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Teacher target language input and young learners' aural comprehension of English

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Abstract

The quantity of target language input available to learners contributes to the understanding of target language development. The present paper reports on a longitudinal study of the relationship between the amount of non-native teachers' EFL input and learners' aural achievement in instructed SLA. Young learners (N=132) were followed over a three-year period. High variability in teacher use of EFL was found. Results of correlational analyses and group comparisons pointed to a longitudinal advantage of participants exposed to instruction dominated by teacher target language use during their first two years of formal EFL learning. Directions for future research on the use of different languages and their relation to learners' achievement are discussed in the context of early formal foreign language study.

Key words: young learners; amount of teacher's use of EFL; listening comprehension; L1 use.

1. Introduction

Although input-related factors have been repeatedly suggested as a source of variance in learner achievement (Lighbown, 2000; Muñoz et al., 2018), the manner in which target language (TL) input influences acquisition is a matter of considerable interest with many unresolved questions (e.g., Unsworth, 2016; Young-Scholten & Piske, 2009). Recent research on the age factor in SLA points to TL input (its quantity, quality, and variety) as a more deterministic factor than (starting) age (Muñoz, 2008, 2011, 2014) since early primary instruction failed to lead to long-term advantage over instruction that commences at the secondary level (Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018). Hence, a shift from viewing learner attainment as the function of age to viewing the attainment as a function of the quantity and quality of language experience (Moyer, 2014) suggests that contact with the TL (exposure and use) may be

crucial in terms of increased sensitivity to the features of the TL in the learners' environment (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017).

This paper attempts to explore the relationship between aural input and output at early stages of foreign language (FL) development from the psycholinguistic perspective (Collins et al., 2009), which stresses the importance of interplay between the learner and the ambient language. Specifically, the present study aims to explore if the amount of teacher talk in English as a FL (EFL) influences young beginners' early FL comprehension and what the ramifications of these findings are. Furthermore, an effort is made to more closely identify the optimal amount of TL input in a uniform early English language learning (EELL) context. First, we discuss the role of input quantity in the early stages of child first (L1) and second (L2) language development, which shows a clear pattern. Next, we look at research exploring the role of input quantity in FL learning settings with an emphasis on studies with young learners (YLs), i.e., pre-puberty learners of a FL enrolled in primary education, aged 6-11. Later, we outline the study's rationale, the method, and the findings, which are followed by the discussion of the results and their implications in consideration of current significance attributed to local learning environments in FL development (Benson, 2017).

2. Input, L1, and L2 language development

The role of input-related variables has long been in the centre of interest of studies on the acquisition of L1, L2, and bilingual studies. Traditionally, research on input in L1 aimed to determine "what the input could and does teach a child" (Foster-Cohen, 1999: 8). Its findings highlight input factors as important influences on vocabulary development (e.g., Pan et al., 2005; Quiroz et al., 2010). In essence, children's vocabulary growth is shown to depend on the amount of caregiver language, which, in turn, shapes the quality of children's language-learning experiences and results in high variation (Hoff, 2006). Likewise, accounts of L1 emergence grounded in usage-based cognitive linguistic research stress the roles of ambient language and accumulated experience with language as important facilitators of language development (Bybee, 2006; Tomasello, 2000). Even though child language acquisition is not viewed as merely stochastic, usage-based and emergentist approaches do not widely discuss qualitative aspects of learning situations and consistently show that "language learning can be explained to a large degree by quantitative learning processes" (Behrens, 2009: 403).

Studies on bilingualism show a clear relationship between a child's proficiency and the amount of input from each language in the child's environment (Bohman et al., 2010; Bowers & Vasilyeva, 2011; Thordardottir, 2011; Pearson, 2007; Scheele et al., 2010; Unsworth, 2016). In fact, a competition

model for the development of multiple language systems during childhood, also rooted in emergentist theory, substantiates the view that language processing modules are experience-dependent and made, not born (Hernandez et al., 2005). Hence, input-related variables are shaped by different bilingual experiences and associated affordances.

In SLA, access to opportunities for L2 learning has been receiving an increase in attention. Differences affecting the rate and outcome of learning in very disparate learning contexts are often highlighted (de Bot, 2014; Lightbown, 2014; Muñoz, 2008). Research contexts should matter greatly in comparisons of empirical evidence of input-output relationships because the quantity of TL input available in L2 and FL environments is probably the most striking factor of difference. Whereas young L2 learners are usually involved in language immersion and surrounded by input-rich environments that give them a fair chance to learn the TL (DeKeyser, 2013), young FL learners typically enrol in low-intensity 'drip-feed' courses in a 'minimal input situation' (Larson-Hall, 2008). This limited exposure to the TL in FL settings and meagre opportunities for genuine interaction are found responsible for unsatisfactory outcomes of FL programmes (Lightbown, 2000; Llanes & Muñoz, 2013; Webb & Nation, 2017). Contexts of learning may matter even more in the case of young FL learners. Unlike older learners, they are not autonomous learners, and their early progress may greatly depend on classroom conditions (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). Therefore, the shared findings about the importance of the mere quantity of TL input (first, second, or foreign) lead us to believe that current understandings of the role of the amount of input available to YLs of a FL language should be carefully revised. Our view is that the amount of TL use cannot be a personal or subjective matter of a practising language professional (Rabbidge & Chappell, 2014; Shin et al., 2018) and that FL teachers would benefit from guidelines that go beyond recommendations like 'maximal' or 'optimal' TL use (Macaro, 2005; Turnbull, 2001).

2.1. *TL input in FL learning contexts*

Rather little is known about the influence of the amount of input on children's FL skills (Unsworth et al., 2015). This is an effect of at least two methodological problems. First, measuring TL input is a complex challenge, hence, available research is scarce and relies on indirect data. The most direct measure of TL quantity would be obtained by compiling corpora of FL input that the learners are actually exposed to. Instead, estimations are made based on self-reports from questionnaires that suffer from inherent practical and ethical limitations (Flege, 2009). Second, the way in which learners engage with available input remains elusive to researchers. When learner achievement is compared with TL contact in instructed settings, the amounts of

TL input are often operationalized either as (estimations of) hours of exposure (Muñoz, 2006) or instructional hours/minutes (de Bot, 2014; Unsworth et al., 2015). Notable exceptions are studies conducted in intensive FL classes that rely on corpus analysis of classroom input and its association to learner production (Collins et al., 2009, 2012; Trofimovich et al., 2012; White et al., 2007). In an effort to explain the input-acquisition relationship and draw implications for instructional input, these studies look into the quantity and exposure to formal features of the TL that learners normally receive in their regular FL classes. Their research context and foci are less relevant for early FL learning since the most common model of early FL instruction is low on time and intensity (Johnstone, 2018) and largely focuses on the development of aural comprehension and vocabulary. A noteworthy study is one on the impact of frequency (the number of times children heard a word) by Myles and Mitchell (2012), who reported that the amount of raw teacher input over 19 weeks/38 hours played a major role in vocabulary learning of 5 to 11-year-olds learning French in the classroom. Other studies reporting language gains for YLs rely on teacher proficiency as a measure of the TL input on the assumption that higher proficiency ensures more and varied TL input. In Unsworth et al.'s (2015) longitudinal study, children (aged four at the beginning of the study) scored significantly lower on vocabulary and grammar tests when taught by a non-native teacher at the CEFR B-level of FL proficiency than by a more proficient or native speaker teacher in the first two years of instruction. Similarly, Graham et al. (2017) found that YLs of French (N=252, aged 9-10 at the start of the project) taught by more proficient teachers achieved more progress. In a recent study involving 844 German teachers of primary EFL, teachers with higher formal education reported having higher TL proficiency and using TL more than teachers with lower formal education (Wilden & Porsch, 2020). Unsurprisingly, many claim that the teacher's role as a source of TL input in early classroom instruction remains constant and significant (Copland et al., 2014; Garton & Copland, 2018; Rich, 2018). Indeed, TL input addressed to learners in FL settings is primarily their teacher's FL performance, which serves as a model of FL use, thus making the teacher the principal source of FL input and facilitator of interaction (Edelenbos et al., 2006).

The search for an optimal amount of teachers' FL use in formal settings is inevitably associated with research on classroom TL/L1 use. Nevertheless, these classroom-oriented studies are rather descriptive, oftentimes relying on teacher and learner perceptions of TL/L1 use and/or dealing with the functional use of the two languages at different educational levels, from primary school to university. The problem lies in the fact that these teaching contexts are characterized by major differences in, on the one hand, learners' maturational stage, and, on the other, learners' language proficiency, which determines the rate of FL progress and classroom methodology applied.

Thus, the manner in which research on the use of the two languages carries implications for different education levels is unclear to date. At this point, however, there are two important findings shared across levels and contexts that have importance for the present study. Firstly, no matter what the age of the learners, an exclusive use of the TL is hardly ever, if at all, perceived as desirable. Moreover, exclusive L2 use can be perceived as a threat for communicativeness of the class and a possible cause for unwillingness to participate, as revealed in Macaro and Lee's (2013) study involving 449 YLs (aged 12) and 309 adults. Secondly, the amounts of languages used by teachers vary greatly, which is the issue addressed next.

2.1.1. *Amounts of TL use with YLs of a FL*

Whereas studies on TL use at the university and secondary level are abundant (Hall & Cook, 2012; Shin et al., 2019), TL use at the primary level is largely neglected and needs to be urgently addressed, especially in light of recent findings revealing disappointing linguistic outcomes of early FL programmes (e.g., Baumert et al., 2020). A few studies available corroborate the wide variability found in teacher TL use with more mature learners. Giannikas (2011) reports that Greek YLs (aged 6–11) were exposed to the TL between 2% to 40% of the classroom time. More TL use was reported by Tsagari and Georgiou (2016) who found that four EFL teachers of Cypriot YLs (aged 7–9) in private language schools produced between 24.15% and 87.75% TL words over 12 lessons. Less variation and more TL use were found in a Turkish primary school where EFL dominated the classroom talk of three teachers who produced 61% to 86% of TL words over 9 lessons in grades 2, 3 and 4 (Taşçi & Aksu Ataç, 2020). Similarly, Peng and Zhang (2009) found that four teachers used between 64% and 92% of the TL while speaking to fifth graders (aged 10-11) in China.

Thompson and Harrison (2014) describe 50% or more of L1 use as extreme, whereas Turnbull (2001) raises the question if 50% implies heavy reliance on that language and insufficient TL input. Based on his teaching experience and research, he argued that classes where TL use is below 25% deprive learners of valuable TL input, thus aligning with Shapson et al. (1978, as cited in Turnbull, 2001), who viewed 75% of TL as the acceptable minimum. Explicit statements about acceptable amounts of L1 use are found in Macaro (2005), and Thomson and Harrison (2014), who set the acceptable amount of TL use at 85% to 90% of classroom interaction. Macaro (2005) concluded that guidelines cannot be issued beyond insistence on communicative interaction where TL is predominantly used, and called for more research on the amount and effects of languages used.

Generally speaking, better outcomes of FL learning are expected if an optimal amount of TL is available, but to date, there is no consensus on the meaning of optimal TL quantity in FL classroom settings. Empirical studies that address the relation between the quantity of TL input and FL development are painfully missing. Efforts are made to produce guidelines on the functional use of L1 that lead to better learning outcomes (e.g., Fuente & Goldberg, 2020), but there is also evidence of negative influences of teachers' L1 use on learners' language choices, and consequently, opportunities for TL language production (Thompson & Harrison, 2014). Based on our conviction that, in a greatly uniform and homogenous FL context, a threshold level for teacher's TL use can be established, the present study attempts to determine the TL amount that leads to better outcomes of early FL learning in one such setting. For this purpose, we collected samples of classroom speech to Croatian YLs of English at the early stage of FL learning when the FL language used by the teacher in the classroom is the primary source of TL input. The amount of teacher talk in English, the TL of instruction, is therefore treated as a distinctive factor that can add to explanations of variation in YLs' outcomes. Specifically, the relationship between this type of aural TL input and YLs' early development of listening comprehension of EFL is explored.

3. The study

3.1. *The rationale*

Although research on learners' contact with the TL is increasing, very little is known about the actual TL exposure or the amount of input YLs receive (Muñoz, 2008; Unsworth et al., 2015). The rationale for the present study rests on evidence from two large projects on early FL learning in Europe. Findings of the Barcelona Age Factor Project suggest that the auditory skills of YLs are affected by the amount of TL exposure (Muñoz, 2009). The report on the cohort of Croatian learners who participated in the project Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) revealed significant differences on listening comprehension outcomes among participants and observable differences in their classroom exposure to the TL (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). Starting with the assumption that the amount of classroom TL input alone is a significant factor in the context of low intensity instructed EFL learning, we aimed to determine how much TL was there in the first three years of EFL instruction. Additionally, we aimed to discover how much of the variance found on the listening comprehension tasks could be explained by the amount of teacher-produced input in English alone. Before we move to the study itself, we describe the Croatian context of early EFL to underscore its suitability for implementation of the present methodology.

3.2. *Context of the present study*

The Croatian educational system is highly centralized; the Ministry of Science and Education is directly responsible for determining the FL policies and FL methodology in the classroom (including setting up curriculum goals and objectives for the subject, determining time and content requirements, reviewing and approving textbooks, and issuing guidelines for curriculum implementation). A weak version of the communicative approach with a particular focus on the development of listening and speaking skills is enacted with YLs, hence, typical course activities include listening to and practicing songs, rhymes, chants, short stories and role-plays, playing games and doing game-like activities for development of listening skills and pronunciation, vocabulary learning, and, less frequently, learning-to-read and learning-to-write activities. Literacy skills activities become more frequent in each successive grade. Learners are provided with a textbook and an activity book (nationally or internationally published). The textbooks are almost identical, covering the same themes, vocabulary, and structures prescribed by the official curriculum.

In Croatia, primary education begins at the age of 6.5–7.5 and lasts for eight years. The study of a FL is compulsory from the first year of school entry. The contact hours for regular scheduled language classes are two weekly 45-minute lessons (70 annually). EFL teachers are non-native English speakers who obtain a university degree that ensures the kind of language proficiency required to teach early English successfully (at least B2+ in productive and C1 in receptive language skills).

The Croatian EFL context is a limited-input non-immersive setting, but there are many opportunities for English language exposure through a variety of media (Erk, 2021; Hendrih & Letica Krevelj, 2019). Although time spent watching TV might favourably affect learning outcomes (e.g., De Wilde et al., 2019), an assumption that English input is available to (very) YLs is unwarranted. Many TV channels and films for children are dubbed. Where it exists, the exposure is rather passive, and learners are hardly ever provided with opportunities to use English with proficient speakers in multiple, socially oriented activities typically available in L2 environments.

3.3. *Aims and research questions*

The longitudinal study at hand explores the assumed long-term role of aural TL input in the explanation of significant differences in YLs' development of listening comprehension skills. It is argued that the amount of classroom TL input in the Croatian EFL context is significant for the YLs as it provides opportunities for learners' active engagement with English, i.e., opportunities for verbal and non-verbal responses to the teacher's target language (TTL)

input that are otherwise absent in the local learning environment. Thus, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- How much TTL input is there in the observed EFL classes?
- What is the nature of the relationship between the amount of TTL input and learner scores on listening comprehension tasks?
- Do varying amounts of TTL input affect the development of the YLs' listening comprehension skills differently over the period of the first three years of EFL instruction? Does more TTL input ensure better learning outcomes?

We set out to examine "the more TL, the better" approach, thus taking a complementary perspective rather than addressing the long-standing controversy between TL exposure versus L1 efficacy in instructed SLA.

3.4. *Participants*

The present study uses a subset of Croatian ELLiE classes. Hence, the sample of participants (N=132, 68 girls, 64 boys) is a convenience sub-sample of the Croatian ELLiE cohort attending six state-funded schools. One class of learners per school was followed longitudinally, from Grade 1 to Grade 3. Classes consisted of 19 to 24 pupils. Only typically developing children who started learning EFL in Grade 1 (aged 6.5–7.5) were included in the study. The participants resided in rural (n=3), small town (n=2) and metropolitan (n=1) schools in the continental part of Croatia.

3.5. *Instruments*

TL input in the communicative language classroom with YLs is primarily received through listening, which is believed to be a crucial skill in the development of FL competence over time (Jaekel et al., 2017; Vandergrift, 2011). Therefore, aural comprehension was selected as an appropriate measure of EFL development. Three listening comprehension tasks, developed within the ELLiE project (Enever, 2011;), were administered after roughly 70, 140 and 210 EFL lessons (end of year 1, 2 and 3 of EELL in Croatian mainstream schools). The procedures were tightly followed. Participants were given a multiple-choice task (three illustrations), which was explained in L1 and demonstrated. The participants marked an item that fitted what they heard twice from the researcher in Grade 1 (19 points) or from a pre-recorded native English-speaking voice on the CD player in Grades 2 and 3 (18 and 23 points, respectively). An additional task in Grades 2 and 3 required the learners to listen to a recording, decide if the statements related to the pictures were true or false, and provide the right answer (cross/tick). Some items on the listening tasks were kept while others were added to increase the level of

difficulty for each new year of the study. Descriptive data about learners' achievement on the tasks are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive data on YLs' achievement on three aural comprehension tasks

Task	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
L1	124	3	19	14.77	2.502	-.930	2.897
L2	120	4	18	15.20	2.947	-1.560	2.714
L3	115	11	23	19.63	3.272	-.913	-.165

L1= listening comprehension score in Grade 1; L2= listening comprehension score in Grade 2; L3= listening comprehension score in Grade 3

3.6. *Corpus of TTL input*

To explore the relationship between TTL input and learners' outcomes, a corpus of classroom interaction transcripts was needed that would truly exemplify the amount of TL typically used in EFL instruction to our participants. The initial data about the quantity of TTL input comprised the recorded language from the six classes and 9 teachers, as there were three teacher switches in the third year of the study. The teachers were instructed to deliver a typical EFL lesson, and audio recordings were made during intact EFL lessons in the same week at the beginning and towards the end of the second term. All of the classroom interaction was transcribed word for word except for some pair and group work that was characterized by simultaneous speech of many pupils and, therefore, difficult to comprehend. Thirty-six recordings made in Grades 1 through 3 were complemented by lesson observation records. The lessons were qualitatively analysed for appropriateness and similarity in lesson content. Two recordings of poor quality and one recording of a lesson different from the others in the corpus (it recorded individual learners reproducing a poem for assessment purposes) were discarded. Hence, a corpus of 33 transcripts of spontaneous and scripted TTL use to which learners responded verbally or non-verbally (e.g., in the case of classroom instructions) was obtained. Following Kim and Elder (2005), interactions involving mechanical TL utterances were excluded from the subsequent analysis (dictations, repetition drills, songs, and reading). Discipline-oriented L1 exchanges between teachers and individual learners were excluded from the analysis as they could artificially inflate the amounts of languages used, whereas the language addressed to the whole class with the same purpose was retained (e.g., *Stop talking!*).

Next, the language used by the teacher in the L1 and TL was marked on the transcripts. The Analysis of Speech Unit (AS-unit; Foster et al., 2000)

served as the unit of data analysis which was conducted by the first author of this paper. Intra-coder reliability was established by coding half of the corpus (17 randomly selected lessons) after a six-month lapse with a resultant level of agreement of 94% to 99%.

The L1/TL language units were classified following Duff and Polio's (1990) categories of L1/TL use per utterance. Table 2 provides authentic examples of the categories from the present corpus along with English translation (in italics) where necessary.

Table 2: Examples of categories of L1 and TL AS-units from the corpus of TTL input.

CATEGORY		EXAMPLE
1	TL	is this left or right?
2	TLc	have you ever heard of **zvjezdana prašina**? *stardust*
3	Mix	**ajdemo sada pogledati** how you did this one *let's take a look at*
4	L1c	**što to znači** have you got? *what's the meaning of*
5	L1	**a kako znaš?** *and how do you know that?*

TL = TL unit; TLc = TL unit with one word or phrase in L1; Mix= an approximately equal mixture of L1 and Tl unit; L1c = L1 unit with one word or phrase in TL; L1 = L1 unit.

The contribution of units with a word or phrase in the other language was rather small (0% to 1% for TLc, 2% to 5% for L1c), so categories 1-2 and 4-5 were collapsed for subsequent analyses.

3.7. *Procedure*

Two types of data were needed for the present analysis: results on the listening comprehension tasks and amounts of TTL input. Individual answer sheets were used for the listening tasks, and they were completed in a whole class setting with no conferring. The marking criteria for all tasks were transparent (right/wrong). The amounts of TTL input were obtained from the analysis of classroom transcripts. This means that we opted for an exploratory-interpretative research paradigm based on a non-experimental design and a combination of quantitative (learners' listening comprehension scores) and qualitative data (categories of TL use extracted through quantification of TTL input). The sample (convenient, small classes) and the

nature of the second variable necessitated the use of non-parametric statistics.

3.8. *Preliminary analysis*

Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure homogeneity across classes related to the formal features of EFL provision in the Croatian context and two individual variables: gender and out-of-class exposure. Also, correlations between listening scores were explored so that assumed long-term cumulative effects of TTL input can be addressed in the interpretation of findings.

Participants' parents and teachers reported about children's non-formal English learning experiences. The learners who received any kind of tutored language study before Grade 1 or during the three years of the investigation were excluded from the sample. As explained earlier, TV programmes for small children in Croatia are often dubbed, but original broadcasts are also extensively available. Information about children's TV watching habits (films, cartoons, TV series) revealed no significant differences among learner groups[1]. No gender-related differences in listening comprehension scores were found either[2].

The young participants did well on listening comprehension tasks (Table 3), showing steady progress with each next grade level. A Friedman test was conducted to evaluate differences in medians among grades for listening 1 (Median = 15), for listening 2 (Median = 16), and for listening 3 (Median = 20). The test was significant $\chi 2$ (2, N = 103) = 110.96, $p < .001$, and the Kindall's coefficient of concordance of .54 indicated fairly strong differences among the three concerns. Follow-up pairwise comparisons were conducted using a Wilcoxon test and controlling for the Type I errors across these comparisons at the .05 level using the LSD procedure. The median listening 3 was significantly greater than the median listening 1, $p < .001$, and the median listening 2, $p < .001$, and the median listening 2 was significantly greater than the median listening 1, $p < .05$.

[1] (p=.127 on the first, p=.709 on the second, and p=.971 on the third listening comprehension task, Kruskal-Wallis H test)

[2] (p=.733 on the first, p=.824 on the second, and p=.315 on the third listening comprehension task, Mann-Whitney U-test)

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for listening comprehension tasks (N=132).

TASK	CLASS	N	MIN	MAX	M	SD	M_r
L1	1	23	10	19	14.00	2.505	13.00
	2	18	10	18	12.83	2.203	12.50
	3	22	9	18	15.00	2.138	15.00
	4	16	3	19	14.75	3.642	15.00
	5	23	12	17	15.17	1.337	16.00
	6	22	13	19	16.55	1.683	16.00
L2	1	20	4	18	13.95	4.174	15.00
	2	20	11	17	15.15	1.631	16.00
	3	22	8	18	13.59	3.018	13.50
	4	17	7	18	15.35	3.372	17.00
	5	22	12	18	16.50	1.739	17.00
	6	19	12	18	16.79	1.512	17.00
L3	1	19	11	23	18.05	4.403	19.00
	2	18	14	23	19.94	2.645	21.00
	3	22	12	23	18.09	3.676	17.00
	4	18	13	23	19.56	2.975	20.00
	5	21	17	23	20.62	1.987	20.00
	6	17	19	23	21.94	1.298	22.00

L1/L2/L3= listening comprehension scores in Grades 1/2/3 respectively

A correlational analysis confirmed that the participants' listening comprehension results correlated significantly between grades (Table 4), which verified that cumulative perspective on the impact of TTL use could be taken.

Table 4: Correlations between aural comprehension scores in Grades 1-3 (N=132).

TASK	*r*	
	L2	L3
L1	.431**	.274**
L2	-	527**

**p<0.01

In sum, the participants made significant longitudinal progress with important associations between their aural achievement over the years. Next, the classes were taught by non-native speakers of English who followed the same teaching approach, comparable textbooks were used, and participants

received the same number of yearly lessons (70 in each grade) and took part in activities aimed at the whole class rather than at individuals. Accumulated instruction hours for the participants was identical over the three years. There was a heavy reliance on oral language in all observed classes. Hence, conditions of FL provision our participants received over the three-year period were uniform, and grouping learners from different classes together for subsequent analyses was justified. Due to the uniform nature of EFL provision across the country, we could safely assume that they were at the same stage of the EFL learning process at the beginning of the study. The major distinguishing factor within their school environment was their EFL teacher. We are aware that other teacher factors (e.g., teacher qualification and training, teaching style, teaching experience) can significantly influence what goes on in the classroom, but we are convinced that these factors reflect themselves and/or become incorporated into the teacher's linguistic behaviour and, by extension, into the frequency with which teachers' (choose to) use the TL in the classroom. On these grounds, and in an effort to avoid confounding with other teacher-related factors, we find our focus on one variable only, the amount of TTL input, justified.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. *How much TTL input is there in the observed classes?*

In line with available research, the results on the amount of TTL input showed great variability (Table 5). The range (expressed as percentages of TL used over the three years for each class and grade separately) is extremely wide and some TTL input quantities are surprisingly low. In contrast, numbers that are around and above 80% of TLL input are encouraging and show that extensive TL use is also a reality in the observed EFL lessons. The least TL input was produced in the first year of EFL learning, with an average of below 50%, and slightly more in the second year, whereas an increase of 11% is found in the third year of learning.

Table 5: Amount of TTL input in the observed classes over the years, ranges and averaged percentages.

YEAR	CLASS UNIT						% RANGE	AVG. % OF TTL INPUT
	1	2	3	4	5	6		
1	18%	47%	12%	70%	85%	46%	12 – 85%	46.33%
2	30%	77%	16%	59%	65%	54%	16 – 77%	50.16%
3	21%	79%	77%	59%	73%	58%	21 – 79%	61.16%

At the beginning of their formal education, YLs may have social and emotional needs different from older learners, and these might be valid reasons for less TL use, especially in Grade 1. However, a closer look at the values obtained in different classes actually shows that average percentages of TL use are not revealing of the extremes found. In FL contexts, there is traditionally strong pressure on teachers to use the TL almost exclusively. In this way, it is believed that increased learning affordances are created for learners to exploit in the classroom. Unfortunately, affordances seem to be scarce where learners receive low TL amounts (e.g., class units 1 and 3), and the concern about (extreme) inequality in the amount of experience with TL input in different classes (especially so in Grade 1) remains. From our knowledge of the context, FL matter taught in these early years focuses on everyday age-appropriate situations and concrete and familiar concepts (which can be demonstrated by action or presented visually), ensuring that least reliance on L1 is needed. Surely, the role of teacher proficiency, implementation of age-appropriate methodology, and teaching efficacy contributes to understanding of the motivations behind the TL/L1 use and need to be addressed in the future, but for reasons mentioned earlier, they are beyond the scope of this paper.

The amounts of TTL input recorded in our study are comparable to the findings by Tsagari and Georgiou's (2016), but they are lower than those available to Turkish EFL learners of the same age (Taşçi & Aksu Ataç, 2020) and slightly older Chinese learners (Peng & Zhang, 2009).

It has been repeatedly emphasised that YLs need massive exposure to TL input in meaningful contexts to benefit from an early start. The recorded variability in the amount of TTL input clearly demonstrates that our participants had been exposed to variable and unstable amounts of TTL input over the three years, and their accumulated experience with spoken language of the classroom is quite diverse. In light of the proposition that low TL use deprives learners of opportunities for intake and communication that leads to optimal second language development (Kim & Elder, 2005), as well as the understanding that "language itself is the most important ingredient in the classroom" (Cook 2008: 163), the relationship between different amounts of TTL input and learner progress was examined next.

4.2. *What is the relationship between TTL input and learner scores on listening comprehension tasks in the first three years of EFL learning?*

Building upon the suggestions about optimal percentages of TL/L1 use in instructed settings (2.1.1. above), in the next step the aural TL input-output relationship was explored at two levels, with different learner groups. The

learners who were exposed to less than half or more than half of the instructional input in the TL were grouped together next. The results of correlational analysis are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Correlations between different amounts of TTL input (<50% and ≥50%) in Grades 1-3 and learner achievement on listening comprehension tasks over the three-year period (N=132).

TTL INPUT	r_s		
	L1	L2	L3
G1	-	.236**	-
G2		.333**	.285**
G3			-

**p<0.01

G1= amount of TTL input recorded in Grade 1; G2= amount of TTL input recorded in Grade 2; G3= amount of TTL input recorded in Grade 3

The results show weak to moderate but significant correlations between the two variables over the three years. They confirm a relationship between TTL input at the beginning of EFL learning and the learners' longitudinal aural results. However, the absence of significant correlation in some relationships warrants detailed examination. No significant association was found between TTL input available in Grade 1 and the listening scores in Grades 1 and 3. Grade 1 may be too early a developmental stage for listening score to significantly correlate with TTL input, and the lack of significant correlation between TTL input and listening score in Grade 3 may be attributed to the listening task being rather easy for this particular cohort (see Tables 1 and 3). Another plausible explanation for the lack of correlation between teacher input and learner output in the third grade might be the switch (Cameron, 2001), i.e., the point when spoken language input becomes less important for learners' learning and assumed to take place at the age of 8 to 9. Namely, as children become more proficient in English, they become less dependent on formal instruction and their teacher as the primary provider of 'live' language and interaction. They start turning to other resources and more TL contact outside of school (Unsworth et al., 2015). Actually, this was recorded in another study with learners in Grades 3 and 4 on sources of out-of-school contact with English in Croatia and informal vocabulary acquisition (Erk, 2021). The informal learning of English seems to increase from Grade 3 onwards in the Croatian EFL learning context, probably as a consequence of YLs' increased readiness to utilize opportunities for more out-of-school FL input, which might have influenced the outcome of the third listening comprehension task in our study. Interestingly, Mihaljević Djigunović (2012) reported a marked decrease in motivation in Grade 3 for

the ELLiE cohort, hence, less association with aural English in classroom learning is interpreted as an indirect effect of the participants' decreased interest in it. This requires further investigation.

4.3. *Do varying amounts of TTL input affect the development of the YLs' listening comprehension skills differently? Does more TTL input lead to better learning outcomes?*

Proceeding from the results of correlational analysis (Table 6 above), a comparison of learner groups receiving more than or less than half of TTL input in Grades 1 and 2 was conducted for listening scores in Grades 2 and 3 first (Table 7).

Table 7: Results of the comparison of listening scores between learners who received more (≥50%) or less (<50%) TTL input in the first two years of EELL.

GRADE LEVEL	TASK	TTL INPUT GROUP	N	MDN	M_r	U-TEST	SIG.	EFFECT SIZE
G1	L2	<50%	81	16.00	54.91	2032.50	.010**	.06
		≥50%	39	17.00	72.12			
G2	L2	<50%	42	14.50	45.00	987.00	.000**	.11
		≥50%	78	17.00	68.85			
	L3	<50%	41	18.00	44.40	1000.50	.002**	.08
		≥50%	74	21.00	64.98			

**p<0.01; *p<0.05

G1= amount of TTL input recorded in Grade 1; G2= amount of TTL input recorded in Grade 2

The YLs exposed to the TTL input dominated by the use of the TL during their first year of FL learning significantly outperformed those who received less TL input on the second listening comprehension task. The effect size was small (Field, 2005), i.e., 6% of the variability in the ranks is accounted for by TTL input received in Grade 1 (z = 2.572, N= 120). Likewise, the YLs who received more exposure to TTL input in the second year of FL learning did better than those with less exposure on the second and third listening comprehension tasks. The effect size explained 11% of the variance on L2 (z = 3.630, N=120) and 8% of variance on L3 (z = 3.048, N= 115). These findings suggest that the quantity of TTL input is a significant factor for YLs' FL development over time. Interestingly, the variance explained in the compari-

sons is similar to that found in Flege (2009) who established that self-reported frequencies of L2 use accounted for 5% to 10% of variance in L2 speech learning.

The result of comparisons between groups of learners exposed to more (≥50%) or less (<50%) TTL input confirmed that predominant use of the TL is needed for better aural skills development of YLs in this study, as suggested by Macaro (2005). In what follows, additional tests were run at a more detailed level. The two groups of higher and lower exposure to TTL input were split into two subgroups, resulting in four groups of learners receiving different amounts of TTL input over the two-year period (Table 8). The aim of this step was to test the validity of recommendations by different authors about acceptable TL use (2.1.1. above).

Table 8: Groups of participants (N=132) exposed to different amounts of TTL input in Grades 1 and 2 and their listening scores.

GROUP	AMOUNT OF TTL INPUT	N G1	L2 Mdn/ M_r	N G2	L2 Mdn/ M_r	L3 Mdn/ M_r
1	≤25%	46	14.5/45	23	13.5/40.07	17/43.57
2	26%-50%	43	16/65.58	23	15/50.42	19/47.53
3	51%-75%	19	17/66.41	65	17/75.12	21/67.12
4	76%-100%	24	17/76.52	21	16/50.65	21/58.31

A Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed significant differences between groups for Grade 1 scores ($H(3) = 14.713$, $p = .002$). Pairwise comparisons indicated important differences between the group receiving little TTL input (<25%) and the group exposed to reduced (26%-50%) and substantial (76%-100%) TTL input ($p = .042$ and $p = .003$ respectively) in the first year of their EFL study. The learner group exposed to most TTL input in Grade 1 performed the best, corroborating the view that higher amounts of TTL input lead to better learner achievement. Apparently, high amounts of TTL input at the very beginning of the FL learning have a snowballing effect on later development, a point which will be revisited later.

The same statistical procedures were applied on learner groups receiving different quantities of TTL input in their second year of EELL. The results showed significant differences between amounts of TTL input in Grade 2 and learner outcomes on listening tasks 2 and 3 ($H(3) = 21.684$, $p = .000$, and $H(3) = 10.411$, $p = .015$ respectively). Post hoc comparisons indicated important differences between the group exposed to a fair amount of TTL input

(51%-75%) and the other three groups on the listening comprehension task performed in Grade 2 (p=.000 for group 1, p=.033 for group 2 and p= .036 for group 4). Next, groups 1 and 3 performed significantly differently on the listening tasks in Grade 3 (p=.027). The group receiving fair amounts of TTL input (51%-75%) had the best mean rank on both measures of listening comprehension. This is an important finding which shows that those exposed to most TTL input in the second year of EFL learning failed to perform best and suggests that YLs might have benefitted from some L1 use in Grade 2. This may be partially due to the nature of English classes in Grade 2. Although listening and speaking activities are still extensively employed, reading and writing activities are gradually introduced and may challenge learners in ways that make teachers use less TL and more L1. Indeed, this was recorded by Rabbidge and Chappell (2014) at the primary school level in South Korea (Grades 3 to 6), where learners needed more L1 explanations at higher grade levels. Linguistically complex and less-structured activities with YLs require more L1 use, as exemplified in a qualitative study with YLs (aged 6-7) in Hong Kong (Careless, 2002). Hence, in addition to the need for a careful assessment of relevance of studies from different FL teaching contexts, teaching approaches implemented with YLs within these contexts and their implications for TL/L1 use warrant closer scrutiny.

Undoubtedly, TTL input is one of many important variables influencing early English development. In this study TTL input alone explained 6% to 11% of variance on the measures applied. However, learners exposed to teacher input dominated by the TL did significantly better and they did so longitudinally. The assumption the more aural TL input, the better the listening comprehension outcomes was fully confirmed in the case of TTL input in Grade 1 and partially in the case of TTL input in Grade 2, setting the threshold at minimum 75% of TL use in the very first year of EFL instruction, and at least 50% of TL use in the second. In the Croatian context of EELL these amounts seem to ensure balanced classroom learning environments for YLs, and if the TL is not the dominant language of the classroom interaction, if it is not extensively used, significant and longitudinal ramifications for YLs' aural development can be expected. Furthermore, since development of other language skills rests upon good listening comprehension skills, an enhanced listening comprehension ability can lead to, for example, faster vocabulary development (as established in research on bilingual development and L1 acquisition, see section 2).

Overall, the results of the naturalistic study presented here show that the amount of TTL input at the beginning of EFL learning had an important and longitudinal influence on YLs' aural skills development. The best outcomes were recorded for those exposed to substantial (76%-100%) and fair amounts of TTL input (51-75%). Longitudinal and cumulative effect of more TTL in-

put in the first year of EFL learning corroborates the assumption about the more TL input, the better. The effect of the TTL input from the second year of EFL learning was different in that a balanced use of the two languages had no detrimental effect on YLs' receptive achievement. No effect of TTL input in the third grade of EFL learning was found, which is likely to be the result of a variety of English input resources that become available to the Croatian YLs due to their increased literacy skills. As the study was conducted within a framework of a particular uniform and homogenous EFL learning context, it is an empirical question whether and to what extent the findings are relevant for other FL learning contexts. Next, there are certain limitations related to the sample type and size, the number of tasks conducted, and language skills under study. The focus on one variable might be another limitation especially in light of the growing awareness about complex interplay of various individual and contextual factors in second language development. Surely, more variance could be explained with the inclusion of more contextual and individual variables, which is a step to be taken in future studies with experimental research design.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that TL is the key component of the FL classroom and that differences in instructional contexts influence learning outcomes. Reliance on the findings from studies on L1 acquisition and bilingualism prompted us to start our investigation from the assumption that the quantity of TL alone can significantly influence the rate of second language development. The present study shows that a highly variable TL/L1 use was a reality in the observed classrooms, and makes it evident that formal learning of a FL can be a very different experience for learners even in a highly uniform and homogenous context like that of EELL in Croatia. Indeed, a longitudinal relationship was established between the language produced by non-native EFL teachers and their learners' listening comprehension. YLs' progress was affected favourably by abundance of TL available in the first two years of FL learning. The continuity of association was partially compromised in the third year of EFL learning when individual (e.g., motivation) and other contextual factors (e.g., extramural contact with English) might become more pronounced and influence classroom experience of EELL in important ways. Nevertheless, variability in classroom learning opportunities associated with different quantities of available TL input should be further examined. As it can affect learners' progress in the long run, the availability of classroom TL input should be explored with reference to linguistic development of learners at different maturational stages and in different learning contexts. In the case of YLs, an interesting avenue of research would be pro-

bing TL use and different teaching approaches, such as CLIL versus general languages courses, but with careful treatment of affordances in the wider social context. As only a dynamic view of learner engagement with the TL over time in their local learning environment can reveal what learners do with available resources and how that affects their language learning trajectories (Moyer, 2014; Muñoz, 2017), more research is needed on the neglected role of quantity of TL input in instructed SLA settings.

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