

# Children and Languages Today

First and Second Language Literacy Development

Edited by

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**Series in Education**



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## Editors' Preface: Children and Languages Today – First and Second Language Literacy Development

The idea for a series of recurring scientific conferences, Children and Languages Today, was brought about in 2001, motivated by the need to bring together researchers tightly involved in the acquisition, learning and teaching of the Croatian language and foreign languages to learners at the lower elementary level. At the time, the Croatian academic community was lacking a conference that would be truly dedicated to critical thinking and the exchange of research findings, as well as relevant outcomes and experience in these particular study areas. As it turned out, Children and Languages Today served as an inspiration for other conferences and meetings in Croatia that would continue to promote research in the field of first and second language acquisition of young learners and has gradually grown international in its scope.

Since their inception, Children and Languages Today conferences have fostered critical examination of the following themes about language and young learners' education: children and the learning of Croatian and foreign languages (2001); Croatian language teachers and foreign language teachers (2002); children and multilingualism (2003); evaluation and self-evaluation in Croatian and foreign language instruction to young learners (2004); native and local identity in Croatian language instruction and interculturalism in foreign language instruction (2005); children and text (2007); and children and the media (2011). The six volumes of conference proceedings have had a substantial impact on the academic community, and are still in demand. We are thankful to the conference participants, including the article contributors, as well as the editors for their tireless engagement. The aim of the most recent conference, held on the 1st and 2nd December 2017 at the Faculty of Education, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, was to bring together scientists and contributors who do contemporary research on children's literacy development in the first and second foreign or additional language.

Recent findings show that successful social participation is greatly affected by multiple understandings of literacy, which is one of the core human competencies. Therefore, literacy development from an early age should focus on a range of different types of literacy. It should be noted that the term "literacy" also involves teaching children to read and to understand various text genres, not only to inform them but to help them aesthetically experience literary work. Therefore, the conference presentations shed light on emergent

and early literacy, functional literacy, cross-linguistic influences, linguistic landscape and literacy development, children's literature and literacy development, media and literacy development, and other relevant early literacy issues. Researchers and scientists from diverse academic fields shared their findings on literacy and cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, first and second language acquisition, bilingualism, multilingualism, language assessment, language education, language policy and planning, which involved cognitive, socio-cultural, dynamic and emergent theories of literacy development. Some participating scholars focused on the analysis of literary text and discourse, and literary pragmatics and functional perspectives in literature, discussing the artistic value and usage of media materials in the context of the new media, taking into account media effects, intermediality and interdisciplinary research. Additionally, researchers studying literacy development via multimodal texts as features of global culture took part.

The 2017 conference discussed above produced this volume, *Children and Languages Today: First and Second Language Literacy Development*. The book is a collection of papers by experts on the topic of developing literacy in teaching first and second languages, encompassing different fields of science and research, including children's literature, bilingualism, metaphor usage, slang, translation, narrative and orthography. Because literacy is one of the major achievements of humankind, our conference proceedings attempt to shed light on, and open up, an array of questions in the area of literacy development.

The contributors to this volume come from different linguistic, cultural and academic backgrounds, and therefore investigate early literacy development from a variety of perspectives. The volume is divided into two parts.

Part I: Language and Literacy Development begins with **Jelena Vignjević and Tihana Lukačić's** "Preschool knowledge of synonyms in the context of the complexity of the interlanguage field". The authors examine lexical competence in the form of synonyms as indicators of the level of linguistic knowledge and school success in general. The data was collected from preschool children in kindergartens across Croatia in an attempt to determine the level of knowledge of synonyms in their development of Croatian as their mother tongue. The following study, "The connectivity between interlanguage field and the developing orthographic competence in early language discourse" by **Dunja Pavličević-Franjić**, compares the results of longitudinal studies carried out in the last ten years to investigate the level of orthographic competence of elementary school students. The author puts special emphasis on the occurrence of an interlanguage field, caused by the transmission of the linguistic elements from speakers' native idiom or the English language. The results of this study aim to initiate future positive modification in the

development of literacy in the early language discourse. Subsequently, **Dijana Vučković** reports on "Acquisition and development of students' vocabulary in lower grades of elementary school" in order to describe a teaching methodology and approach to the acquisition and development of students' vocabulary in lower grades and to determine the outcome of the approach itself. In the study "The impact of teaching sight words on L2 literacy learning in young Persian learners of English" **Newsha Ahmadi and Mona Roudsaz** introduce the reader to the effect of sight words teaching on the L2 reading fluency and accuracy, and spelling accuracy of young Persian English learners. The study was conducted in the first-grade classes of bilingual elementary schools in Iran and includes different teaching and testing procedures. The authors also conducted a statistical analysis of the collected data.

Next, "On the sequence of biliteracy instruction in young learners: L2, then L1, or simultaneous L1 & L2?" by **Newsha Ahmadi and Negin Doost Mohammadi** explores the learning progress of two groups of young Persian learners of English in their first year at a bilingual elementary school. Statistical comparisons indicated that the young learners who gained functional literacy in L2 prior to L1 literacy were more fluent and more accurate L1 readers. In the last study of the first part of the collection, "Narrative ability of a bilingual girl: Case study", **Ivana Trtanj** presents the production and comprehension of the narrative of a five-year-old girl who has been exposed to her mother tongue Croatian as well as to English since birth. The girl's telling and retelling of a story led to the analysis of the macrostructure in view of the story structure complexity and the words expressing mental states.

The first paper of Part II: Literature and Literacy Development, "The systemic didactics of children's literature" by **Milena Mileva Blažić**, offers the review of Slovene children's literature since 1980 as a system incorporating literary didactics and various communication elements. This detailed system led to concrete pieces of advice for literature teachers. The research by **Dragica Dragun**, "When *gaffers* go to the *secretariate*: On the specific linguistic code in children's/YA diary prose" discusses slang as an authorial stylistic choice in two Croatian novels, *Seventh B* (1939) by Joža Horvat and *Diary of Mila Horvat* (2004) by Ivana Josić, as well as their reception among elementary and high school students. The ninth study, "Character names in Croatian translations of *Alice in Wonderland*" by **Smiljana Narančić Kovač**, compares translated names to original names and interprets them using Franco Aixelà's (1996) translation strategies, with the aim of establishing the preference of domestication or foreignization in the corpus.

In "Read me: Children's literature renaissance supreme and three cases of exploding delight", **Željka Flegar** examines the features that affect children's

interest in reading books for pleasure and enjoyment (*aesthetic/free reading*). The three specific elements of popular children's books – deviation, in style and “childlike language”, *paratext* and multimodal, multimedia and *transmedia storytelling* are explored through the works of Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling. The volume ends with “On ravens, rings and spiders: Riddles and literacy development in children” by **Ksenija Švarc**, who discusses the role of riddles in children's literature and their effect on literacy. Švarc argues that riddles help develop problem-solving skills and critical thinking, and can lead to a new understanding of children's language.

The eleven papers collected in *Children and Languages Today: First and Second Language Literacy Development* intend to promote literacy as a learning and teaching imperative involving different expert and scientific perspectives. As editors, we are conscious that the field of early literacy is far too complex and varied to be fully covered by the studies contained herein. Nonetheless, their heterogeneity is intended to provide the reader with a variety of questions and issues concerning the topic. We hope that these studies will motivate further methodological, theoretical and practical research, as well as many follow-up discussions. Hopefully, this increase in discussion and research will give the topic of literacy a more central position in interdisciplinary research.

**Željka Flegar and Ivana Moritz**

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# Introduction

The volume *Children and Languages Today: First and Second Language Literacy Development*, edited by Željka Flegar and Ivana Moritz, is a collection of papers presented at the most recent Children and Languages Today conference. Since its launch almost two decades ago, this conference has grown into a staple forum for researchers interested in all phenomena related to children's language development. Without a doubt, there hardly seems to be a topic more fascinating and relatable, and it is no wonder that it has resonated so strongly among the academic community. Along with the attraction, however, comes the challenge to grasp and explain the multitude of aspects involved in language acquisition and learning. Bringing together scholars with different academic backgrounds, research perspectives and areas of expertise, including some of the most respected authorities in their field, is a step forward in the search for points where various disciplinary insights intersect and complement one another. It is precisely this interdisciplinary approach that this volume advances.

Under the overarching topic of literacy development, the collection of papers features eleven individual studies organized around two main themes: one concerns the role of language and the other the role of literature in literacy development. This dual focus alone bears witness to the fact that understanding of the notion of literacy has developed beyond its initial reference to the "mere" ability to read and write. The realization of how complex literacy has become warrants a deeper look.

The first part of the volume, *Language and Literacy Development*, deals with skills underlying communicative competence requisite in learning how to read and write. Several strands seem to emerge from the six contributions in this part. To begin with, lexical competence stands out as one of the important indicators of literacy development in young children. Children's vocabulary development is shaped by a multitude of linguistic and non-linguistic factors operating in a remarkable variety of contexts. This stage of development is marked by the arising integration of the principles of the oral and written codes which, again, correlate with the level of acquired lexical competence. This brings us to the second strand, namely the fact that in the modern world these contexts increasingly include both vertical and horizontal plurilingual learning scenarios in which earlier literacy experience in one language (a dialect, sociolect or slang, a first or a foreign language) influences literacy development in another. What this plurilingual developmental paradigm implies is that the first oral language may *not* always

be the first written language, that all linguistic aspects are *not* necessarily acquired first in the first language and that the influence of first on second language acquisition is *not* one-directional. In fact, Newsha Ahmadi and Negin Doost Mohammadi argue that the development of second language functional literacy makes young children more fluent and more accurate readers in their first language as well. Similarly, the study by Jelena Vignjević and Tihana Lukačić found that children learning English as a foreign language achieved higher scores on a contact synonyms test, thus supporting the premise that foreign language learning facilitates first language vocabulary development. It also showed that not only do synonyms represent lexical extension beyond functional communication, but they also point to the development of metalinguistic awareness, which is another key aspect of literacy development. Finally, as Ivana Trtanj points out, simultaneous literacy development in two languages in bilingual children is mutually advantageous, at least when it comes to their ability to comprehend and produce a narrative.

Thirdly, literacy development can and should be enhanced. One way of doing so is by finding appropriate methodological approaches and educational models. As Dijana Vučković maintains in her paper, since vocabulary is an important aspect of reading literacy, first language curricula should encompass a broad range of objectives and activities designed to guide and boost vocabulary development. The study by Newsha Ahmadi and Mona Roudsaz follows suit by stressing the benefits of instruction on the development of L2 literacy which was operationalized in terms of reading accuracy, reading fluency, and spelling accuracy. Finally, in her discussion of the development of orthographic competence as a specific prerequisite of literacy development, Dunja Pavličević-Franić also acknowledges the pivotal role of formal instruction. Her study showed that elementary school learners learned the orthographic rules and definitions, but a number of deviations occurred when they were asked to apply them practically. Therefore, orthography should be taught following the guidelines of the communicative-functional approach if functional and useful knowledge is to be achieved.

The second part, *Literature and Literacy Development*, is devoted to the role of children's literature in literacy development. This too is a complex phenomenon whose exploration has to take into consideration not only the range of underlying competencies that children must acquire to be able to read literary works but also the way in which children's immediate and wider social and cultural contexts foster their aesthetic reception of literature and their literacy development. Only if children's literature is favorably perceived and canonically valued, if it is explicitly taught at different educational levels, and if it is widely recognized by the society (for example, by designating a date on which it is nationally celebrated), can it be expected to carry far-reaching

positive implications for literacy development. According to Milena Mileva Blažić, literary works should not be analyzed in isolation, but must be studied as a system that, in addition to the author and the product, encompasses institutions (schools, libraries, bookstores and awards), repertoires (e.g. curricula, proposed and required reading), the market (publishing and consumerism), products (e.g. books, multimedia and the Internet), and finally the reader. Those involved in the selection of literary works for children must be acutely aware of the interaction of these factors and their potential influence on the young reader (e.g. hyperproduction of profitable but lower quality texts). The reception of literature by the target audience is paramount, as Blažić aptly notes.

The same idea seems to have led Dragica Dragun in her exploration of children's and young adult diary prose in which she focuses on one possible way in which authors seek to connect to their readers: slang as a specific linguistic code with which these particular readers can identify. Because it is group-related, slang boosts the identity and cohesiveness of social (sub)groups. When used in literary works, it strengthens the relationship between the author, the subject and the reader.

What this and the following papers in this part underscore is that language is indeed a vital entity of literature. To start with, characters are given carefully chosen names that are semantically loaded and culturally specific. As a consequence, translating such often playful and strange names into other languages poses a great challenge to translators who have to find appropriate strategies to reflect their semantic expressive power. Smiljana Narančić Kovač gives a comprehensive analysis of how Croatian translators of one of the seminal children's books *Alice in Wonderland* have rendered character names. Childlike language characterized by deviations from written and spoken rules is one of the three specific elements of children's books that stimulate children's interest in reading for pleasure. The other two, according to Željka Flegar, are paratext and multimodal, multimedia and transmedia storytelling. All of these characteristics cater for children's perceptual, sensory and semiotic needs and enable them to find different ways of meaning-making and analyzing the written word, leading to the development of a wide range of literacies. Last but not least, Ksenija Švarc puts a spotlight on another distinctive feature of the language: its ambiguity. In children's literature, ambiguity is deliberately achieved by creating riddles and inviting readers to solve them. By attempting to unveil the hidden meaning, children develop their deep thinking skills and metalinguistic awareness which is, as we have already learned, developmentally reciprocal with literacy. Clearly, language and literature are the two sides of the same literacy coin.

To conclude, the volume entitled *Children and Languages Today: First and Second Language Literacy Development* is a valuable collection of papers on the timely topic of literacy development joined into one interlinked text that, surprisingly, reads like a cohesive book. It covers a variety of key areas of literacy, such as orthographic and lexical competence, the ability to understand and use language in disparate social and cultural settings, as well as paths and patterns of literacy development. Evidently, many areas of (bi)literacy development have become an intriguing topic of research that can be addressed from many perspectives. By embracing the expansive definition of what literacy can be and by extensively considering the multitude of conditions and factors affecting (bi)literacy development, it helps the reader navigate the complexity of children's developing literacy in the modern world. As such, the volume makes a formidable contribution to the field that should be of interest to all those trying to reach new understandings of its multifaceted and multidisciplinary subject.

2 January 2019

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## About the Contributors

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**Blažič, Milena Mileva**, Full Professor, graduated in 1985 at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory, obtained her Master's Degree in 1997, and her Doctoral Degree in 2001. In 1992 she published the book *Creative Writing* (three workbooks of the same title were published in 1995, 1996 and 1997). The monograph (*Skrivni bralni zakladi*, 2000, 2001), *Zgodovinski ori s prostega spisja na Slovenskem* (1850-2000), was published in 2002, and she also co-edited a poetry anthology (*Petiletni čas*, 2001), and co-authored the textbook *Sveti zbesed 4-9* and *Novi sveti zbesed 4-9*. As a scientific researcher, she is active in the Humanities, the literary theory field, and the sub-fields of Slovenian literature and Slovenian literature methodology. Additionally, her research interests encompass: digitization of literature, authenticity of literature, child image in literature, fairy tales, stories, young adult fiction, picture books, and other. Professor Blažič is a member of the scientific societies: *Nordic Network for Children's literature* and *IRSCL – International Research Society for Children's Literature*. She works at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education. She completed her professional development with professor Marija Nikolajeva (University of Cambridge), professor Jack Zipes (University of Minnesota), and others. Her papers were published in scientific monographs *Branja mladinske književnosti* (2011, 2014), *Skriti pomeni pravljic* (2014), *Mladinski klasiki* (2016), and many more. She is also active internationally – as a visiting professor at universities in Wien, Graz, Trieste, Zagreb, and she delivered visiting lectures in Kassel, Nottingham, Prag, Zagreb.

**Doost Mohammadi, Negin** is an EFL teacher and a professional young learners' literacy instructor in a bilingual school in Tehran. She studied English Literature at Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch within her undergraduate studies. In pursuit of becoming a competent EFL teacher, she continued her studies in the graduate program of Teaching English as a Second Language at the same university. She graduated in September 2018.

**Dragun, Dragica**, Associate Professor, was born in Imotski in 1970. She graduated from the Faculty of Education of the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek in 1995. From 1996 to 2004 she worked as a secondary school teacher of Croatian language and literature. Since 2004 she has been working at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, where she obtained her Master's Degree in 2006. In 2010 she successfully defended her doctoral dissertation titled *Children's and Young Adults' Diary in Croatian Literature*. She currently teaches Literature for Children and Youth, and related courses which fall within the scope of her research interest.

**Flegar, Željka**, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Osijek, teaches courses and does research on children's literature, media and drama in English. Her research deals with the intricacies and deviations of English language and literary discourse, more recently in the context of the historical development of children's culture, adaptation, as well as with her theory on the "childlike language" of children's literature. She has published papers in Croatia and abroad and is the author of the interdisciplinary book *Theatrical Improvisation, Language and Communication [Kazališna improvizacija, jezik i komunikacija]* (2016).

**Lukačić, Tihana** graduated at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb with the research on children's language development (*Knowledge of synonyms in pre-school in terms of learning one or two languages*). She is currently working as a preschool teacher and is interested in the development of key competencies of primary school children, especially language competence.

**Narančić Kovač, Smiljana**, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Croatia. Her research interests include comparative literature, the narrative, children's literature (contact and transfer studies), picturebook theory, and teaching English to young learners. Her publications include two monographs, *The Triple Structure of Gundulić's "Tears of the Prodigal Son"* (1994, in Croatian) and *One Story and Two Narrators:*

*Picturebook as a Narrative* (2015, in Croatian) as well as chapters in *Alice in a World of Wonderlands* (2015) and *The Routledge Companion to Picturebook* (2018). She serves as the principal investigator of the project on children's literature translations, BIBRICH UIP 2014-09-9823, funded by the Croatian Science Foundation. She is the Vice-President of the Croatian Association of Researchers in Children's Literature and Editor-in-Chief of *Libri&Liberi: Journal of Research on Children's Literature and Culture*.

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# List of acronyms

BCE Before Common Era

BIBRICH (project) Building Intercultural Bridges Through Children's Literature Translations

CEFRL Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

CLAN Child Language Analysis (Program)

DT Dictation Test

EFL English as a Foreign Language

FL Foreign Language

FS Final Score

GAO (goal, attempt, outcome)

ICT Information and Communications Technology

IMDb Internet Movie Database

IEA International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement

L1 first language (system)

L2 second language (system)

L3 third language (system)

MAIN Multilingual Narrative Assessment Instrument for Narratives

MANOVA Multivariate Analysis of Variance

NCVVO National Centre for External Evaluation of Education

OLS Overall Literacy Score

PISA Programme for International Student Assessment

RA Reading Accuracy

RF Reading Fluency

RT Reading Test (read aloud test)

SA Spelling Accuracy

ST Spelling Test

ST (translation) Source Text

SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

TT (translation) Target Text

UNESCO The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

YA Young Adult

YPLE Young Persian Learners of English

ZEROJ (see CEFRL)

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