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Part 5

Researching young learners

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the ways in which research has been undertaken with children in applied linguistics and ELT. First of all, the traditional paradigm is introduced and it is argued that most research to date has involved children as passive objects of adult interest. Even where children have been studied as unique subjects with their own characteristics and trajectories, all aspects of these studies have also been completely controlled by adults. An alternative paradigm which considers children as competent social agents is proposed, and, accordingly, the chapter recommends that it is possible to work with children as active subjects and co-researchers, and even to enable them to become researchers themselves. Children can influence and have useful input into research that concerns them and their learning. The consequences of this shift from passive to active research participants brings numerous benefits but also significant challenges. This chapter gives an overview of these benefits and challenges and suggests some practical recommendations for classroom research with children.

Running Head Right-hand: Research issues with young learners

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Research issues with young learners

Annamaria Pinter

Introduction

Given the spread of English into primary and pre-primary contexts all over the world in the last decades, research with young learners in EFL/ESL is on the increase (e.g., Rich 2014, Mourão and Lourenço 2015, Bland 2015, Copland and Garton 2014, Enever 2011). In the last decade more research has been done than ever before and this trend is likely to continue. Thus questions about how research with children might be different or similar to research with adults will continue to dominate discussions among those interested in working with children. The community of researchers interested in child second/foreign language learning will also continue to be interested in tools and techniques that ‘work particularly well’ with children in research.

Children’s special status in research is generally ignored or left implicit. Most books covering research methods in applied linguistics have been written with adult learners in mind, for example, Dörnyei 2007, Paltridge and Phatiki 2015[v1], Nunan 1992, Mackey and Gass 2005 and Richards 2003, just to list a few. These books offer comprehensive guidelines about the research process in general; however they devote very little space, if at all, to children. For example, Paltridge and Phatiki (2015[v2]) devote only one chapter to child research participants, while Dörnyei (2007) makes only occasional mentions of children where data collection in schools is discussed. Mackey and Gass (2005) refer to children only on a handful of occasions (see pp. 32–33 and 209–213). Recently Murphy and Macaro (2017) have reported

about the challenges and common obstacles of working with children as research participants in school contexts, but this review is also mostly focused on the practicalities of collecting data in schools.

Some would argue that this apparent lack of interest in children as research participants in second language education is explained by the assumption that there is nothing special about undertaking research with child participants because research with all subjects (adult or child) has to meet rigorous methodological or ethical criteria, and research tools and approaches need to be appropriate to the participants' needs no matter who they are. On the other hand it could be argued that there are indeed specific challenges that emerge in research with child participants, and undertaking research with children is therefore qualitatively different from that with adults. For example, children do not always take an interest in adult research and may resist taking part by showing reluctance in answering questions or even staying silent altogether (e.g., [Spyrou 2016](#)). If unaware or uninterested, children find concentrating on research activities tiring or meaningless, and as seemingly reluctant contributors they are quickly dismissed as 'difficult' research participants ([Bucknall 2014](#)).

In this chapter I will first of all explore trends in research involving children from a historical perspective. I will address some critical issues in more traditional approaches to researching children and then move on to current contributions. In this part the discussion will focus on the variety of ways children can be involved in research as active contributors.

Current approaches also present considerable challenges which will be discussed next. Finally, ethical issues, practical considerations and future directions in researching with children will be offered.

Definitions of research

Any research is enquiry that leads to new insights and understandings. Academic research undertaken by university researchers has the highest status because the researchers are highly

skilled and experienced; however, such research is not routinely accessible or available to others, such as teachers. In fact to address the gap between academic research and teaching or classroom practice, and to encourage teachers to engage with research that is more meaningful to them, [Burns \(2011\)](#) and others have long promoted the idea of different types of practitioner research such as Action Research or Exploratory Practice ([Hanks 2017](#)).

Research involving child participants can be undertaken by both academic researchers or teachers, and these two types of perspectives have their own advantages and drawbacks. Typically, academic researchers who come into schools to work with children do not have any prior relationships with the children, and they often do not understand the context of the school and find the children's life worlds difficult to understand. Such researchers are outsiders with an 'etic' perspective. They might find it challenging to get the children to open up in conversations and thus may not get rich data. On the other hand, they can notice aspects of the context that insiders might not be immediately conscious of or might take for granted. In contrast, teacher researchers are almost always insiders with an 'emic' perspective, and they establish strong relationships with the children before embarking on any study. This existing relationship allows teachers to base their research work on strong foundations of trust and mutual understanding. However, emic perspectives also have disadvantages such as the difficulty of differentiating between the roles of being a teacher and researcher at the same time.

Whether adults work with children as outsiders or insiders, from etic or emic perspectives, in the majority of cases they are still in charge of all aspects of the research process. Traditionally adults conduct research *on* children and children remain passive objects of interest throughout the research process.

In this chapter, however, I argue that research does not have to be an exclusively adult territory and children are able to contribute actively.

Definitions of child research participants

Since both children and adults can undertake research, it is useful here to conceptualise the different roles and status positions children can take. Following Kellett (2010a) we can identify four distinct ways in which children can participate in research. Accordingly, any research can be conducted ‘*on*’ them, ‘*about*’ them, ‘*with*’ them or ‘*by*’ them. When adults alone are in charge, research is either ‘*on*’ or ‘*about*’ children. In both these roles children are rather passive and have no input on the shape of the research. When we talk about research ‘*with*’ children or ‘*by*’ children, the difference is that the children themselves can influence the research process in an active way. They can offer unique insights and perspectives, and some can go as far as becoming co-researchers or researchers themselves.

On the whole, applied linguistics has been dominated by research ‘*on*’ and ‘*about*’ children. The second two options ‘*with*’ and ‘*by*’ are less familiar and more contentious (see Pinter 2014; Pinter and Zandian 2012, 2014; Pinter et al. 2016) even though it is clear from studies that have taken alternative perspectives that children benefit in various ways (Kellett et al. 2004). Nonetheless, due to this current lack of focus on children in more active roles in research, very little is actually known about children’s perspectives and views about English language learning.

Historical perspectives

A great deal of research has been undertaken with children as language learners in the broad field of applied linguistics over the last few decades, as every chapter in this book illustrates, but almost all of it is adult focused and adult motivated.

The most popular and traditional approach across different disciplines has been research ‘*on*’ children. In these types of studies children are objects of systematic adult enquiry which encourages objectivity, a dispassionate predisposition, often adopting a tightly controlled experimental design. This approach is associated with the ‘developmental psychology’ paradigm which has its roots in the work of Darwin and dates back to the time of the industrial revolution.

Developmental psychology is interested in the universal processes and stages of development in childhood with an emphasis on the general rather than the individual child. In order to understand children such research is interested in plotting the path of development from birth to adulthood and either explicitly or implicitly; children are viewed as immature, incompetent and irrational. Since they are being compared and contrasted to adults, their abilities and performances are routinely described in negative terms, i.e., emphasising what they are still lacking.

In this paradigm children appear as ‘depersonalised’ objects of study’ [AuQ3] (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008, p. 14). As Alderson (1995, p. 40) comments, such research is undertaken so that adults can ultimately influence school curricula, mass education and health provision for large populations. Children are usually left in the dark about the purposes of the research, and the data gained from children are interpreted according to ‘adult discourses’ (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008, p. 13) and evaluated with adult priorities in mind.

Within this paradigm, one of the most well-known and comprehensive developmental theories of childhood was proposed by Piaget (1963) and his colleagues in the early part of the twentieth century. Most children, according to Piaget, progress through the same stages, becoming more skilled at handling questions of formal logic. Universal processes apply in learning to think about problem solving, to consider others’ views and positions and to learning about extending one’s thinking from immediate problems in the here-and-now to abstract ideas and hypotheses. Even though Piaget’s claims have been criticised heavily, this is still the most well-known framework describing age-related abilities in a universal framework, thus illustrating the essence of this tradition. In addition, the methodology used in Piaget’s experiments also fits with research ‘on’ children in the sense that children were typically questioned and tested in somewhat decontextualised situations where their understanding of adult concepts was carefully measured.

In addition to the numerous large-scale studies that have focused on children’s progress towards adulthood (studies on children), research ‘about’ children has also emerged. Within this

approach, more qualitative studies focussing on fewer children as unique individuals have been undertaken. In such studies adult researchers have been making efforts to understand children as individuals with their unique views and perspectives. Accordingly, children might be studied individually or in small groups and the research design may be more longitudinal and may draw on various different data sets in order to get a comprehensive dynamic view of the participants. In a quest to understand individual children a holistic approach to data collection is applied: e.g., observation of the children in and out of school may be combined with interviewing them or collecting and analysing their written work or drawings or photos. However, the majority of these studies still sit within the developmental psychology paradigm, because despite the efforts to get to know the children as individuals, all decisions and responsibilities in the research process remain adult initiated and adult focused, and the needs-benefits scale is still heavily tipped in favour of the adult.

For example, In [Hawkins \(2005\)](#), the adult researchers were interested in understanding the L2 development of kindergarten children in the US. The teacher and the academic researcher worked collaboratively and used a wide range of appropriate tools to track the children's L2 development. They conducted regular observations both in the classroom and the playground, interviewed the parents and the focal children on several occasions and also analysed the children's friendships networks and interactions by constructing 'sociograms'. Nonetheless, as Hawkins remarks, despite the fact that they were able to follow these children around using a variety of appropriate research tools, they (the adults) were still the ones who designed all the tools and interpreted the children's voices from an exclusively adult perspective (ibid. 2005, p. 79).

Overall, in research *about* children even though the more qualitative methods are more conducive to showcasing individual differences and special learning trajectories than traditional experiments, for example, children's voices are still reported from an adult perspective. In this sense both studies *on* and *about* children ultimately rely on adult perspectives and adult interpretations.

Critical issues and topics

What we know today about children as language learners originates from contributions of the traditional paradigm, i.e., research *on* children and research *about* children. However, criticism has been mounting regarding the dominance of such adult perspectives. [Hogan \(2005, p. 26\)](#) comments that approaches where children are studied as objects appear context-free, because it is the universal that is being studied by detached and neutral observers, and children's individual unique trajectories together with their contextual affordances and their perspectives are often ignored. The object position also implicitly assumes that children have less to offer even about themselves than adults do. This leads to a conclusion that children are passive and dependent, and they are unreliable informants. Some go as far as saying that research 'on' children is therefore unethical ([Fraser et al. 2014](#)) because of the adult-biased view.

Research about children has offered an alternative approach and has helped us broaden our understanding about children's individual trajectories as well as promoted the emergence of a range of so-called 'child-friendly' methods and approaches. For example, researchers have attempted to embed interview questions into more meaningful events such as circle time conversations ([Eder and Fingerson 2002](#)) and have suggested using drama, stories and drawings to elicit better quality data from children.

In the ELLIE study ([Enever 2011](#)), for example, the researchers incorporated a child-friendly tool to explore young learners' perspectives on classroom layouts (from more traditional contexts with rows of desks to classrooms where children were sitting in groups working together). The children in different contexts were asked to select one classroom they would most like to join and then explain why they selected this classroom. It is clear that the adult researchers' aim was to use an appropriate, child-friendly tool which contained visual clues and allowed the children to link the visuals to their own personal experiences. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the prompts were designed by adults based on their judgments as to what was appropriate. Interesting questions therefore arise, such as: how do adults know what

is ‘child-friendly’ for a particular group of children? Where do accommodations come from that help adult researchers ask age-appropriate questions and/or use language that is deemed meaningful to the children? Adults’ ideas about child-friendly approaches come from knowledge, experience and assumptions all rooted in the traditional developmental psychology paradigm.

Current contributions

Research ‘*with*’ and ‘*by*’ children reflects a major perspective change whereby adult researchers acknowledge that in order to understand children *in their own right* (rather than as developing ‘would-be’ adults) they need to seek children’s own interpretations and involve them in research as *partners* and *collaborators*. ‘Childhood Studies’ has played an important role in this paradigm shift. Originated by scholars in sociology and anthropology ([James and Prout 2015](#)) it is now gaining strength in second language education. Childhood Studies is a movement that devotes itself to understanding children from their own point of view by acknowledging them as experts in their own lives.

Childhood Studies emerged as a radical approach to studying children following the impact of the United Nation Declaration on the Rights of the Child ([UNRC 1989](#)), in particular in relation to Articles 12 and 13 that focus on children’s rights as decision makers when it comes to important aspects of their lives. The change of perspective from conceptualising children as passive objects of the adult gaze to children as ‘active social agents’ means that children’s rights are to be taken much more seriously and their input should be sought systematically. The Childhood Studies approach is based on the idea that children are competent social actors and, as [Scott \(2000, p. 88\)](#) argues, ‘the best people to provide information on the child’s perspective, actions and attitudes are children themselves. Children provide reliable responses if questioned about events that are meaningful to their lives’.

Even though the UNRC articles do not directly mention children's rights to research, the wording 'all important aspects of their lives' (Articles 12) has been interpreted rather broadly and scholars working in Childhood Studies have been designing and undertaking studies with children as research collaborators, exploring both school and out-of-school issues. Some children have been promoted to important roles in research such as advisors or even fully fledged researchers. Publications promoting research training for children have also become popular (e.g., [Kellen 2005](#)).

For adult researchers the explicit shift from thinking about children as objects to children as social actors can lead to unexpected opportunities of gaining new insights and understandings. For example, in my own work I have seen how some children who participate as active subjects can suddenly become interested in contributing more and/or take a genuine interest in adults' research. In [Pinter and Zandian's \(2012\)](#) study, the participating children were originally invited to respond to a questionnaire about intercultural issues such as welcoming newcomers in their school. This initial phase was followed up by group interviews which were organised in a way that a range of participatory activities were included. Participatory activities ([O'Kane 2008](#)) are recommended in the literature because they allow flexible participation through drama, role play or drawings rather than just responding verbally. The children enjoyed the participatory activities and contributed fully. When the research study was written up in an MA dissertation, we decided to go back to the children to talk about the research they participated in some months earlier. We also wanted to get the children's reflections on the whole process. During these discussions, the children took an unexpected interest in the actual MA dissertation that was on the table and wanted to look through it. When they discovered their own transcribed utterances on the pages in the data analysis section, they asked spontaneous questions about transcribing conventions, pseudonyms and representation. They were genuinely surprised that their own words were so frequently quoted word by word in the final text, and they wanted to understand why their exact words (even if fragmented and with hesitation) were used rather than adult reformulations. In fact they expected that adults would 'correct' what they had said. They also wanted to know why

pseudonyms were necessary. The follow-up session with the children therefore turned into a ‘research training session’, where the adult researchers were explaining to the children the conventions of writing up research and the way data were represented in an academic text. These children were keen to understand more about research and academic conventions, but a space for such spontaneous discussions would not have opened up had we not made a conscious effort to listen to the children’s agenda rather than just following our own. This study started off as research about children but as we progressed, the discussions with the children opened our eyes to the possibility of researching ‘with’ children. Adult researchers and facilitators should be encouraged to approach children’s input with a genuine willingness to take the research in directions that the children suggest, and resist the urge to brush to the side their suggestions, comments and questions as irrelevant, unimportant or vague.

In another study by [Kuchah and Pinter \(2012\)](#), children’s views were sought about good English teaching. The study’s primary interest was the exploration of inspirational teachers’ practice in primary schools in Cameroon. The children’s English teacher had already been identified as an inspirational teacher using a careful bottom-up approach, but in order to complement the findings gained from adults, it was decided that children would also be interviewed about their views regarding inspirational/good teachers. When the children were invited to talk about the characteristics of good English language teachers, they insisted that their regular teacher (the one who was identified earlier) was not their best English teacher. They suggested that another teacher in the school (who was a less established teacher) was much better at teaching English. They explained their viewpoints and persuaded the researcher to observe and interview this other English teacher. The adult researcher could have simply ignored the children’s suggestion and could have persevered with their own agenda, but that would have been a missed opportunity. Listening to the children, taking their views seriously and observing the new teacher they recommended led to a better understanding of the differences between children’s and adults’ views on good teaching and has led to an alternative research focus compared to the original adult focus.

Children as co-researchers and researchers

Children can take various roles when working with adults as interested, active subjects. They can help with data collection by interviewing each other (i.e., act as interviewers and interviewees). For example, in a study by [Coppock \(2011\)](#) 10-year-old children interviewed their peers in pairs, one of them asking the questions and the other one acting as a scribe. Children may also comment on, design and evaluate tools initially designed by adults (e.g., [Zandian 2015](#); [Horgan 2016](#); [Pinter and Zandian 2014](#)) and thus can contribute to producing tools that are more authentic and more in tune with children's life experiences in a given context. Children can also suggest new research questions and angles of enquiry or new topics to explore. Children can also analyse data and disseminate findings, but these are less frequently reported in the literature (but see [Kellett et al. 2004](#) or [Kirova and Emme 2008](#)).

Children may first take on limited roles as co-researchers first, but over time they may take on more roles and different roles in new projects. [Hart \(1997\)](#) discussed issues about levels of involvement and introduced the concept of a 'participation ladder', i.e., a continuum from pretence or tokenistic involvement all the way to shared work and projects fully initiated and directed by children. Many would argue that tokenistic participation is of little benefit and significance, but the debate is ongoing about the practicalities of achieving full participation.

Taking more and more responsibility means being involved in increasing numbers of roles such as identifying research questions, undertaking data collection and analysis or writing up and disseminating results. Kellett, in this respect, ([2010a](#):49) explains that:

the co-researcher role is a partnership where the research process is shared between adults and children. A distinguishing element is that co-researchers can be involved in any number of the research phases from design to dissemination. If we were to think of a sandwich as a metaphor: participant researchers always form part of the filling, co-researchers also form part of the bread.

In order for the child to develop independent skills, the relationship between child, co-researchers and adults needs to be open and honest and requires a great deal of rapport building and reflexivity. [Christensen \(2004, p. 174\)](#) suggests that rapport building can be achieved through a reflective dialogical approach whereby ongoing communication between adult researchers and the children becomes the basis for meaningful engagement. Reflexivity, the conscious attempt to switch back and forth between the researcher's own ideas and understandings and the children's perspectives, requires the adult researcher to work out 'when to step back both figuratively and physically from the discussion, allowing the children's voices to become more dominant and their deliberations more independent at each stage' ([Coppock 2011, p. 442](#)).

Some children are enabled to work as researchers in their own rights. When children undertake research for themselves, they initiate and direct research and take responsibility for all the stages. [Alderson \(2008, p. 287\)](#) argues that this is qualitatively different from children undertaking research in their everyday lives at school, or being involved in adult-initiated research.

[Kellett \(2010a, p. 105\)](#) promotes child research for a number of reasons. She argues that children ask different questions compared to adults. She also (*ibid*, p. 8) proposes that 'accepting children as researchers in their own right promotes their democratic involvement in all phases of decision-making'. Some go as far as to suggest that children themselves are best suited to researching children's experiences ([Alderson 2008](#)) as they are successful at, for example, getting responses from their age group. Research is an important vehicle for children's voices, and participation is an empowering process. Parents also often comment on their children's increased self-esteem ([Kellett et al. 2004](#)).

[Mann et al. \(2014, p. 299\)](#) also emphasise a range of benefits that affect the self-development of young researchers; these include raised self-esteem, increased confidence, development of transferable skills, sharpening of critical thinking, heightened ethical awareness, enhanced problem solving abilities, more effective communication, development of independent

learning, increased participation in other aspects affecting their childhoods and contribution to knowledge being valued.

Overall, the benefits are holistic and long lasting:

When children realise their research is valued and listened to by adults, they have an increased sense of personal worth, of childhood as an important stage in life and of their ability to influence the quality of that childhood.

(Kellett 2010b, p. 201–202)

Pinter et al. (2016) also quote specific benefits, not just for the children but also for the adult facilitators/teachers. Children who acted alongside their teachers as co-researchers in an Indian project developed both their proficiency and confidence in using English and autonomous learning skills such as critical thinking and working collaboratively. They also enjoyed engaging with authentic texts such as interview data which they had collected themselves, which they contrasted with passive learning from books. The children also commented that the projects they chose were important to them, that they carried on working on these even when the teacher was absent and they felt proud and empowered to be able to share their work with wider audiences. Additionally, benefits were also significant for teacher-researchers working with these children (Pinter et al. 2016). Teachers reported that they grew and changed as professionals in their acceptance that everyone in their classrooms was learning all the time, including themselves. They also commented on the fact that they had changed their conceptions about children and learning in general, and many became firm believers that children should take a central role in decision making, choosing activities and evaluating their learning. For example, one teacher said (quoted in Pinter et al. 2016, p. 22):

Today I believe learners can be good researchers, I strongly believe that. What next? [Research] will be an ongoing activity in my classroom. It will continue as

long as I am in the profession. I hope it will become a part of the curriculum someday. And it will go on because the children are not letting me stop.

Current critical issues

How children are viewed and how adults decide to work with them will depend on the adults' system of beliefs regarding children and childhood. Whether adults will invite children as objects or subjects in the research project will vary according to their aims and their research questions but more importantly according to what they believe about what children can or cannot do or be trusted to do. In fact many academic researchers or practitioner researchers do not believe that children can do their own research (e.g., [Ellis and Ibrahim, forthcoming](#)).

At the same time, [Gallacher and Gallagher \(2008\)](#), p. 511) rightly comment that 'children should be approached as experts in their own lives', but they are of course not the *only* experts. It would not be sensible just to focus on what children tell us about their experiences; we need to continue listening to adults who also know them well. [Komulainen \(2007\)](#) warns us that we must not replace one essentialism 'children are incompetent' with another, 'children are competent'. Children's voices are always multilayered and messy and they are the product of relevant institutional, interactional and discourse contexts ([Spyrou 2011, 2016](#)), and therefore the interpretations of these voices are never straightforward.

Many scholars also suggest that there are certain roles that children cannot take over. [Mayall \(1994\)](#) argues, for example, that no matter how much we try to involve children in all stages of research, the interpretation and analysis of the final representation (at least for some purposes) requires knowledge that children simply do not have.

In addition to methodological challenges, there are also critical voices questioning the value of children's research. [Kim \(2016\)](#), for example, suggests that quality issues can be raised about children's research. Is children's research really 'research'? Is it scholarly? Kim (ibid.) comments that much research that children undertake is not aimed directly to promote genuine

participation or the core purpose of knowledge production but is undertaken simply for educational benefits. In fact she argues that research undertaken for pedagogical purposes at schools allows teachers to '*achieve their own pedagogical goals*' (Kim 2016, p. 12) and this goes back to traditional perspectives *on* children because research for educational purposes focuses on adults' agendas. Kim further argues that, 'as children's research is vulnerable to being subsumed under the pedagogical intentions of adults, and given the ethical questions that arise when that happens, it seems necessary not to fuse conceptually children's research as a tool for their participation and pedagogy. If so, tensions arising from balancing these objectives seem inevitable, as are those concerning children's status as 'beings' and 'becomings'.

Overall, perhaps research undertaken with a pedagogic purpose is a stepping stone for research that is for true participation if we conceptualise different types of research on a continuum.

Ethics

The role of ethical guidelines in any research is to protect the research participants by offering anonymity, confidentiality and an opportunity to withdraw from the research without negative consequences of any kind. Working with children, whether in the role of objects or subjects or social agents, will mean that adults may have to consider complex ethical dilemmas of all kinds. Academic institutions and other organisations will have their own ethical guidelines about working with children but it is the duty of the adult researcher to monitor and navigate ethical dilemmas as they arise in any one study. For example, one issue that causes concern is the increasing over-bureaucratization of ethical procedures, which leads to a situation where children are sometimes excluded from research (Darian-Smith and Henningham 2014) even though they themselves would very much like to participate. The more active roles children take, the more there is a tension between how far they can make decisions and when and how their parents and guardians can potentially override these decisions. Children are considered 'vulnerable' research

participants because of their social status, and in all research their parents' or guardians' permissions (often interpreted as written consent) will be needed in order to for them to participate. However, when children are active contributors or even initiators of their own research, their own consent is most important and the requirement for adult permission can be brought into question (e.g., [Coyne 2010](#)).

Good quality research rests on a trusting relationship between the adult researcher and the children, and confidentiality is a cornerstone of this relationship. However, should any issues about child abuse or any other harm or danger to the child come to the attention of the adult researcher, they cannot continue with confidentiality.

There are important cultural dimensions to consider as well. In some contexts it is not the norm to approach parents with letters from the school about research because it is believed that whatever activity that goes on at school is authorised by the teachers and the head teacher/principal. In some contexts, parents might also find signing official letters threatening as they might not fully understand the content and/or fear potential negative consequences, based on past negative experiences.

Ethical guidelines have been inherited from the field of medicine, and much of the scrutiny about harm, for example, does not really apply in the kind of social sciences research that children will be involved in (see [Copland and Creese 2016](#)). In the majority of cases, especially the kind where children are encouraged to become researchers themselves, participating in the research is in fact beneficial and enjoyable for children.

Recommendations for practice

In our rapidly changing societies there is now a growing realisation that new approaches are needed to meet the ever-changing educational needs of school children. Many scholars recommend that schools should embrace the development of twenty-first century skills ([P21 2009](#)) focussing on cultivating skills such as creativity, critical thinking, communication and

collaboration. These 4 skills (4Cs) have been widely accepted to be core for primary school children (Trilling and Fadal 2009). In view of the importance of these skills, the goal of developing competent and confident young researchers equipped with rudimentary research skills does not seem such a far-fetched idea. To become a child researcher presupposes certain autonomous skills, and those children who can undertake research in collaboration with adults or by themselves with minimal adult facilitation are by definition autonomous, motivated learners who can communicate well, collaborate with their friends and think critically and creatively.

It is therefore important for future research and practice to identify opportunities where children are encouraged and enabled to take control of their own learning and to undertake projects, enquiries or research into their own learning.

Future directions

To date, very little research within second language education has been undertaken with children in active roles, participating in research as active social agents. Whilst all research with children is valuable (whether children are subjects, objects or active participants), there is a need to open up new possibilities which would allow more research to be undertaken *with* or *by* children as part of larger projects.

Researchers interested in children as language learners need a broader framework that embraces all types of research with children in a more a balanced way. This would mean undertaking research of all kinds including on, about, with and by children. This would further stimulate future work that would cover a wider range of options in terms of children's status, roles and general involvement in research.

Teacher education programmes of all kinds will need to incorporate awareness raising about teachers' own conceptions of childhood and children (Ellis and Ibrahim, forthcoming) and familiarise teachers with various roles children can take on (Pinter and Mathew 2017).

Depending on specific contexts, different ways in which children can contribute to more meaningful classroom research could be explored and critically evaluated.

Academic research could also benefit from exploring the opportunities around involving children as social agents. Longitudinal studies that explore the trajectories of children and groups of children working jointly on classroom research projects alongside their teachers will also present interesting opportunities to understand how children develop and move forward to become researchers, acquiring new skills and learning to do more and more sophisticated research.

How and why (under what circumstances and with what kind of support) children actually take interest in being involved in research and how and why they may want to develop their skills to learn to function as co-researchers and in some cases as fully fledged researchers is an interesting empirical question. As [Tisdall \(2012, p. 188\)](#) comments, ‘There is too little research, and particularly too few large-scale and sustainable models of research that involve children as researchers or other deep levels of involvement’. Children should have opportunities to engage in different roles as developing researchers to gain long-term benefits.

The principles that suggest that children’s views and opinions need to be taken seriously should of course permeate all aspects of the teaching-learning process, including materials, activities, ways of working and assessment as well. All these areas may be good entry points for teachers and learners to begin joint enquiry in their own classrooms.

Conclusions

Traditionally, applied linguistics research involving child participants has been very much focused on children as objects of research. While this focus has resulted in a useful pool of knowledge and understanding about how adults make sense of children’s language learning, there is further scope to include children’s own views, perspectives and experiences. Such

alternative opportunities would complement the findings of studies where children are objects of adult investigation.

If children are engaged in research alongside adults on an ongoing basis, an additional benefit is that the adult researcher is also on a path of professional development, learning about how to facilitate children's research and helping them to move forward and progress from less formal to more formal types of research. I have worked with teachers who have supported children's research and who have been inspired to undertake their own academic research as graduate students, moving forward on their own paths of professional development.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge most child-initiated research is ultimately represented by adults, and not all contexts will be conducive to working with children as co-researchers or researchers, and indeed not all children will be interested. Nevertheless, we should not give up on pushing the boundaries that provide space for children to make their voices heard within the field of second language learning.

Further reading

- 1 Christensen, P., and James, A. (Eds.). (2008). *Research with children: Perspectives and practices*. London: Routledge.

This is a collection of chapters illustrating how children can be engaged as active collaborators or co-researchers in different contexts. Many of the chapters discuss participatory tools and approaches that can be directly implemented in language classrooms as well.

- 2 Sargeant, J., and Harcourt, D. (2012). *Doing ethical research with children*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

This is a hands-on handbook that takes the reader through many of the common ethical dilemmas that occur in working with children. Illustrative case studies focus on problems and possible solutions to ethical dilemmas in various contexts.

- 3 Kellett, M. (2005). *How to develop children as researchers* London: Sage.

This book starts with an excellent introductory chapter about why it is important to teach children research skills. The rest of the chapters are devoted to a step-by-step guide to teaching children research concepts; introducing them to research questions, methodological solutions, data collection techniques and analysis; and finally reporting and presenting research. There are real examples from children to illustrate a variety of different topics and interests, and there are activities with guided commentary as well as additional reading, games and key reflection questions in each chapter. The content is suitable for children aged 10–14.

Related topics

Researching very young learners, research on learners outside the classroom, the age debate

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