

## Engaging Young Learners in L2 Research

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Although educational research and its results can affect the lives of children by impacting on pedagogical decisions, consideration of children's input in such studies tends to be limited. This paper discusses the different approaches to L2 research into young learners' participation and compares them with the emergent participatory perspective (Gallacher & Gallacher 2008; Coppock, 2010). It discusses the epistemological, methodological and practical aspects of implementing the participatory approach to research in a language-learning classroom. Using examples drawn from the author's research, it demonstrates how learners aged 7-11 became involved as active participants in designing a research instrument and closing the power gap between the researcher and the participating children. The results suggest that young language learners are able to enact agency in designing a research instrument. If judiciously deployed, the participatory approach can provide invaluable insights for those wishing to incorporate children's perspectives into their research.

### 1. Introduction

L2 research in young learner contexts is conducted largely from an adult perspective and rarely incorporates the children's viewpoint. As the results of educational research may impact the lives of young learners (YLS) by shaping educational policy and practices, we should also explore ways of enabling children's agency in research. This paper looks at how YLS can be actively engaged in practice. It overviews research methods used to collect data from children in L2 studies to date, with a discussion of the four perspectives on child participation in research and examples from the author's experience of researching Assessment for Learning (AfL) in English to Young Learners (EYL). The aim is not to offer technical advice but rather to develop the idea of negotiating the roles with children in research as discussed by Kuchah and Pinter (2013).

The term *young learners* is used here for children up to the age of twelve. Some of the studies included in the analysis were conducted with learners under twelve as well as older peers. Research methods used solely with over-twelve year olds were excluded from the analysis. All the studies were conducted in contexts of teaching a foreign or a second language (L2), which in the majority of cases was English. For this reason, English to Young Learners (EYL) is consistently used for the contexts included in this paper. The term *research methods* points to the strategies researchers use to collect and analyse the data they use to build and test theories (Frey et al. 1991), e.g. an interview; while the term *research instrument* refers to a particular use of a research method, e.g. an interview schedule.

#### 1.1. Perspectives on child participation in research

Christensen and Prout (2002) discuss four ways of conceptualising children in research. In the first approach, children are considered to be objects of research, dependent upon adults who make all the decisions for them. The second approach is more child-centred, with children recognised as individuals with their own subjectivity. However, research with children as subjects seems to be typically conducted from the perspective of an adult who

decides what constitutes child-friendliness in research methods (Kuchah & Pinter 2013). These two perspectives have often been adopted in studies with children in EYL settings.

The other two perspectives view children respectively as social actors, and as active participants and co-researchers. They differ from the former in considering YLs as autonomous individuals who can develop their own understandings and views. Children as social actors “take part in, change and become changed by the social and cultural world they live in” (Christensen & Prout 2002: 481). Finally, the active participation of children in society can extend to the research activities themselves (Alderson 2000). This is understood to entail two conditions: intentionality, i.e. “a conscious, informed decision to take part in a project or an activity” (Gallacher & Gallacher 2008: 502); and performativity, i.e. conducting that action.

## 1.2. Epistemological and methodological nature of the participatory approach

The participatory approach to engaging children in research offers a potential epistemological advantage for adult researchers, who can approximate children’s perspectives and have their insights complemented and/or challenged by children (e.g. Coppock 2010). However, this approach also poses epistemological and methodological challenges (Gallacher & Gallacher 2008). In order to be able to invite children’s views on the researched issue, the researcher works on certain epistemological assumptions. These include the fact that children are considered as experts, with unique insights into their lives and self-knowledge. Secondly, the participatory approach assumes that the best source of knowledge about a certain type of social actor, such as a child, is the person concerned or somebody who is similar to them, e.g. another child. In other words, insider knowledge is considered better than outsider knowledge. This has implications for the methodological choices adopted in a study, such as issues related to study design, and especially for the choice of research methods and stage(s) of research in which YLs can be actively engaged.

## 1.3. Engaging YLs as active participants

The two conditions for active participation (intentionality and performativity) imply that the researcher should provide meaningful, comprehensive information about the study and ensure informed consent (ethical issues) not just from legal guardians of YLs but also from the participating children. Adequate provisions must be made for the children to meaningfully participate in the study through research design (methodological issues). Furthermore, there may be contextual factors which make the implementation of a child-centred approach to research challenging. These include cultural considerations, learners’ ages and L2 proficiency levels, and their relationship with the ‘outsider’ researcher, or as often is the case, the lack of such a relationship. These aspects imply a number of questions when applying the active participant perspective: what research methods can be used in EYL contexts to gather valuable and valid data from children; how YLs can be meaningfully informed about the research and consent gained; at what stage of a study it is pragmatically possible to engage students in EYL contexts; whether it is possible to engage learners in research method selection and design, data collection and analysis, validating findings, and reporting the results while ensuring internal validity of the study. An in-depth examination of the above questions is beyond the scope of this paper. However they will be partially examined when discussing the implementation of the participatory approach in EYL contexts.

Section 2 below discusses the study from which examples of implementing the participatory perspective were sourced and reviews the research methods used to gather data from children in published research from EYL settings. Building on that review, Section 3 addresses issues of practical implementation by discussing examples from the AfL study (2.1), to problematise the language accessibility of data collection instruments and the power relationships in L2 research encounters.

## 2. Data

### 2.1. A study of AfL in an EYL classroom

All the examples provided in this article come from a study of AfL in an EYL setting. This section provides an overview of the research. A cross-sectional, largely qualitative study was conducted by the author in a Central European language school. Participating children were aged 7-11 and were taught in groups of between six and twelve students. Since no L1 was shared by all students and the school's policy was to teach through English only, the data were collected through L2. The teachers tended to be the only fluent L2 speakers in the classroom and occupied a role of authority as a language source during the lessons. However, both children and teachers were addressed by their first names and overall, a friendly and informal atmosphere was present in the school.

The study sought to investigate how teachers understood AfL in an EYL context after in-service training, how they translated that understanding into classroom practice and what impact of AfL they reported. Data included field notes from 28 lesson observations and curriculum documents. Information was also collected from teachers (n=8) through semi-structured questionnaires and a focus group, and from learners (n=148) through a purpose-designed drawing task and focus group-like sessions.

While reporting on this study is not the aim here, it is interesting to see how children were engaged in developing one of the research instruments (instructions for a drawing task) and how the researcher attempted to minimise the power gap in the group discussion. The paper will also discuss what challenges and advantages such processes entailed.

### 2.2. EYL research

In order to identify what methods have been used in EYL research to date, two databases of academic texts were scrutinised, namely EBCOhost and ERIC. Searches were conducted using the following key phrases: 'research methods in L2 research with children' and 'L2 research with children'. The results returned 539 items, whose abstracts were read to identify the most relevant texts using the following criteria: (i) reports of empirical research in L2 settings; (ii) data in the reported study from learners aged under twelve; (iii) not from Special Educational Needs settings; (iv) not from case studies of individual children. As a result, 34 journal articles were identified and grouped into three categories.

The largest proportion focused on the impact of pedagogic interventions on the teaching and learning processes. Such studies were typically experimental or quasi-experimental in nature and used pre-tests, intervention, post-tests and delayed post-tests (Simard 2004). Data were collected from children through performance tasks (Bae 2007), purpose designed summative tests (Harley 1998) and standardised summative tests (Butler & Lee 2006). Depending on the purpose of each study and the age of participating children, the research methods differed. They employed picture description tasks (Kim 2008), comprehension tests (Peñate Cabrera & Bazo Martínez 2001) and the Cambridge Young Learners Starters Test (Drew 2009) to compare the effects of various types of instructional approaches. In order to collect data on age-related language learning issues, researchers used story telling tasks with 5-12 year olds (Shrubshall 1997), re-telling a story which children had listened to with 4-6 year olds (Tagoilelagi-Legota et al. 2005) and a grammaticality judgement test with 8-9 and 11-12 year olds (Garcia Mayo 2003). Another subgroup of studies investigated the development of various language skills and areas. The data were collected through picture-based story writing tasks (Bae 2007), reading aloud tests (Woore 2009), reading comprehension/fluency tests (Gebauer et al. 2013), oral and reading comprehension tasks (Tolosa et al. 2009) and the BPVS II standardised test (Steinberg et al. 2010). The research methods used in these studies yielded useful insights into the effectiveness of various pedagogical practices but did not allow for children's voices to be heard.

The second group of studies combined experimental design with research areas such as motivation (Tae-Young & Hyo-Sun 2012) and/or attitude (Lamb 2003; Heining-Boynton & Haitema 2007). They tended to employ questionnaires whose results were sometimes compared with learners' L2 performance (Shak & Gardner 2008). Similar to the first group of studies, this type of research treated children as objects of the study. This meant that the child-friendliness of methods was determined by adult researchers, whose findings were influenced by adult interpretations and whose decisions about YL education were made solely from an adult perspective.

The third category comprised a significantly smaller proportion of published research which engaged YLs more fully by treating them as subjects and eliciting their accounts of classroom practice as well as their views and opinions. This group of studies deployed a varied array of methods to collect data from children, including think-aloud procedures (Gu et al. 2005), role play (Gardner & Yaacob 2007, cited in Pinter 2011), reflective writing (Goh & Taib 2006), questionnaires (Papapavlou 1999; Victori & Tragant 2003), smiley-face questionnaires (Szpotowicz et al. 2009) and interviews (Hawkins 2005; Szpotowicz et al., 2009; Kuchah & Pinter 2012). Their aim was to collect data from the perspective of participating children, which seems to be the most significant difference between this group of studies and the former two groups.

In addition to these three categories, there were a few studies which attempted to ensure the active participation of children in other ways. For example, by negotiating a meaningful relationship between researcher and learners (Kuchah & Pinter 2012) or by engaging YLs in the designing of research methods.

### **3. Implementing the participatory perspective**

The first consideration when employing a participatory approach is the choice of data collection. An important principle in any research is fitness for purpose (Cohen et al. 2007). Also an overview of published research can help to identify what criteria are commonly used to select research methods. A list of research methods used in EYL studies was therefore drawn up, with items on the list coded descriptively to highlight emergent themes. These reflected two types of criteria, as described below.

*Generic selection criteria.* Regardless of their perspective on child participation, the research methods were ecologically and pedagogically authentic. Firstly, they tended to resemble the activities students of that age routinely perform in real life (ecological authenticity), such as playing games, drawing and talking about age-relevant topics. Secondly, they were designed to resemble the type of tasks that YLs routinely engage in during lessons (pedagogical authenticity), such as discussions, simple writing tasks or using smiley faces.

*Study-specific criteria.* Depending on the context and the design of each study, there are additional factors to be taken into account when selecting or designing research instruments. These may include: context specific criteria connected with the institution, cultural considerations or characteristics of participants; and study-specific criteria necessitated by the design of the study, e.g. methodological considerations, research questions and type of data required.

#### **3.1. Example A: task instructions refined by children**

In the AfL study (2.1), one of the context-specific criteria was the use of L2 to collect data. It was therefore necessary to ensure that learners were allowed to express themselves in ways that did not require high language proficiency. A reflective drawing task was identified as a suitable option but it was vital to ensure that the instructions were understood by all

participants. For that purpose, the children in the study were actively engaged in the process of designing the instructions for the tasks, as detailed below.

**Engaging children in refining instructions for a drawing task**

First, the children were given the instructions which had been prepared jointly by their teacher and the researcher. Children were asked to complete the task. Following that, they were invited to help their teacher redraft the instructions for use with different groups in an audio recorded shared writing session. By analysing the recordings the researcher was able to refine the instructions and compile a list of follow-up questions that served the purpose of clarifying children’s understanding of the instructions.

This procedure helped to ensure that the child-friendliness of the method was based on active participation of YLs. Their input was incorporated into the instructions which were later used with other learners to collect data in the study. There is however a limit to how much influence children had on the wording of instructions, given that adaptations were based on an adult’s interpretation of their input. The transcript below, taken from the shared writing session, illustrates two changes proposed by the children.

Initial instructions (extract)	Transcript from shared writing	Refined instructions (extract)
(**) <u>Your task is to draw things that (***) help you learn English.</u>	<p>[The initial instructions for the task (left) are displayed on the whiteboard and children are discussing with the teacher how to improve them]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. S: <i>I think is no good.</i></li> <li>2. T: <i>You mean the beginning is no good, I see. Why do you think so?</i></li> <li>3. S: <i>I don't have the picture. Teacher have the picture.</i></li> <li>4. T: <i>Do you mean that that I collected the pictures and that you can't keep them?</i></li> <li>5. S: <i>Yes.</i></li> <li>6. T: <i>I see. So how shall we start?</i></li> <li>7. S: <i>For the teacher.</i></li> <li>8. T: <i>Where shall I put this?</i></li> <li>9. S: <i>Your task is to draw for you.</i></li> <li>10. T: <i>For me? Do you mean for the teacher?</i></li> <li>11. S: <i>Yes.</i></li> <li>12. T: <i>Excellent. Thank you. Do you like it, everybody? Show me on your thumbs. Yes or no? (3) OK, fine. And what should I say next? How do you want me to start the sentence?</i></li> <li>13. S: <i>What we draw.</i></li> <li>14. T: <i>Is this good? (writes) 'We are going to draw...'</i></li> <li>15. SS: <i>Yes.</i></li> <li>16. T: <i>What should I say that we are going to draw then?</i></li> <li>17. S: <i>Things that help you learn English?</i></li> <li>18. T: <i>Things that help ME?</i></li> <li>19. S: <i>No you. Children.</i></li> <li>20. T: <i>Okay. Children. Any children?</i></li> <li>21. S: <i>No. Just I draw for my help.</i></li> <li>22. T: <i>I see. Shall I write (writes) '...things that help us learn English' then? Like this?</i></li> <li>23. S: <i>Yes.</i></li> </ol>	<p>(*) Today I would like you to draw a picture for me.            (**) <u>We are going to draw things that (***) help us learn English.</u></p>

Table 1. Adaptations of instructions for a drawing task. T: teacher; S: student; SS: students; (3): pause in seconds; CAPITAL: emphasis; \*: adaptations.

The YLs in this group felt that it was important for the initial part of the instructions to specify who the picture was for. On reflection, this is important because of its motivational effect; if the task is destined to the teacher/researcher, children may try to work harder or do more. Secondly, the learners suggested using the pronoun ‘we’ instead of ‘you’.

Implementing the change makes the second sentence in the last column more inclusive, as it no longer highlights a distance between the teacher/researcher and the students.

A comparison of the drawings by two groups who received different instructions (1st teacher prepared; 2nd refined by students) showed a greater variety of answers in the second group of children, although both groups had the same level of English and were taught by the same teacher. This may indicate that the use of child-refined instructions allows the collection of more detailed data. This finding agrees with claims that participatory techniques produce a more authentic understanding of children's realities (Grover 2004) by providing more nuanced insights into researched phenomena (Kesby 2000).

### 3.2. Example B: negotiating roles and power

An important aspect of the data collection was securing consent from YLs. Kuchah and Pinter (2012) have argued that in a research context there exists a power gap between the researcher and participating children. They report how students' and researcher's roles were negotiated with 10-11 year olds through L1 in a group interview. My research is equally sensitive to the role of YLs in research, as shown by the transcript below. It is taken from a group-task discussion in which roles are negotiated with learners aged 7-9 through L2, prior to completing the task.

#### **Negotiating roles and power**

1. Researcher (R): *Who knows why we have a different teacher today? Why is it me and not your teacher? Remember your teacher told you about it last week. Who can remember?*
2. S: *Because we have a lesson with other children today.*
3. R: *Yes, well done. We have children who go to different groups here. You're right. But does anyone know why?*
4. S: *Because you want us to come to here and say you.*
5. R: *Yes, well done, I would like you to tell me about something. I have some tasks for you and I would like you to help me do them. Can you help me?*
6. SS: *Yes!*
7. S: *Because teacher don't know.*
8. R: *Yes you're right I don't know. I don't know because I am big. I am not a child like you. You are a child, and you and you. Am I a child?*
10. SS: *No (and laugh).*
11. R: *You're right I'm not but I want to find out, I want to know what children think that's why I need you to tell me, to say what you think. OK, so can we start the first task?*
12. SS: *Yes!*

Despite the fact that these learners' parents were asked for consent, the researcher also asked the children if they were willing to help. This challenged the traditional role that an adult adopts in EYL contexts and placed the learners in a position of power; the researcher made it clear that she needed their help. By ensuring their consent, the researcher sought to improve the content validity of data that she was about to collect. Importantly, the researcher negotiated with children what type of help was needed (Turn 5) and explained why she was asking for help (Turns 7-8). The role modification of the researcher was primarily in the children's perception of that role. They were encouraged to think that there was no good or bad answer and that she was happy to view the children as experts on the matter of interest to her (Turn 11).

The power gap between the learners and the researcher is not completely removed. As evident from this transcript, the researcher remains the only one who leads the conversation and interprets students' response. This may be necessitated by the relatively low L2 proficiency levels of the learners or perhaps by their schooled docility towards an adult in a classroom.

## 4. Conclusions

Seeking active participation of children in L2 research is still a novel way to research in EYL contexts. This paper only provides an overview of approaches used to research with children in L2 studies to date. The impression is that most research tends to be carried out *on*, not *with*, young learners, despite the value of pedagogical and ecological authenticity when selecting research methods for YLs. Authenticity can help to improve the validity of research methods and the reliability of findings (Brown & Rodgers 2002), which in turn enhances the quality of data.

Some aspects remain problematic from the participatory perspective. School activities such as drawing, writing stories or brainstorming are often compulsory and required by teachers (David et al. 2001). By using them to engage YLs, researchers build on the children's docility towards such familiar tasks. The question is whether in such circumstances children can be engaged on the basis of an active, informed decision. There seems to be a limit to the degree of participation that a study can aim to achieve if such tasks are used. A systematic study of the relative merits of various participatory options could help to assess the suitability of methods such as 1:1 adult-child interviews, focus group discussions, case studies and diaries.

Examples from the author's data suggest that by negotiating roles with research participants, the researcher can ensure that children are meaningfully informed of why they have been asked to participate in a group task. This contributes to lowering possible anxiety levels of YLs in the research situation, as children realise they are not participating in a lesson or a test, so what they said would not be deemed wrong. It also helped to clarify the objectives of the task, namely to invite learners' views rather than knowledge about a topic. As Cohen et al. (2007) rightly noted, a research informant's belief that they need to be familiar with the topic of an interview can inhibit their willingness or ability to share information with the researcher. By signalling to the learners that what they had to say was of genuine interest, the researcher may have encouraged a willingness to communicate thanks to positive situational variables (MacIntyre et al. 1998). More importantly, roles were negotiated before the data collection stage, so that data were collected *with* children and not solely *from* children.

There is of course a need for further investigation in this area. We need to better understand whether engaging YLs in research does in fact lead to improved data and more reliable findings. This may have significant implications for the way in which studies with children are designed and assessed by L2 researchers in English and other languages.

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