

Ten Years of English Learning at School

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To our families for their enduring support

Preface

When Biel¹ started learning English at a public school in Barcelona (age 6 grade 1), English was his favourite subject. He loved English and would have liked to learn Chinese as well because, he said, his dad had once been to China. When Biel got to high school (age 12 grade 7), he still liked English but it was no longer his favourite subject. He recognised he often paid little attention in class. He was no longer interested in learning an additional foreign language. By the end of secondary education (age 16 grade 10), Biel had given up on English and commented “*I have never experienced English*” in reference to a lack of opportunities to practise English outside class. He did not see himself as an adult making use of English for personal purposes “*Unless I happen to have an English girlfriend*”.

Like Biel, Albert started learning English at a public school in Barcelona at the age of 6. His favourite subject back then was maths, but he also liked learning English and thought English and other languages would allow him “*to make friends from faraway countries*”. Once in high school, Albert started attending a language school and by the end of that year he recognised that he had put a lot of effort into learning English. He was satisfied with how much English he had learned. Once he told us of having spoken to a tourist in the street and feeling that “*Now I can*

¹ All the names that appear in the book are pseudonyms.

communicate with more of the world". In his last year of high school, Albert participated in a school exchange programme with the Netherlands, and he was thrilled by the experience: "*From day one we started to speak [with his Dutch partner] and we never stopped*". He was also very pleased with what he had learned at the language school but demotivated with English lessons at school. When asked to define what learning English meant to him, he said: "*An experience (...) a different way of thinking, of behaving (...), something positive for me*".

Biel and Albert are two of the participants in the ELLiC (Early Language Learning in Catalonia) project. They belong to a group of learners from five schools in Catalonia (Spain) who participated in a longitudinal study that started when they were 6 years old in their first year of primary education and continued until they reached the end of secondary education. Throughout the six chapters of this book, the reader will get to learn about the project and may reach a better understanding of the complexities of learning English as part of compulsory education in Spain and other countries with similar learning conditions.

The study in this book is exceptional in that it spans over a very long period of 10 years. It is also remarkable in its methodological diversity and data richness. We have engaged with numerical data and with statistics to look at group and individual outcomes. The qualitative analyses have put flesh on the bones of those results and have added depth to the quantitative results. By using focal participants within the broader study, we have come close to a multiple case study at some points.

The readers of this book will find a very personal book, or rather a bipersonal book, arising from our shared experience of prolonged engagement with a group of learners of English. Because of our extended period of study, we witnessed the development of the focal participants from young children to adolescents and came to understand the reasons why some eventually fared better than others in English. We hope some of our excitement about the many insights we gained from their English learning journey reaches the reader.

Barcelona, Spain

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About the Book

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to longitudinal research. The dearth of such an approach in SLA is highlighted and a number of exceptionally long-term longitudinal studies are discussed. In the second part of the chapter we introduce the reader to our long-term project, ELLiC, by setting the study in its context, presenting the design, and describing the participants and instruments.

Chapter 2 explores the influence of learner and contextual factors on learners' linguistic outcomes at the end of primary school: general language proficiency, listening and reading comprehension, and writing. The participants are the whole group of learners in grade 6. The explanatory factors include attitudes and motivation, language learning aptitude, first language skills, parents' educational levels, amount of extracurricular lessons, spoken interaction in English, and out-of-school contact with English.

Chapter 3 describes the longitudinal development of the focal learners' written and oral production from grade 5 and grade 4 respectively and until the end of secondary education (grade 10). It is based on yearly written compositions and oral interactive tasks. Group results are complemented by the analysis of three focal learners to illustrate the individual variability in the group.

Chapter 4 explores three dimensions of the focal learners' language awareness: language learning awareness, metalinguistic awareness, and crosslinguistic awareness. Through learners' responses to interview

questions, we can observe the changes that FL learners' awareness experiences over the course of the primary and secondary school years.

Chapter 5 examines the learning conditions (family, extracurricular English, interaction and exposure) a group of focal learners grew up in. We adopt a qualitative approach to show how the factors analysed are closely connected and to better understand how learners ended up having different degrees of success in English at the end of secondary education.

Chapter 6 analyses language learning motivation at the end of secondary education in a group of focal learners. Two profiles are identified for the less and more successful learners each. An inductive approach is followed guided by self-determination theory and the Ideal L2 Self within the L2 Motivational Self System framework. Learners' visions as future users of English are also examined within the four profiles as well as their motivational trajectories starting in grade 1.

Contents

1	Longitudinal Research: The ELLiC Project	1
2	English at the End of Primary School: Explanatory Factors	29
3	Written and Oral Production Development through Primary and Secondary School	69
4	The Development of Young Learners' Language Awareness	111
5	Levels of Success with English and Learning Conditions: Same Opportunities?	149
6	Motivation after Ten Years: Learner Profiles with a Time Dimension	201
	Index	247

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List of Figures

Fig. 1.1	The ELLiC design	13
Fig. 2.1	Interaction between parents' educational level and aptitude	60
Fig. 3.1	Illustration of a written task in G7	75
Fig. 3.2	Written fluency: Words per text	81
Fig. 3.3	Written lexical diversity: Guiraud's Index	82
Fig. 3.4	Written syntactic complexity: Clauses per sentence	82
Fig. 3.5	Written syntactic complexity: Coordinate clauses per sentence	83
Fig. 3.6	Written syntactic complexity: Subordinate clauses per sentence	83
Fig. 3.7	Written accuracy: Errors per 100 words	84
Fig. 3.8	Proportion of morphosyntactic and lexical errors	85
Fig. 3.9	Written fluency: Words per text. Three learners	86
Fig. 3.10	Written lexical diversity: Guiraud's Index. Three learners	86
Fig. 3.11	Written syntactic complexity: Clauses per sentence. Three learners	87
Fig. 3.12	Written syntactic complexity: Coordinate clauses per sentence. Three learners	87
Fig. 3.13	Written syntactic complexity: Subordinate clauses per sentence. Three learners	88
Fig. 3.14	Written accuracy: Errors per 100 words. Three learners	89
Fig. 3.15	Proportion of morphosyntactic errors out of total errors. Three learners	89
Fig. 3.16	Oral fluency: Utterances longer than 2 words	91
Fig. 3.17	Oral lexical diversity: Guiraud's Index	91

Fig. 3.18	Oral syntactic complexity: Mean length of utterance	92
Fig. 3.19	Oral fluency: Utterances longer than 2 words. Three learners	93
Fig. 3.20	Oral lexical diversity: Guiraud's Index. Three learners	93
Fig. 3.21	Oral syntactic complexity: Mean Length of Utterance. Three learners	94
Fig. 4.1	Percentages of responses. Evolution of self-concept in primary school	117
Fig. 4.2	Percentages of most frequently mentioned areas of difficulty per grade	123
Fig. 4.3	Percentages of most common responses concerning crosslinguistic differences	128
Fig. 4.4	Question prompt (Color figure online)	132
Fig. 4.5	Percentages of explanations of gender agreement rule per grade	133
Fig. 5.1	Fathers' and mothers' levels of education	159
Fig. 5.2	Parents' English skills	160

List of Illustrations

Illustration 1.1	Learner questionnaire in G6 (sample items from answer sheet)	19
Illustration 1.2	Listening test: a sample item from the G6 test	21
Illustration 1.3	Comic strip	22
Illustration 5.1	Berta's drawing (MS)	173
Illustration 5.2	Pilar's drawing (MS)	182
Illustration 5.3	Rita's word web (MS)	187
Illustration 6.1	Andreu's (LS) word web "English now" (G10) (Profile 1)	209
Illustration 6.2	Biel's (LS) teachers' comments (Profile 2)	214
Illustration 6.3	Antoni's (LS) word web "English now" (left) and "English in the future" (right) (G10) (Profile 2)	215
Illustration 6.4	Pep's (MS) word web "English now" (G10) (Profile 3)	220
Illustration 6.5	Cinta's (MS) word web "English now" (Profile 4)	230
Illustration 6.6	Albert's answers (MS) to "For you, what is learning English?" in G7 and G10 (Profile 4)	236
Illustration 6.7	Learners' motivational profiles	238

List of Tables

Table 1.1	The five primary schools in ELLiC	14
Table 1.2	The eight secondary schools in the ELLiC project (G7)	16
Table 1.3	Overview of instruments/measures	24
Table 2.1	Descriptive statistics by gender and school	36
Table 2.2	Explanatory factors and data collection times	40
Table 2.3	Descriptive statistics of explanatory variables	42
Table 2.4	Descriptive statistics of interaction with English speakers. Yearly frequencies and percentages	42
Table 2.5	Descriptive statistics of parents' educational level. Frequencies and percentages	42
Table 2.6	Descriptive statistics of L2 outcome variables	42
Table 2.7	Correlations of language learning aptitude and multilingual achievement	43
Table 2.8	Correlations of fathers' and mothers' educational levels	44
Table 2.9	Correlations of parents' educational level	45
Table 2.10	Correlations between the outcome variables	46
Table 2.11	Summary of results	51
Table 2.12	Estimates of fixed effects of LMMs	59
Table 3.1	Whole group. Significant differences in written and oral measures	95
Table 3.2	Estimates. Writing development	103
Table 3.3	Results of RMs Linear Mixed Models. Significant differences in writing development	104

Table 3.4	Estimates. Oral development	105
Table 3.5	Results of RMs Linear Mixed Models. Significant differences in oral development	105
Table 4.1	Questions on language awareness and grades	115
Table 5.1	Less successful students' marks	156
Table 5.2	More successful students' marks	157
Table 5.3	Less successful students' extracurricular instruction	166
Table 5.4	More successful students' extracurricular instruction	167
Table 5.5	Less successful students' oral/spoken interaction in English (G1-G10)	171
Table 5.6	More successful students' oral/spoken interaction in English (G1-G10)	172
Table 5.7	Less successful students' leisure activities in English (G4)	180
Table 5.8	More successful students' leisure activities in English (G4)	181
Table 5.9	More successful students' strategies in primary school	182
Table 5.10	More successful students' leisure activities in G7	185
Table 5.11	Synthesis of the less successful students' contextual factors	190
Table 5.12	Synthesis of the more successful students' contextual factors	191
Table 5.13	LS students' parents' levels of education and English skills	195
Table 5.14	MS students' parents' levels of education and English skills	196
Table 6.1	A selection of questions on motivation in the G10 interview	207
Table 6.2	Profile 1 (LS students): Key features in G10	212
Table 6.3	Profile 2 (LS students): Key features in G10	219
Table 6.4	Profile 3 (MS students): Key features in G10	226
Table 6.5	Profile 4 (MS students): Signs of motivation in G10	228
Table 6.6	Profile 4 (MS students): Key features in G10	236