans may be expressed in regard to aims (what the teacher wants to teach) or in regard to outcomes for students (what will the students be able to do after a lesson/period of time). Then the aims or outcomes are used to design activities that would lead to their accomplishment. These activities are called tasks, and the instruction that is based on a number of tasks for learners is called Task-Based Instruction (see section 3.2.5). Tasks need to have a certain context, revolve around familiar topics, be clear, and

not overly demanding for students (Ellis, 2003, p. 127) to be effective in promoting learners' speaking skills. Also, learners need to be supported in the attainment of the task regarding its linguistic and non-linguistic demands (Cameron, 2001). Therefore, teachers need to be able to evaluate the speaking tasks used in the classroom in regard to all these elements, as well as their effectiveness in the use of vocabulary and language structures that were the focus of the lesson. Besides that, they need to make sure that all the learners have had a go at the activity, or took part in it in accordance with their abilities. Teachers need to be aware of what microskills (reading out loud, pronunciation, vocabulary use, etc.) and macroskills (fluency, style, turn-taking, etc.) are being developed with each particular task (Brown, 2003, pp. 142-144).

Speaking assumes "building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney & Burk, 1998, p. 13). Teachers need to design classroom scenarios that would facilitate the building and sharing of meaning, considering learners' level of proficiency, interests, motivation, ability to focus, and other age-related factors (see Chapter 2). As an illustrative example, let us assume that a teacher has taught some vocabulary (e.g., wild animals) through typical vocabulary learning activities or a song or rhyme. In order to create an opportunity for learners to employ this knowledge in a meaningful communicative activity, they may design a miming or a board game. During the game, each student would need to use the words in spoken form. The teacher's task is to observe and reflect by asking the following questions:

1. Did my students use the newly acquired vocabulary in a meaningful way?
2. Did all of my students have the same opportunity to use the language?
3. Which students were not able to do it and why? What can I do to help them start using the language in the future?
4. What micro- or macroskill of speaking were aimed to develop by this activity?

This applies to the more complicated language, too. In the fourth year of learning, for example, students might be asked to explain the differences between two pictures, retell or build a simple story, talk about themselves, their interests, friends, or families, etc. Again, teachers observe and reflect on the scaffolding techniques that would enable each learner to express themselves orally.

Scaffolding, as described by Vygotsky, is the breaking down of a skill into pieces and supporting the child towards acquiring it (see section 2.3.2.). In education generally, especially language teaching, scaffolding consists of providing support where learners need it to achieve an expectation that is a little bit above what they can do at the moment. With time, when learners can do it on their own, support is withdrawn. In terms of speaking, for example, the child may be able to name objects and colours, but not



be able to use it to describe their favourite toy. In that case, scaffolding would consist of prompts that would elicit the description:

Teacher: "What is this?"

Student: "A car."

Teacher: "It is nice. Is it yours?"

Student: "Yes."

Teacher: "No, this is my car." (teasing the child, smiling warmly)

Student: (laughing) "No...my car."

Teacher: "This is my car." (teasing the child, smiling warmly)

Student: "No, this is my car." (smiling back)

Teacher: "Okay, I give up. What colour is it?"

Student: "Red."

Teacher: "This is my car. It is blue." (teasing)

Student: "Nooooo."

Teacher: "Yes. This is my car. It is blue. Correct me if I am wrong." (use of L1 if the student does not respond)

Student: "This is my car. It is red."

There are numerous examples of scaffolding in speaking, and the tasks that students are asked to do should be achievable independently or with the provision of scaffolding by the teacher. If the task is not achievable with support, then it is too difficult for the learner, and it will have to wait until the learner matures linguistically, cognitively, or emotionally.

As far as the methods (see section 3.2.) are concerned, teachers should not be intimidated by the terms "traditional" and "current". The healthy mix of various methods will probably be a good choice. The task-based approach may be the typical choice, but many other methods may be used without worrying

that they will be harmful, as long as you always have learners' needs and characteristics in mind. For example, learning vocabulary that will be used in speaking is often nothing but drill, but as long as the drill comes "packaged" into games, songs, rhymes, or is accompanied by some physical activity, learners will enjoy it. As they grow older (age nine and up, perhaps), they will not enjoy singing nursery rhymes, but they will be into rap songs or some authentic songs that contain useful language and structures. Incorporating movement into activities and breaking the 45-minute lesson into four or five task-based activities will help with concentration.

Being observant might be one of the most important characteristics of a successful teacher. Observing is the first step towards changing for the better, of one's methods, activities, learners' behaviour, etc. Observing is an important part of formative assessment, which we will discuss in section 5.2. Being observant of all things happening in the classroom goes hand in hand with the teacher's flexibility and adaptability to various circumstances. When speaking is concerned, the "observant eye" may catch who does not speak enough in the classroom (and help them do it), how pair work or group work affect one's willingness to speak English, who is not repeating during choir activities (so that you can ask them privately why they do not participate, and encourage them or help them join in), and similar. Being observant is helpful in the evaluation of the effectiveness of tasks and methods, which is central to teaching speaking.

### 4.5.3. Talking time

To provide students with a sufficient amount of practice, teachers need to be observant of the student talking time. The amount of student talk in the lesson depends on the type of the lesson (Hitotuzi, 2005). With teenage and adult learners, more time will be spent developing writing skills, which leads to a decrease in student talking time. The same study reports that student talking time is increased when students are given assignments that require them to speak in pairs or small groups. An interesting Master's Thesis study was conducted with high school students in Germany by Hetzelein (2016). Even though the participants of the study belong to a different population than the population we discuss in this book, some of the results are relevant because they show that teachers underestimated their talking time (meaning that in the self-evaluation of their talking time, they believed to talk less than they did) and they still reported the wish to have talked less. On the other hand, students overestimated the teacher's talking time and reported that they wanted to speak more in the lesson. Another German study (DESI-Konsortium, 2006) recorded 210 EFL lessons and analysed various variables including the teacher-student talking time. Students talked for 23.5% of the time and teachers for 50.5% of the time, whereas there was no speaking during 26% of the lessons. Student talking time consisted of: 47.9% of the free speech, 26.8% of the reading out loud, and 20.1% of other types of speaking (such as repetition). Again, the study was not done with young learners but it also points to the fact that in self-evaluation, teachers believe that they talk less than they actually do. In learning generally, students achieve better results in classes with an overall high amount of student talk. This was confirmed by a study in general pedagogy by Sedova et al. (2019), showing that, regardless of the learners' background, indi-

vidual participation is strongly linked with individual achievement. It confirms Vygotsky's (1978) idea that speaking leads to internalisation and may as well be applied to learning foreign languages. The so-called talk-intensive pedagogies are important in every subject, especially in teaching languages. An adult learner study in Japan (Talandis & Stout, 2014) has shown that personalised topics and frequent assessment of spoken English lead to higher fluency and accuracy in learners' conversations.

In our opinion, knowing what young learners are like and relying on the idea that internalisation is crucial in learning, is as important for young learners as for adult learners. Teaching language that is meaningful to them and creating opportunities for them to speak is crucial. Giving learners a lot of positive feedback on their speaking skills (see sections 5.2. and 5.3.) is also very helpful. Furthermore, teachers need to make sure that each learner is given the same amount of speaking time. With young learners, this may be challenging. Every teacher who has ever taught a young learner class knows what it looks like: The teacher asks a question and there are dozens of hands in the air, eager to answer. Teachers are just humans, and they may not realise that they are asking the same children to answer questions or say something. Therefore, keeping track of how many times each student has spoken in the class is not a bad idea. There are many ways to do it: having a chart putting check marks next to their names every time they talk; assigning students numbers and drawing the numbers from a bowl on the teacher's desk to decide who will speak, etc. To make it a bit cuter for students, teachers can have a row of bathing ducks with numbers on their desks and let students take a duck as they enter the classroom. Of course, some students will be reluctant to speak for many reasons: their insecurity, lack of vocabulary at the moment, their personality, or their current mood. Teachers may let them stay silent if they wish, but make sure that it does not become a habit. It is important to find out what bothers them and lead them gently towards more speaking time.

At the early stages of language learning, the use of the mother tongue in lessons is quite common as well. According to Erk (2017), in Croatian schools, teachers of English in lower primary contexts use their mother tongue from 10% to 90% of the time for various purposes. Some teachers are very successful in giving instructions and managing the class in English, no matter how young their students are, but some struggle and feel the need to rely on students' mother tongue, perhaps even more than necessary. As with the teacher talking time, teachers may be unaware of the amount of L1 they use and seem to underestimate it (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). The amount of L1 used by teachers is very individual and not experience-related (De la Campa & Nassaji, 2009). There is no recipe for the amount of mother tongue use – it is very context-dependent; however, a general piece of advice is to provide as much FL input and to resort to L1 whenever it leads to better conditions for learning. It is advisable to speak English as much as possible, even during the teacher's self-talk. For example, a teacher is setting up the computer and something is not right. While the teacher is handling the computer and the students are waiting, she may talk to herself in English: "Oh, this is not working. Let me see what's wrong. I'll try clicking this to see whether it would work. No. Hmm, I'm confused now. Let's try this button. Yes, here it is. We're all set and ready to begin." Also, telling her students in simple words about her day or weekend is sometimes a good idea.

#### 4.5.4. Differentiation

The fact that each foreign language teacher today is faced with mixed-ability classes is perhaps the most challenging part of their job. On the one hand, some children have acquired a lot of English language through input via modern media and are quite fluent (sometimes even very accurate) in the use of English in everyday situations. Their vocabulary is quite rich and teachers are quite often amazed by their choice of phrases and grammatical structures. On the other hand, some children are true beginners. Curriculum and textbooks are designed for this group of students. Also, some children in the class will have higher language aptitude than others.

Educational systems, including Croatian, usually do not allow for streaming or tracking<sup>12</sup>, and teachers need to be open to and prepared for differentiation or differentiated instruction. Again, the idea has poured into foreign language education from general education theory and practices. For example, Tomlinson (1999) wrote a very useful book for teachers in which she discusses differentiation and gives many examples that can easily be applied to teaching foreign languages. According to her, differentiation is “a teacher’s response to learner’s needs guided by general principles of differentiation, such as respectful tasks, flexible grouping, and ongoing assessment and adjustment” (15). In the context of teaching young learners to speak English, observation and formative assessment (see sections 5.2. and 5.3.) are crucial for understanding learners’ needs. Students with lower language aptitude and beginner students will benefit from repetition and vocabulary recycling through songs, rhymes, or games. They will need a lot of visual support in learning and a lot of encouragement in speaking. Teachers should make sure that all students speak in each lesson, and teach them that making mistakes is a part of learning. They should create an atmosphere of mutual student encouragement, too and provide a lot of scaffolding. For the more proficient students, simple tasks may become boring over time, unless they are designed in a way that would “mask” their outcomes (e.g., if the outcome is for students to describe toys using adjectives of size and colour, more proficient students may be asked to provide more details). As a reward, instead of the grades, special badges may be distributed to learners (e.g., “Chief of Descriptions”) or they can be given a chance to be a “Teacher Helper” in the next activity. When preparing for an oral task, the teacher may divide students into different groups or around different learning stations, and let everyone try both simple and more challenging tasks and be there to support them. Of course, the tasks will be assessed in regard to the curriculum outcomes, not to the performance of the most successful students, because teachers need to grade what they teach (and not what students have learned outside the classroom).

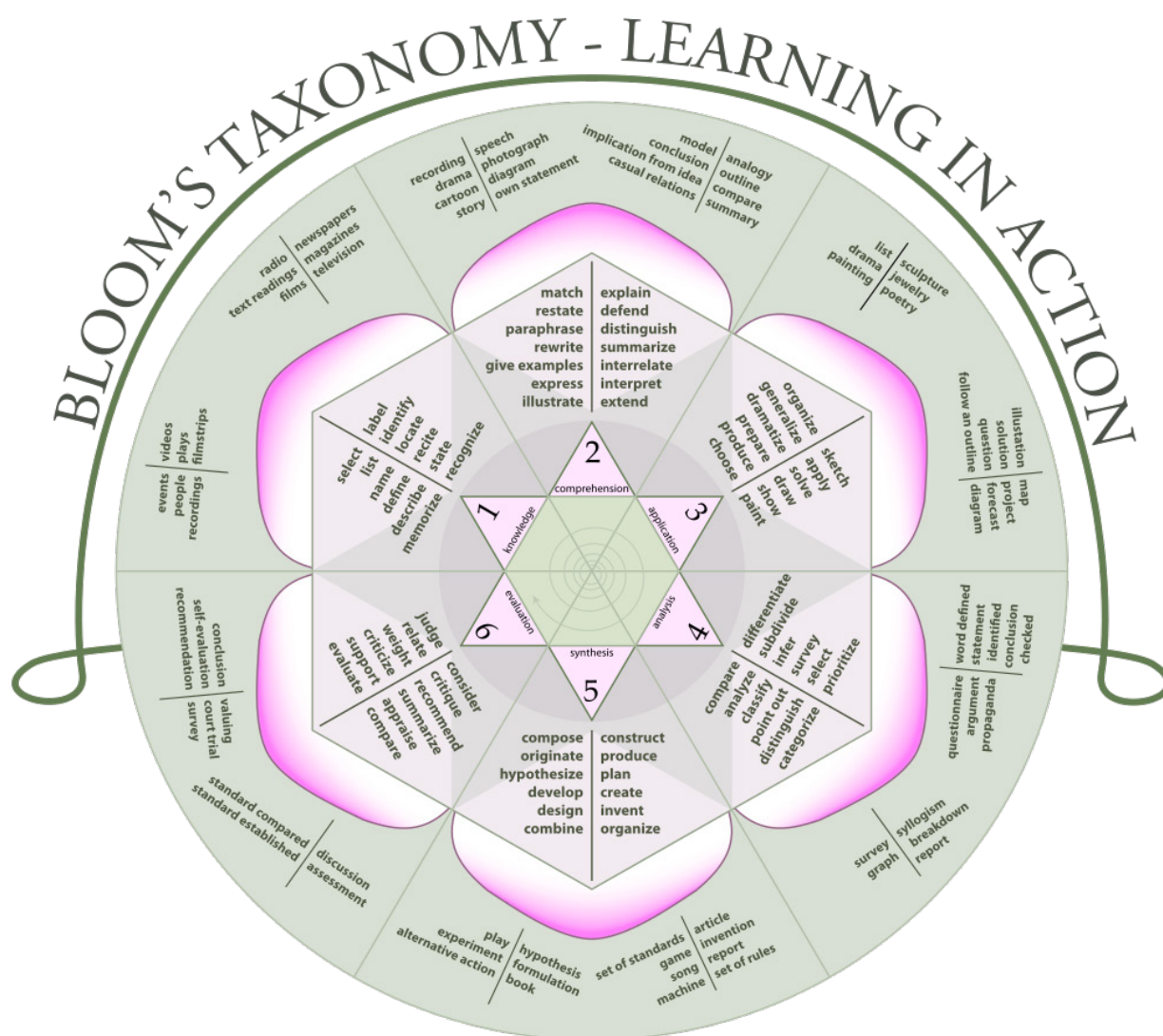
Differentiation is aimed at students’ needs - most of them need to be noticed by their teacher. Once the teacher knows his students, the ideas of how to meet their needs will come. The bottom line is that no student should be neglected, neither due to their lack of language aptitude or proficiency nor due to their superior performance in comparison to the majority of students.

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<sup>12</sup> grouping of students with similar abilities in certain schools or classrooms

Figure 1

Bloom's taxonomy<sup>13</sup>



When creating diverse tasks, Bloom's taxonomy (Figure 1) is typically used as a reference for the task difficulty or as a source of ideas. High-proficiency students may be asked to do more complex assignments (in line with their age, of course), such as to evaluate someone's speech. For example, the teacher may write a text about a familiar topic with some errors in it. They will find an online AI text-to-speech generator that will read and record the text, and send the text to the advanced students to correct it. Next time, they will report orally what they have noticed and tell the teacher how the text should be made more accurate. Students can then be asked to prepare a similar task for other students. High-proficiency students are usually very quick in doing their school assignments, and the teacher needs to find ways to keep them busy nevertheless. In Figure 2, there is a suggestion on how this can be done.

13 By John Manuel Kennedy Traverso - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4000460>

**Figure 2**  
*Challenge Box*



In Figures 3, 4, and 5, there are three examples of differentiation. The outcome for all students is described, followed by the regular and the differentiated activity.

**Figure 3**

*Differentiating a guessing game*



**Figure 4**

*Differentiating a text-retelling activity*

**Daily routine** Outcome: To talk about daily routines

There is a text in their textbook about a girl and a boy and their daily routines. After covering the lesson, you tell students that they should practise retelling the text and answer questions about their daily routine.

**Differentiation possibility: Tell students to choose what they would like to do**

**a.**  
Retell the textbook text and answer questions about their daily routine.

**b.**  
Retell the textbook text with the help of the gap sentences (provided in the handout in advance), such as "Emily usually \_\_\_\_\_ at 9 am".  
Answer questions about their routines.

**c.**  
Invent a character, describe them shortly, and say what their daily routine is like. Encourage students to be creative and come up with various characters - human, animals, robots, or non-human creatures of any kind; they may draw pictures of this character and show it to everyone (using a design tool or a presentation).



**Figure 5**

*Differentiating a description task*

# DESCRIBING PEOPLE

After you have covered the family topic, you ask students to pick three members of their family and talk about them using the suggested vocabulary/phrases.

**Differentiate**

Organise classroom stations with different scaffolding options. Students circle the stations and do tasks in groups. Some of the tasks will be too difficult for some students, but tell them not to worry. Tell them to listen to their friends, and be attentive because that is how we learn as well.

- 1 Station 1 - put word cards on the desk that can be used to combine into sentences (e.g., “my mother, my sister, my granny, is, cute, great, the best” ...).
- 2 Station 2 - Provide students with sentences about someone’s family members. Tell them to compare their family members to this (e.g., “My mother is very patient.” --> “Yes, my mother IS very patient.” or “No, my mother is not very patient.” )
- 3 Station 3 - Provide students with adjectives they have learnt so far that can be used to describe people. Challenge them to think of more adjectives together as a group. Then challenge them to talk about their family members using as many adjectives as possible.

At the end, tell them to decide which station they like the best. This is the station they will be at when speaking about the topic in front of the whole class (for assessment purposes).

### 4.5.5. Error treatment

The spoken language of young learners will contain a lot of errors and mistakes, which are often taken as different concepts in EFL pedagogy. Errors occur due to the lack of knowledge of what is correct, whereas mistakes are a result of a functional inability to perform in line with something that the learner knows (Ellis, 1997, p. 17). Errors in speech may be of lexical, grammatical or phonetic nature. Both errors and mistakes may be treated on-the-spot, as they happen, or after the spoken performance. Also, it is entirely valid not to treat them on some occasions.

The fact that learners make errors is not only a reflection of their lack of knowledge but also a sign that they are attempting to formulate and articulate (see section 3.1.2.) a message in a foreign language, which is in itself a signal of learning. Therefore, even if the teacher decides to correct the errors, this should come hand in hand with praise. Mistakes happen to learners, despite the fact that a particular structure has been practised, for many reasons: slip of the tongue, too many things to process at the same time, hypothesising about the rules of the language, overgeneralising the rules, time pressure, speaking anxiety, etc. So, generally speaking, the communicative approach to teaching recommends being tolerant of learners' errors.

Being tolerant does not necessarily mean that there will be no treatment of errors. It suggests that teachers should not be intolerant towards mistakes, and when deciding to treat them, they need to know why and how to do it. Some learners are more self-conscious than others about their FL proficiency, already being aware that they lack the knowledge, and will have a hard time dealing with the anxiety (see Mihaljević Djigunović, 2002, pp. 75-97; Rahmat et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2024), whereas others will be very confident in their speaking skills, even though they make a lot of errors. In other words, different students will sometimes need to be approached differently.

Teachers may correct young learners in fear of the fossilisation of mistakes, or forming habits which will later, when there is more focus-on-form, be difficult to correct. Also, they may fear that children, by being exposed to the language of their peers and learning from it too, might "pick up" other learners' errors.

Errors and mistakes may be treated immediately as they happen, however, this should not feel like interruption or criticism. If a learner makes a lot of errors while speaking, correcting him all the time will be pointless. Teachers may opt for the delayed treatment of the mistakes they noticed, either by remembering them or by making notes. The delayed error correction may happen immediately after the activity (without naming names) or may be used as the basis for further instruction on one of the following occasions.

Typical ways of on-the-spot correcting include verbal or non-verbal correction. Verbal correction is done by asking the learner to repeat what they have said or saying "I'm sorry?", pretending not to have heard (and giving them a chance to correct themselves), by saying the correct word/expression, repeating what they have said, by repeating up to the problematic part (and again letting the learners correct themselves), by recasting (saying the same thing correctly), and similar. The way the teacher does it is crucial for how the correcting might sound to the learners - the same type of correction may sound either critical or non-critical, depending on the tone the teacher uses, their facial expression while saying it, the amount of encouragement they display, etc. The same can be said about non-verbal correction options, such as signalling by facial expressions, head movements, gestures, coughs, and similar. If learners are aware that the teacher's intentions are good, they will accept the corrections as a part of learning. However, it is not enough just to tell learners that one's intentions are good, they need to feel it in teachers' positive and encouraging behaviour.

Self-correction and peer-correction follow the same principles. First, it is important to decide when learners will be asked to self-correct or peer-correct, and then the ground rules and the atmosphere in which correction happens need to be set and known to all learners. There are examples where peer correction works perfectly well, even though children are sometimes very critical towards their peers. Teachers' presentation of language learning as making mistakes all the time, and learning from them is very important. Many times, teachers play games with learners in which they make mistakes and let children correct them, just to show that correcting is not "a big deal" in language classrooms.

Teachers also need to be aware of their role in learners' errors (Winke et al., 2018). Sometimes, the task may be too difficult or cognitively too demanding for learners.

#### 4.5.6. Teacher's competences

Being a teacher carries multiple roles and responsibilities, whatever subject a teacher teaches. When it comes to teaching English as a foreign language to young learners, this encompasses pedagogical, psychological, theoretical, and subject-content knowledge, as well as a good mastery of the language itself. When either linguistic or pedagogical competences are missing, teachers rate their self-efficacy as lower (Choi & Lee, 2016).

With the rise of the communicative approach to teaching and the expectation to teach the whole lesson entirely in English, the question of teacher proficiency has become implemented in teacher training programmes and educational policies (Freeman et al. 2015). Proficiency is believed to be a key to a teacher's self-confidence in speaking; if the proficiency is low, it can have a negative effect on students' learning and the application of the communicative approach (Nunan, 2003; Butler, 2004). A case study by Tragant Mestres and Lundberg (2011), however, does not emphasise proficiency as one of the crucial factors in the description of a successful young learners' teacher. Proficiency, of course, is not enough for successful teaching, but we find it important for several reasons, other than the teacher's self-confidence in speaking. Today, with the growth of research and the surge of ideas about teaching which are being imposed by educational policies, we find it important that teachers can read and understand professional and scientific literature that would help them make informed decisions in the classroom. The rise of teachers' autonomy brings higher responsibility for self-education. Having a good command of English as the language of international communication is crucial for being a successful teacher in the contemporary world. Furthermore, as schools are opening up towards various international projects, being able to communicate one's teaching practices to teachers around the world, and learn from other teachers' practices is also an important aspect of life-long learning. Also, the language changes all the time and new vocabulary is being added to the English language daily, so staying interested in learning the language and brushing up one's skills is what we see as an important trait of an interested, motivated, and enthusiastic teacher. Finally, for some learners, a teacher is the only source of language input. The language that teachers use in the classroom need not be too simple or extremely basic, as long as it

does not impede learning. Of course, when giving instructions, teachers need to be clear and concise and teach frequent vocabulary, but when telling children stories or anecdotes, they may use language that is a bit beyond curriculum expectations (e.g., stories containing Past Simple, or anecdotes from their life containing authentic language). So, even though teachers' lack of proficiency in the classroom can be compensated by in-school or out-of-school exposure, or teacher-related factors, such as good classroom management, there are reasons why teachers might want to improve their language skills.

There are teacher skills that are not language-related (in terms of proficiency or language methodology) which we find important for the development of young learners' speaking skills, such as classroom management, successful classroom- and out-of-classroom communication, and attitudes towards teaching in general. In describing them, we rely on our own teaching experiences which support the belief that, besides environmental and learner-related factors, the teacher-factor is also very important in learners' attitudes towards speaking, their motivation to speak, the development of social and communication skills, and eventually, their speaking abilities.

Classroom management refers to many ways the teachers ensure that classroom culture is supportive of learning. It involves issues such as discipline, teacher-student and student-student relationships, focus on learning during lessons, and similar. The word discipline has a negative connotation of the enforcement of obedience and order, whereas making sure that learners follow the teacher's lead requires a lot of nuanced psychological insight into their needs, their wish to be respected, accepted, seen, and heard, and the ways a teacher's actions might affect learners' behaviour. Learners, as our experience has shown us, do not mind classroom rules and order. They feel good and secure about them, as long as the rules are meaningful to them. For example, instead of telling students to be quiet while others speak, and criticising learners when they do not comply with the rule, teachers may explain why this is important to them (she cannot hear the student well) or the student speaking (he or she may be annoyed and distracted). The teacher may introduce a non-verbal sign, which will signal that she cannot hear well (pointing to her ear), and instead of interrupting the flow of the lesson, she may look at the students who are chatting or approach them, pointing at her ear. She can keep a puppet in the classroom who has a hearing-problem and the puppet may do the same - express "annoyance" in a humorous way when they are not listening to each other. There are many creative and often humorous ways to keep the classroom discipline and children are usually quite responsive to such "rules". Being clear and fair about one's expectations, fair in the treatment of students, and respectful to their needs is at least half of classroom management, especially with young learners. Adding a little bit of humour, fun, and entertainment to one's lessons is also very helpful.

Quite often, in FL classrooms, students are often teacher-oriented and when giving answers or speaking in the classroom, they address the teacher. To develop their sociolinguistic competencies (see section 3.3.) teachers may remind learners to address the whole class. Keeping the classroom learning-centred and learner-centred will encourage speaking, and there are many ways to do it: by putting important rules/instructions/vocabulary items on the walls or pinboards, displaying students' work, collecting

toys or items that would make teaching more interesting, keeping bookshelves with graded readers in the classroom. There need to be classroom rules that would help everybody feel welcome to speak and that would provide equal opportunities to all learners. In learning-centred classrooms, teachers often utilise pair- and group-work. To make them supportive of speaking, teachers need to be able to analyse the benefits and possible drawbacks of each and organise the work so that it is conducive to learning and the development of speaking (see section 4.5.4 for the example of learner-centred group work). Creating teacher-student and student-student bonds will make students more relaxed and ready to participate in communication. Every group of students is different - some classes are chattier than others, easier to discipline than others, more creative than others, and similar. But there are ways to create a nice and welcoming atmosphere in every classroom. Teachers need to be observant, good at planning and classroom management, and highly adaptable to various circumstances.

Finally, teachers need to be professional in all aspects of their teaching. They need to work on their conflict resolution strategies and always remember that they are adults, even in adult-adult conversations. Their professionalism should be their pride and shield, and it stems from thinking about one's actions and having a reasonable motivation for any of them. One must know what they want to do and why so that they can explain that to children, parents, colleagues, or superiors. Working on their communication skills, being good listeners, and staying calm in every situation, yet passionate about teaching, are key components of successful teaching.

## 5. Assessment of young FL learners' speaking skills

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With the rise of young learners of English as an FL, both in immersive and non-immersive contexts, the need for age-appropriate assessment of their language skills has resulted in the appearance of volumes dedicated to young learner assessment (e.g. McKay, 2006; Nikolov, 2016), book chapters on young learner speaking assessment (e.g. Cameron, 2001, Linse & Nunan, 2005, p. 137-164; Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 165-176; pp. 214-240; Papp, 2019, pp. 389-407), specialised placement tests for young learners (e.g. Cambridge's Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers, A2 Flyers<sup>14</sup>; TOEFL Young Students Series<sup>15</sup>), as well as young-learner-adapted CEFR benchmark descriptors (Goodier & Szabo, 2018, 2018a).

Oral proficiency of foreign language learners is assessed for different purposes. In research, it is "measured" and studied to find out what constitutes oral proficiency, what factors influence one's performance, how assessment practices relate to learning, etc. (Fan & Yan, 2020). In terms of language knowledge, young learners are often assessed for the purposes of further language education, or as a part of immigration policies. The tests are created to reflect learners' speaking abilities against certain language-proficiency benchmarks, such as CEFR in Europe or ACTFL in the USA. Finally, assessment of language learners is done by teachers continuously throughout formal language education. Assessment by teachers differs in many ways from the research-based and proficiency-based assessment and quite often presents a challenge for teachers.

### 5.1. Proficiency assessment

Proficiency or placement tests, which are also extensively used in research, are a window into the current state of learners' oral abilities. The tests are prepared by experts and undergo validity and reliability evaluation (e.g., French, 2003). They are sometimes recorded and they are usually rated by two raters. Their format and techniques ensure that the assessment is developmentally appropriate, engaging, and informative. One common format for speaking assessment is the individual oral interview, which allows for personalised attention and provides a comfortable environment for young learners to express themselves. During the interview, assessors use various techniques to elicit language production, such as asking open-ended questions, providing prompts, or using visual aids like pictures or props to stimulate conversation. After the interview, which is usually recorded, scales are used to rate learners' fluency, vocabulary usage, pronunciation, ability to maintain a conversation, and other oral

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14 <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/qualifications-young-learners/>

15 <https://www.etsglobal.org/fr/en/programme/toefl-young-students-series-tests>

production features. Lately, there has been a rise in pair- and group-based proficiency tests. Learners are put in pairs or groups and asked to engage in spoken interaction with their peers. This format allows assessors to observe learners' ability to communicate effectively in a group setting. Techniques such as providing discussion prompts, assigning roles, or setting up simulated scenarios are used to structure the activity and guide learners' language production. Group discussions and role-plays can be used to assess not only individual speaking skills but also interpersonal communication and negotiation of meaning, reflecting the communicative nature of language use in real-life contexts (Fisher et al., 2008). Both interviews and group tests are time-limited; for young learners, they usually last three to five minutes. In addition to traditional face-to-face assessments, technology-enhanced speaking assessments are becoming increasingly common. Speakers engage in online speaking simulations and automated speech recognition technology or online platforms are used to evaluate learners' speaking performance, providing instant feedback on aspects such as pronunciation, intonation, and speaking rate. The proficiency tests have lately become more attuned to the needs of young learners. An important endeavour in describing what young language learners can do in terms of speaking when their cognitive and world knowledge capacities are taken into consideration is the newly developed set of documents that collate the CEFR descriptors for young learners aged 7-10 and 11-15 (Goodier & Szabo, 2018, 2018a). They cover the reception, production, interaction, and mediation strategies and activities, as well as communicative language competences and plurilingual and pluricultural competences across all levels of learning (Pre-A1 to C2). The descriptors are written as "can-do" statements, e.g., "I can tell the names of all the animals I know" (spoken production), "I can replace words I do not know or have forgotten with simpler synonyms or describe with gestures, facial expression or other words" (production strategies), "I can ask where someone lives, and say where I live" (interaction activities), etc. The descriptors are meant to be a guide for more successful teaching, as well, since they are not focused solely on the assessment, but a "new, empowering vision of the learner" (CEFR - Companion volume, p. 28) who needs to use the language in real-life situations. CEFR is described as a tool that would assist in the planning of curricula, courses and examinations. It is recommended that teachers study the descriptors that relate to their learners and incorporate them in their curricula because English lessons prepare their learners for the use of English "in the wild" (Sundqvist, 2009), or real-life situations, such as attending classes, seminars, lectures, working in the English-speaking environment, or simply travelling and meeting people. However, many test preparation courses prioritise passing the exam over holistic language development and the teacher's role is seen as preparing the student for the exam (Barnes, 2017).

## 5.2. Classroom-based assessment

Classroom-based assessment of spoken proficiency differs in many ways from standardised proficiency tests.

First of all, classroom-based assessment is not a discrete activity separate from teaching and learning. Unlike the placement speaking tests, which present a five-minute insight into the speaking abilities of young learners in regard to the expected benchmarks, classroom assessment is a much broader concept,

having many “faces”. It is an integral part of teaching and learning. For teachers, it is useful as a means of checking the effectiveness of their teaching (*backwash* or *washback effect*<sup>16</sup>) and for learners it is a way to understand their strengths and weaknesses and make their learning more meaningful. It is an ongoing process, and it is usually not comparable with proficiency tests in terms of validity and reliability. That is why we find the definition by Brewster et al. (2004) on point when they say that classroom assessment is “an attempt to analyse the learning that a child has achieved over a period of time as a result of the classroom teaching/learning situation”. The period of time may be as short as a lesson or as long as a school year, and the assessment is always seen as an attempt, meaning that the teacher is aware of the limitations of their assessment methods. Given its continuous nature, teacher assessment does not necessarily focus simultaneously on all the aspects of spoken performance, such as lexical diversity, accuracy, fluency, phonological command, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence, etc. Teachers often need to decide between the holistic or analytic scoring of students’ performance. Holistic scoring focuses on general performance, whereas analytic scoring assigns separate scores to different aspects of performance (e.g. fluency, use of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation). A study of the scoring rates of candidates for CEFR level appointment (Khabbzbashi & Galaczi, 2020) has shown that there are differences in placement if different scoring models are used. Besides the holistic and analytic scoring model, the raters used the so-called part model, during which raters score holistically each part of the speaking test (interview about candidates, a description and comparison of two photographs, questions related to a scenario, and a one-minute monologue on an abstract topic). Both analytical and part scoring ensured the separation of candidates into more statistically distinct ability levels and higher levels of rater consistency, but part scoring proved to be especially precise. Applying this to the classroom situation, in which teachers sometimes give holistic scores for “tiny” assignments during lessons (e.g., a student answering questions, or describing a picture; a pair of students exchanging information on their pets, etc.), students will be appropriately graded as long as they are graded more times on different types of tasks. However, if the speaking test is announced in advance and practised, an analytic rubric might be more informative to students in terms of feedback about their strengths or weaknesses. In section 5.3.2., we will provide a couple of examples of assessment rubrics.

Classroom assessment is often seen as either formal or informal (Brown, 2003, pp. 5-6). Informal assessment happens every time a teacher notices something about the learners’ performance and makes a comment, gives suggestions to learners on how to improve their performance, or simply makes a “mental note-to-self” about some issues that need to be addressed in teaching. Formal assessment is usually more structured, and sometimes it is announced and planned; for example, a whole lesson can be devoted to a show-and-tell activity, which was practised beforehand and during which the teacher makes notes about each student’s performance and grades them appropriately. Formal assessment is not the same as testing, because it involves various methods. Sometimes, students will be formally assessed during a learning activity; for example, a pair of students doing a role-play performs unexpectedly well, and the teacher decides to give them an excellent grade, thus turning a learning activity into a formal assessment opportunity.

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16 Washback or backwash is the influence of testing on teaching and learning, which can be positive or negative (see Taylor, 2005) and often contextually defined (Cheng, 2005).



The categorisation of classroom assessment according to its function makes a distinction between formative and summative assessment. As explained by Taras (2005, p. 468), “the process of assessment leads to summative assessment, that is, a judgement which encapsulates all the evidence up to a given point. This point is seen as finality at the point of judgement”. Formative assessment is also “the process of making a judgement according to standards, goals, and criteria”, however it “requires feedback which indicates the existence of a “gap” between the actual level of the work being assessed and the required standard. It also requires an indication of how the work can be improved to reach the required standard” (Taras, 2005, p. 468). However, in practice, even summative assessment may have a formative quality, and teachers should try to make students realise that a speaking test is not “the end”, nor the “final point” in one’s learning, but also a new opportunity to understand what their (and teacher’s) future endeavours should encompass (Brown, 2003, pp. 6-7).

Feedback to learners is a necessity in all types of assessment. Implicit feedback, which does not explain why a student received a particular grade is, hopefully, not so common in education anymore. A typical explicit teacher feedback act is made up of three elements, according to Sadler (1998): attending to the learner’s production, comparing it to some background or reference framework (reflecting and identifying strengths and weaknesses), and making an explicit response, either by grading the performance or providing a verbal statement about its quality (giving reasons for the judgement and ways to remedy the shortcomings). It is used in all kinds of assessments (formal, informal, formative and summative). With young learners, teachers need to be extremely cautious with the choice of words to describe learners’ performance, since they do not understand the metalanguage, they do not like to disappoint their teachers, and they often cannot cope with being unsuccessful in comparison to their peers. Therefore, it is best to include a lot of praise for their achievement and to teach them to focus on their progress rather than compare themselves with others, using simple language and/or giving feedback in their mother tongue. Also, since young learners are still not able to organise their learning and what steps they need to take to improve their performance, teachers have a crucial role in helping learners do it. Children often do not remember what the teacher told them in class, or are not able to repeat the teacher’s words to their parents at home, therefore it is a good idea to give written feedback on their speaking performance, in children’s mother tongue, so that parents are familiar with the expectations, too.

Unlike during the proficiency tests, the teacher is not a neutral examiner of learners’ performance. The teacher is a creator of lessons, a performer of the activities, a guide in learning, a test-maker and an examiner. This makes the teacher an engaged party whose role is to support learners in their group and individual endeavours towards speaking proficiency. No matter how important objectivity in testing is, and we will address it in the sections to follow, it is impossible for teachers not to be subjective. In fact, subjectivity and empathy to understand the learner’s current situation or state of mind sometimes make teachers more encouraging and understanding of students’ needs. So, lately, the research into classroom-based instruction has brought forth the concept of dynamic assessment as a more appropriate way to connect testing with instruction, especially in the field of speaking assessment (Poehner, 2008). The concept is used in education and psychology studies and relies on the Vygotskian and neo-Vygotskian idea of scaf-

folding, or providing support to learners so that they can reach goals that are not quite unattainable to them, but still require other's help. Thus, teaching and assessment ought to be fully integrated, and during the assessment, teachers should intervene to lead learners to achieve more than they would independently (Lidz & Gindis, 2003, p. 99). Unlike the product-focused assessment, dynamic assessment is focused on the change in performance and the guidance or feedback that is necessary for this change to occur. It takes into account the hidden potential of an individual's performance, it is fluid, process-oriented, diagnostic, engaged and flexible (Murphy, 2011, pp. 8-9). The examiner is not neutral but engaged in understanding of the characteristics of the person being assessed and their current circumstances. In the assessment of speaking skills of young learners, there is evidence that various scaffolding techniques during assessment lead to better performance; for example, giving young learners more time to plan what they will say and not pressuring them with the time limit while speaking leads to higher fluency, accuracy and complexity of their speech (Aaj et al., 2021); scaffolding the retelling of a story by dividing it into segments and asking guided questions about each segment helps young learners to include more details into their final retell performance, improve their word choice, and provide more coherent stories (Choi et al., 2019). Dynamic assessment is intrinsically linked to the backwash (or washback) effect, or the impact that testing and learning mutually have on each other, and does not stand in the way of instructional practices, as the more traditional types of testing sometimes do (Fredricksen & Collins, 1989).

Furthermore, assessment of spoken language in the classroom is time-consuming (Nikolov, 2017) and it is quite often impractical to provide the same assessment conditions for all learners, as provided during standardised proficiency tests (quiet, isolated room; one-to-one interaction with the assessor; the same set of questions/tasks; same length of assessment). Therefore, it mostly occurs during lessons, as instruction-embedded assessment and differs in terms of being outcome-based (or curriculum-driven) and task-based (see Rea-Dickins, 2004). Outcome-based assessment of speaking focuses on the learner's attainment of certain "can-do" activities. For example, an outcome of a lesson may be that all learners become able to describe their favourite toy using basic vocabulary and simple sentences. Then, learners are assessed during a series of lessons by answering questions, performing speaking tasks that focus on these descriptions, or during a single lesson in which all students bring their toys and talk about them in front of the other students. Teachers create assessment rubrics and grade learners' performance accordingly. Task-based assessment is, according to Rea-Dickins (2004), less embedded in instructional practices, because it focuses on the authentic use of language, which is quite often not typical for classroom context, especially with young learners.

Teachers do not only assess, they observe continuously looking for the effect of their teaching on learners' knowledge, or the learners' efforts put into lesson preparations. The "data" gathered ranges from the written documentation about learners' progress to non-written observations, both being turned either into feedback or grades. In fact, the importance of this type of assessment, done daily and continuously, is quite underestimated and rarely present in teacher training curricula. The concepts of validity and reliability<sup>17</sup>

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17 Validity refers to the meaningfulness of the scores whereas reliability refers to scores consistency; both constructs are extensively discussed in various fields which use testing as a tool for research or assessment, EFL included (see Hughes, 1989; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Louma, 2004; Green, 2014).

of speaking tests are, perhaps, less useful for teachers of young learners than the concept of ‘diagnostic competence’ or the teacher’s ability to interpret students’ foreign language growth, as discussed by Edelenbos and Kubanek-German (2004). Teachers rarely have time, opportunity or knowledge to validate their speaking tests in the way this is done for proficiency tests. They also rarely have access to validated proficiency tests and do not use them in the classroom. Diagnostic competence, on the other hand, is a construct that seems to unify two seemingly distinct roles of a teacher as a supporter and the evaluator of learning. It is a combination of “pedagogical attitude towards the learner; hermeneutic abilities: seeing, observing, comparing, interpreting, evoking, self-distance, openness; skills in, for example, selecting diagnostic material, handling, designing, adapting tests and assessments, checking, measuring; scaffolding learning: as an application of the ‘diagnosis’” (Edelenbos & Kubanek-German, 2004, p. 277). As the authors themselves say, the diagnostic competence descriptors need to be refined, but we believe that they are on right track when recognising that teachers need to be able to “read” and support young learners (e.g., make an educated guess about a child’s silence; seeing on their face if they understood the instruction or input; guessing what they are trying to say and finding ways to support them, grouping them according to the perceived needs, being able to evoke prior knowledge), and analyse various classroom situations to reach conclusions about their teaching and children’s language growth (e.g., critically approach their testing materials, being able to explain their limitations, being able to explain the differences between two learners; being able to explain the child’s language growth over a period of time).

There is, unfortunately, not much research on spoken language assessment practices of teachers and how they affect learning. Butler (2009) has found out that teacher’s assessment practices differ as a result of their beliefs about language learning, which signals the need for further research into these beliefs and their effect on spoken language acquisition. It is also known that testing of any kind is stressful for young learners and often not good for their self-esteem (Nikolov, 2016a; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019), which supports the idea that the assessment of speaking needs to be done continuously, along with teaching and learning, and that its main purpose should be to encourage learners’ growth. Peng and Zheng (2016) have found that teachers feel that speaking assessment is not necessary because it “ruins the mood” for young learners and that teachers often ‘follow the gut’ during spoken assessment.

### 5.3. Overcoming assessment challenges for teachers

Even though FL theoretical applied linguistics is intended to inform practice in order to help teachers become more efficient in teaching, some theoretical concepts lead to a lot of confusion, especially during education reforms, when they are presented as the latest ‘must-have’ accessory in teaching. This is even more problematic for teachers of young learners because research on how the changes in educational philosophies are related to FL young learners or affect FL instruction of young learners is scarce. This chapter is an attempt to erase some of the confusion and it is grounded in theoretical knowledge and classroom practice of the authors. It relies on the Croatian context, but it tries to be helpful for young learner teachers in other contexts, as well.

### 5.3.1. What and when to assess?

When designing a course of any kind, one needs to start with the question: What will the learners know after the course that they did not know before its beginning? This means that everything that will be done in the classroom must lead to this end result or the specific outcome. Usually, in the foreign language context, the curriculum goals are similar or the same for all learners, even though learners differ - there are true beginners in the class, as well as quite proficient learners, or children with special needs. So, grading, as the curriculum-based assessment or assessment *of* the achieved outcomes may differ from the assessment *for* learning.

The Croatian English language curriculum, for example, is outcome-based (Table 3), which gives teachers a lot of autonomy (and responsibility) in choosing the materials, teaching methods and approaches, as well as assessment practices that would guide their students towards the achievement of the outcomes. Learners will be able to “do” something at the end of each school year and the differences among students are reflected in the amount of support needed for a particular outcome.

**Table 3**

*Speaking- or pronunciation-related outcomes in the Croatian curriculum for the English language*

Grade	Speaking-related outcomes
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>→ reacts verbally and non-verbally to spoken words and very short and simple instructions and questions</li><li>→ repeats words and very short and simple sentences imitating the English sound system</li><li>→ uses frequent words imitating the English sound system</li><li>→ speaks to other person exchanging the short and simple sentences that have been acquired in lessons</li></ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>→ links the spoken and written form of the simple frequent words that are similar in their graphic and spoken form</li><li>→ repeats words and short and simple sentences imitating the English sounds system</li><li>→ uses frequent words and very short sentences imitating the English sound system</li><li>→ speaks to other person exchanging very short and simple sentences that he/she has acquired in lessons</li><li>→ reads the English alphabet</li></ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>→ reacts verbally and non-verbally to spoken words and simple instructions</li><li>→ reads out loud simple sentences that contain familiar words</li><li>→ repeats short and simple sentences imitating intonation</li><li>→ says frequent words and short and simple sentences that contain familiar words, imitating the English sound system</li><li>→ speaks to other person, exchanging simple sentences that have been acquired in lessons</li><li>→ spells words out loud</li></ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>→ reads out loud a familiar, very short and simple text about a familiar topic</li><li>→ imitates the intonation of a simple sentence</li><li>→ says a very short and simple text</li><li>→ takes part in a very short and simple conversation about a familiar topic</li><li>→ spells words out loud</li></ul>

As it was already mentioned, some of the learners gain proficiency via informal learning and they cannot be set as a standard for the assessment of all learners. Formal assessment, in the case of Croatia, needs to be aligned with the curriculum-prescribed outcomes. Any other extraordinary performance may be acknowledged, praised, and encouraged, but lower-proficiency students must not be assessed against it. If the curriculum is not prescribed, it is best to assess learners by comparing them to the “previous versions” of themselves and the outcomes that the teacher set out as reachable over a certain period of time. Developing speaking skills assumes the development of some sub-skills or microskills of speaking, which refers to the production of smaller chunks of language (phonemes, morphemes, words, collocations, and phrasal units), as well as the macroskills which focus on the larger elements such as fluency, discourse, function, style, cohesion, nonverbal communication, and strategic options (Brown, 2003, pp. 142-144). This is important in the choice of assessment targets. These elements are quite often indistinguishable from one another, especially in adult speech, but with young learners, they may be observed or assessed in isolation. For example, at one assessment opportunity, the teacher may focus on the pronunciation of words only and disregard whether learners know what they mean and whether they can use them in a context. They should, in a case like that, know that they are assessing for the purposes of the development of a microskill, which is a necessary precondition for the development of macroskills.

The *Ordinance on forms, procedures and elements of student assessment in primary and secondary schools* issued by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Youth in 2019<sup>18</sup> distinguishes between assessment *for* learning (advancement and planning of future teaching and learning), assessment *as* learning (active involvement of learners in assessment, and the development of autonomous and self-regulated learning) and the assessment *of* learning (grading the learners’ achievement). The first two types of assessment do not result in grades, but qualitative feedback. Assessment is done continuously, and besides the outcome-based achievement, it focuses on the development of skills, competences, independence, and responsible behaviour. Oral assessment, according to the same document, may be done during all lessons and needs not be announced (unlike the written tests). It should not last longer than 10 minutes per student.

Therefore, what teachers of young learners of English might want to assess falls into three similarly important domains:

1. assessment for learning (e.g., the effect of their teaching on learners’ knowledge; the problems learners experience and why they did not learn what the teacher intended them to learn; what teacher can do to help all learners achieve; how learning can be made more challenging for the more advanced learners in the group; how children feel and how motivated they are for learning, etc.)
2. assessment as learning (e.g., teaching learners to perform simple and age-appropriate self-assessment and peer-assessment activities; giving feedback and talking to learners about the best

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18 <https://www.zakon.hr/cms.htm?id=40193>

ways to learn something, etc.)

3. assessment of learning (e.g., providing an estimation of learners' abilities to perform according to the expected outcomes of instruction; grading or verbally describing their performance, so that the strengths and weaknesses are clear to young learners)

Assessment is, according to the dynamic approach, integrated with instruction (Lidz & Gindis, 2003). Also, it needs to be continuous because of the dynamic nature of speaking development, and should not consist of single oral exams only, because they will not provide enough insight into the complex nature of one's speaking skills (Lowie et al., 2018). The same tasks may be used for teaching and assessment purposes, which means that assessment may be done during instruction. For example, after a certain time of instruction on the typical expressions used to describe the weather, the teacher may hang photos around the classroom of different types of weather in different cities and bring a puppet. The teacher will demonstrate what the puppet does: goes around the classroom and comments on the weather in the photos ("Oh, it's sunny in London! What a surprise!"; "Look, it's very windy in Rijeka. But it's not rainy!", etc.). Then the teacher would let the volunteer students carry the puppet around the classroom one by one, and if some of them performed well, the teacher would grade them immediately. The other performances will serve as a formative assessment and the information for the teacher which structures require more practice.

Pair-work and group-work assessment requires special attention. Pairing low-proficiency students with the teacher is more helpful for them (Butler & Zeng, 2011), whereas high-proficiency students may be challenged by the pair-work to produce more complex language.

If a different set of tasks is to be used for the assessment of learning and a special lesson is devoted to it, teachers need to prepare learners so that there are no out-of-language features that the young learners would find difficult to process or understand (Winke et al., 2018). Simply announcing to students that next time they will have to bring photos of their family and talk about them might bring a lot of confusion that is not linguistically-related: How many photos should they bring? Who should be in the photos? What if students do not have many recent photos of their family? What if all the photos are in the digital form? What kinds of descriptions should they provide - what their family members look like, what they do, what they are wearing in the photos, or something else? In other words, when devoting the whole lesson or a couple of lessons to a formal, summative assessment of all students, there needs to be a lot of scaffolding prior to the performance, both language- and cognition-related.

### 5.3.2. How to assess?

In whatever situation assessment takes place, it needs to be age-appropriate and beneficial for learners. It is advisable for spoken assessment tasks to mimic the typical procedures in the class, e.g. if students are used to seeking teacher- or peer-assistance during lessons, that should not be "forbidden" during formal

assessment (McKay, 2006). To ensure teachers' objectivity, and task validity, and to help learners understand what is being graded, teachers are advised to use rubrics.

Sometimes, there is no time nor a need for comprehensive rubrics. A teacher may wish to assess during the lesson, creating a chart for their use that would contain learner's names and a simple way to make notes about their performance (Table 4). Usually, teachers cannot focus on all aspects of learners' performance, therefore they pick one to assess at a time and leave other elements to be assessed on some other occasion. If this is repeated over a period of time, it may be a helpful way to collect information on your learners' strengths and weaknesses and the future aspects of teaching. For example, the teacher may analyse the results to see if most of the students struggled with fluency on a particular occasion, which might point to flawed preparation or a topic which was cognitively too demanding for learners. If not, then the teacher can track students who struggle with fluency, to try to discover the reasons for it and offer appropriate scaffolding.

**Table 4**

*Quick assessment chart*

\* 0 is the value that signifies that the student did not respond; 3 is the value that signifies that student excelled at the given element

Element	Fluency (no pauses in speech, no hesitation)			Accuracy (uses the structures that have been learnt so far correctly)			Intelligibility (speaks clearly, loud enough, confident)			
	Date	Jan 2	Jan 29	Feb 13	Jan 4	Jan 20	Feb 10	Jan 12	Jan 28	Feb 14
/Student										
Ivan		3	3	2	1	2	2	3	3	3
Monika		2	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3
Vanja		3	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	3
Nikolina		1	2	2	2	2	3	1	1	1
Matej		0	1	2	0	2	1	2	2	3

Teachers do not have to but may at one point share the “results” with learners, either individually or generally. If and when sharing the results with learners, it needs to be done in a way that would not make students embarrassed. For example, the teacher can devote a lesson to a general discussion of students’ strengths and weaknesses (in their mother tongue), during which students will share how they learn, what helps them remember, and how they feel during lessons, and the teacher will share simple and understandable pieces of advice on how to improve certain aspects of learners’ performance without focusing on any learner particularly. While doing that, the teacher should avoid metalanguage and being critical. Rather, they should praise students for what they have accomplished and acknowledge the difficulty of learning another language (see sections 4.1. and 4.2. for the reasons why learners are sometimes unable to be fluent or accurate in their spontaneous spoken performances). After the lesson, the teacher can create a leaflet (in their mother tongue) and distribute it to learners in which they will find some advice on how to learn or practise speaking English outside the lessons (Figure 6). This type of assessment and feedback is not suitable for very young learners, but children aged nine and up.

**Figure 6**

*Support for learning*



## Listen more!

- listen to the audios from your textbook
- listen to the audios and read along
- listen to the audios by pausing and repeating the sentences
- listen to songs in English
- watch videos in English about interesting topics (music, animals, sports, etc.)

## Speak more!

- talk to yourself in the mirror in English
- talk to your stuffed toys or your pets in English
- tell your parents what you have learnt in English
- record yourself speaking English
- speak English with a friend

## Don't forget to ask for help!

- talk to me about your problems in English
- or write me a note and leave it on my desk
- ask your best friend to learn with you



The other way to do it is to ask learners to see you after the lesson individually, and to talk to them about their satisfaction with the lessons, their needs, and their learning strategies, again by keeping it simple, lighthearted, and encouraging for learners. Individual attention, as long as it involves a smiling, warm and soft teacher, is sometimes very encouraging for young learners.

Despite the fact that teachers in Croatia are not legally bound to announce oral assessments, if the whole lesson will be devoted to the assessment of speaking skills, they usually do. This decision is most probably grounded in the cultural context in which parents expect teachers to announce what will be examined so that learners may prepare. Young learners will quite often not remember oral instructions, nor are they able to organise their learning and learn at home independently. Therefore, in the case of the formal and summative assessment (e.g., presentation, picture description, comic-based story retelling, show-and-tell activity, an interview, etc.), it is advisable to find time to explain the grading criteria before the speaking assessment lesson and to practise with students. Giving a rubric to learners and writing a note for parents under the rubric, explaining how the teacher prepared students for a speaking test is always a good idea. It may include a piece of advice on what children could do to continue practising at home (as long as it is something that they can do on their own). By no means should teachers leave the practice for spoken assessment solely in the hands of students or parents. Parents may not be familiar with the foreign language, which will lead to frustration and/or search for tutors, whereas children, as we have already stated, are quite often not ready to organise their learning. This changes with time, and if teachers provide a lot of scaffolding during lessons at the early stages of learning, this will eventually turn into practice that they will be able to undertake on their own.

When learners know in advance that their speaking skills will be graded and have been given the assessment rubric beforehand, an analytic rubric is a common tool. Since our “audience” are young learners, this becomes more complicated, for several reasons. Firstly, when assessing the foreign language performance of young learners, teachers must bear in mind that some of the learners’ errors may not stem from the lack of linguistic knowledge needed for the assignment, but rather from the age-related difficulty in comprehending the task, its language, or the expectations placed upon them (Winke et al., 2018). Therefore, if an assessment rubric is used, it needs to be understandable to young learners. Secondly, teachers are just humans, susceptible to the influence of various factors when asked to rate anyone’s performance; a study of trained examiners of IELTS Speaking Test has shown that they hypothesise about one’s performance and then look for evidence to accept or reject the hypothesis, they cannot identify the cause of one’s disfluency (grammar, vocabulary, shortage of ideas), and when listening to one’s performance for the second time, they may wish to change the scores (Seedhouse & Satar, 2021). So teachers need to find ways to “defeat” themselves and create rubrics that would help them be as objective as possible. Third, during the assessment, eye-contact with a student, nodding one’s head, or encouraging the student verbally is the natural behaviour of all teachers, whereas writing something down and not looking at the student may lead to higher student anxiety and distract teachers from providing the support.

The typical rubrics for the assessment of speaking skills contain a number of criteria: fluency and quantity, communicative output, comprehension, pronunciation and intonation, vocabulary, grammar, pragmatic-discursive structures, and similar (e.g., Buyse, 2013). It is clear from all we know about young learners that such rubrics are not particularly helpful in young learner assessment. When opting for analytic scoring, the elements teachers focus on should align with the intended learning outcomes. For example, if the intended outcome for all learners is to describe their family members using particular adjectives that were taught in the lesson (e.g., “tall, not tall, shy, not shy, chatty, not chatty”, etc.), the rubric may look like this (Table 5).

**Table 5**

*An example of an assessment rubric (pronunciation of words)*

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<p>Can you say the words “shy, tall, chatty, funny, kind”, using them in a sentence to describe your family member?</p> <p>e.g., My mom is shy</p> <p>or My mom is not shy.</p>	<p>Yes, you can! Well-done!</p>	<p>Not bad! I will help you practise more.</p>	<p>You need to practise. I will help you!</p>
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The rubric needs to be written in the learners’ mother tongue. After the first round of assessment, the teacher can assign group work or pair work for more practice, or they can do a differentiated lesson in which they will continue practising with the students who did not achieve the intended outcome whereas the other students might work on something else, individually or in groups/pairs. The assignment in Table 5 only assesses children’s ability to say these words, and not whether they understand what the words mean. To assess that, a prompt needs to be added to the assignment (e.g., “Look at the picture here. What are these children like? Is Susan tall? Is Billy kind?” etc.) and the rubric needs to be expanded (Table 6).

**Table 6**

*An example of an assessment rubric (understanding the meaning of the words)*

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<p>Do you understand what these words mean: “shy, tall, chatty, funny, kind”?</p>	<p>Yes, you do! Fantastic!</p>	<p>Not bad! I will help you practise more.</p>	<p>You need to practise. I will help you!</p>
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As children grow older and their proficiency enhances, the rubrics become more complex (e.g., Table 7). However, they always need to be understandable to them (written in their mother tongue if needed), contain positive and encouraging language, and possible “solutions” or suggestions on how to improve.

**Table 7**

*An assessment rubric for the outcome “The student can compare pets and zoo animals using short and simple sentences and the basic animal vocabulary”.*

		3	2	1	0
Content	Describe at least three pets and three zoo animals.	All six! Well done!	Four or more! Not bad.	Two or more! Was it difficult? Why?	Tell me why you did not do it.
	Say one true sentence about each animal. Compare them like this: ‘A dog is friendly. A wolf is scary.’	You did it! Fantastic!	Four or more! Not bad.	Two or more! Was it difficult? Why?	Tell me why you did not do it.
Pronunciation	Speak clearly so that everybody can understand you. Use correct pronunciation of words.	Marvellous!	Not bad, but let us practise more.	I know this is difficult, but you can do it with more practice.	Tell me why you find it so difficult.
Language	Use ‘is’ and ‘are’ correctly.	Great job!	Not bad, but let us practise more.	I know this is difficult, but you can do it with more practice.	Tell me why you find it so difficult.

Even though there are suggestions to include the amount of support that was given to students in the rubric (and the Croatian curriculum is mostly based on the premise that less support means a better grade), we would like to reconsider whether the amount of scaffolding should be the main criteria for grading. Proficiency is not a cognitive activity done in isolation, and proficiency assessment requires the presence of assistance (McNamara, 1997, p. 449). Dynamic assessment, as explained in Chapter 5.2., helps learners show more, display the “hidden” knowledge, remember what to say, and possibly makes it clearer to the teacher what hinders the learners’ performance (language or out-of-language factors). Therefore, especially when talking about young learners, their need for scaffolding should not be viewed in a negative context (more scaffolding - lower grade).

Finally, our long teaching practice has taught us that, no matter how much a teacher ponders over the rubric when designing it, during assessment, they often see its shortcomings. However, one should not be discouraged or change the rubric during assessment. Every teaching moment is an opportunity to self-evaluate as a teacher and to learn how to do things better next time.

## 5.4. Digital tools in assessment

The use of various digital tools has become increasingly popular in FL teaching despite the lack of evidence of its beneficial impact on FL learning, other than being positively related to learner attitudes, behaviours, and collaboration (Macaro et al., 2012). Students’ books are accompanied by digital material, teachers discover many online tools for use in the classroom, and computers, tablets, and mobile phones are used in various language learning tasks. Some of the tools may be used in classrooms for speaking assessment, as well. For example, digital multimodal composing (DMC) has become increasingly popular, and it refers to the production of texts by combining various semiotic modes (Jiang, 2017). The final products may be video documentaries, presentation slides, podcasts, infographics, webpages, digital stories, etc. If teachers work with students on the production of such material, they often assess it, since it usually takes a lot of learners’ time and effort. The positive side of the materials that have been audio or video recorded, in which learners speak, is that they provide a basis for a more objective and careful analysis of learners’ errors. These errors, in our opinion, should not be taken into account when grading, since the motivation which was achieved by doing such an interesting task may be affected by getting a grade which will not reflect the time and effort invested. Rather than that, learners should be awarded for their effort, and errors should be used for formative assessment and as information on how to scaffold students’ work on similar projects next time.

So far, computer-based tests have not been used as an official way of testing learners’ language skills in Croatia. However, with the advancement of the studies on validation of popular young learner proficiency tests (Papp & Walczak, 2016), the interest in online speaking tests is getting higher. If they prove to be valid and reliable, yet age-appropriate and suitable for young learners (Khabbazbashi et al., 2022), they might become increasingly popular, especially at national tests, since speaking tests are time- and staff-consuming and therefore quite challenging to administer for a larger number of students.

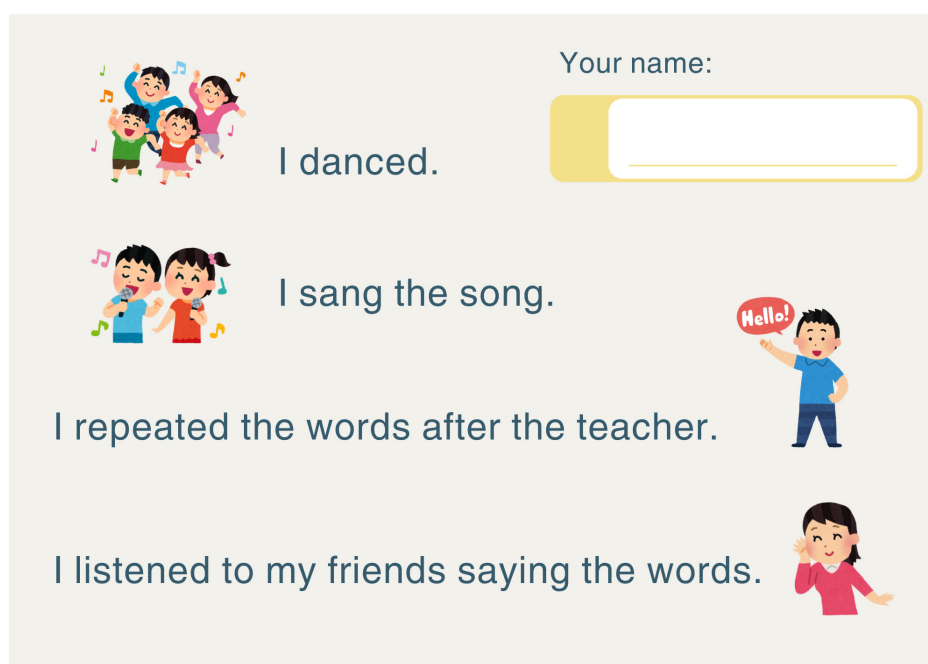
## 5.5. Self-assessment and peer-assessment

There is evidence that young learners (fourth-graders) are not as good at self-assessment as sixth-graders (Butler & Lee, 2006) and many teachers do not see the purpose of self-assessment (Nikolov, 2017) in the young learner classroom. We agree that the teacher needs to be realistic in what to expect of young learners in terms of their self-assessment of speaking skills. Despite that, we suggest nurturing self-assessment as a part of self-image, and self-efficacy development, because they affect learners' achievement and help them cultivate their ideal FL-selves (what kind of learner or speaker of English they wish to become) (Wong, 2018).

Children come to school with a certain self-image that may influence their view of their success. Some will be overly confident, some unnecessarily doubtful of themselves. Children's self-image starts developing at home but community membership contributes to this image and may be beneficial for their competences, self-confidence, and empowerment (Collins, 2000). The child should not feel excluded from the community (in our case the classroom community), and teachers of young learners should perhaps worry more about this aspect of their personality than whether the learners can assess their speaking skills. Self-efficacy is one's belief in his or her capability and should not be mixed with the concept of self-esteem, which is related to the judgement of self-worth (Bandura, 1997, p. 11). Self-efficacy awareness and self-assessment may be integrated into giving very young learners exit cards at the end of some lessons stating the behaviours that were required for participation in the lesson and letting them circle what they think they did (see Figure 7). Again, with very young learners, one should use pictures or their mother tongue in exit cards.

**Figure 7**

*Self-assessment exit card*



The figure shows a self-assessment exit card template. It has a light grey background. At the top right, it says "Your name:" followed by a yellow-bordered rectangular box. Below this, there are four rows of activities, each with a small illustration and a checkbox:

- Row 1: Illustration of three children dancing. Text: "I danced." [ ]
- Row 2: Illustration of two children singing into microphones. Text: "I sang the song." [ ]
- Row 3: Illustration of a boy saying "Hello!". Text: "I repeated the words after the teacher." [ ]
- Row 4: Illustration of a girl listening. Text: "I listened to my friends saying the words." [ ]

With a bit older young learners (grades three and up), self-efficacy may be developed through exit cards or classroom discussions in their mother tongue about their learning strategies. The learners will share their own experiences, discuss what they find difficult in learning the FL, and may learn from the teacher or each other how to become a more efficient learner of English (e.g., the teacher may ask them if they ever listen to songs in English at home, or if they have ever tried to name all the things in their home in English).

Of course, teachers may try out some speaking-related self-assessment strategies with young learners, but they should remember that even if children discover some new problem-solving strategies, they might not apply them immediately to new contexts (see Chapter 2.3.3.). Also, teachers should put the emotional stability of children before children's self-analysis skills, and pay attention to the questions they ask in self-assessment. It is better if they are open-ended, such as "What did you do well, in your opinion?" or "Is there anything that you would change if you had to do it again tomorrow?". Some of the answers will be amazingly mature, some will not be language-related at all (e.g., "I would wear my lucky T-shirt."), and sometimes there will be no other answer than "I don't know". Questions for self-assessment of young learners should not be direct nor involve "hidden" criticism (such as "Were you loud enough? Did you pause much?").

Young learners are not very good at peer-assessment either (Hung, 2018). Despite their sweet nature, they are sometimes very harsh in expressing their criticism of their peers' skills. Some teachers find peer-scaffolding unacceptable (Hild, 2017). Indeed, there are a lot of things that could go wrong during peer-assessment (e.g., children being offended by their best friends' comments, children praising their best friends and criticising the ones they are not friends with, etc.) Therefore, peer-assessment in the very young learner classroom needs to focus on the development of empathy and peer-scaffolding. An important peer-scaffolding aspect is to teach learners that asking for help in the FL classroom is no shame, but a very smart thing to do. Also, letting children scaffold each other, in teacher-controlled circumstances, is a possible way to non-judgemental peer-assessment. Gradually, this will lead to real peer-assessment opportunities, which should best begin with positive observations (see Figure 8 for the example of peer-assessment of presentations).

**Figure 8***Peer-assessment sheet*

WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS' PERFORMANCE?					
Name	Smile	Confidence	Choice of words	Humour	Other (write it yourself)
Sonja	✓			✓	
Lily		✓			how she speaks
Marin		✓		✓	
Noah			✓		photos
Alma	✓		✓		

Hung et al.'s study (2016) of Taiwanese twelve-year-olds has shown that after a group discussion and decision on the grading criteria by the teacher and the students, peer assessment was not significantly different from teacher assessment. However, the rubric consisted of the four criteria: voice, content, interaction with the audience, body language & facial expression, out of which three are either not or borderline linguistically-oriented. The question remains whether, at that age or younger, learners are capable of analysing other learners' oral skills. Still, peer-assessment of such "life-skills" in EFL classes is always a welcome activity. It raises the assessor's self-awareness of their own efficacy and makes them more attentive to other learners' performance (Hung et al., 2016).

## 6. Final words

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In this closing chapter, the shortest in the book, we emphasise that despite numerous changes in teaching practices influenced by social shifts, recent research, technological development, or other factors, two constants remain: human curiosity and capacity to learn, and the critical role of teachers in young learners' classrooms.

The landscape of language education is continually reshaped by new research, emerging methodologies, and innovative technologies. Digital tools and platforms are revolutionising how we engage in learning, offering interactive and immersive experiences that were unimaginable a few decades ago. Human progress is driven by our innate willingness to learn, a phenomenon at the core of any successful education system.

This book deals with teaching young learners to speak English in a foreign language context and our interest in this stems from curiosity and willingness to learn and change our social reality, if possible. The curiosity was sparked by many encounters with individuals who, despite possessing extensive receptive knowledge of the English language, were afraid to speak it. These individuals were mature enough to understand that there was no real reason to be afraid or anxious; nobody was grading them, and the people they needed to talk to were not judgmental and did not care about their mistakes. Their stories about how they felt when they needed to speak or why they were so afraid to speak the language were inspiring. Even more inspiring was the period that we spent teaching young learners before we became researchers and started teaching pre-service teachers. All of this made us believe that establishing a strong foundation for confident English speakers is crucial, and this book is dedicated to that mission. Understanding the cognitive and psychological processes underlying the ability to speak in a foreign language, especially in an educational context, is both fascinating and essential. When young learners are concerned, as a very sensitive age group, the need to understand them is even bigger. Due to their differences from adults, and mutual differences, policy makers, teachers, and those who educate future teachers need to be on the same mission of providing learners with appropriate support in the development of speaking skills. Special attention needs to be given to those who are not intrinsically motivated or naturally gifted, as well as the advanced learners who deserve opportunities to progress at their own pace, even if it is faster than their peers'. The teacher's role is crucial here and never has it been as important as it is today. Educators are not just transmitters of knowledge but also creators of the classroom atmosphere. The environment they foster significantly influences learners' motivation and willingness to participate.



A scientific or professional book is never truly complete. Many areas are left uncovered, either for the lack of research on it or the decision not to explore some topics in greater detail. We are still hopeful that this book will serve as a valuable resource, sparking curiosity and motivating researchers, educators, and pre-service teachers.

May your EFL adventures be filled with joy, discovery, and the thrill of seeing young minds light up with understanding and enthusiasm.

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