

# Bilingual Preschools

## Volume I

### Learning and Development

Edited by Kristin Kersten, Andreas Rohde,  
Christina Schelleter, Anja K. Steinlen



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Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier

Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier

Tel.: (0651) 41503 / 9943344, Fax: 41504

Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>

E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
<i>Kristin Kersten, Andreas Rohde, Christina Schelleter, Anja K. Steinlen</i>	
The Input Quality Observation Scheme (IQOS): The Nature of L2 Input and its Influence on L2 Development in Bilingual Preschools	5
<i>Martina Weitz, Svenja Pahl, Anna Flyman Mattsson, Aafke Buyl, Elke Kalbe</i>	
Receptive L2 Lexical Knowledge in Bilingual Preschool Children	45
<i>Andreas Rohde</i>	
Receptive L2 Grammar Knowledge Development in Bilingual Preschools	69
<i>Anja K. Steinlen, Gisela Håkansson, Alex Housen, Christina Schelleter</i>	
Lexical and Grammatical Comprehension in Monolingual and Bilingual Children	101
<i>Christina Schelleter, Rachel Ramsey</i>	
SETK 3-5: A Developmental Language Test on German for 3-to-5-Year-Old Children	119
<i>Anja K. Steinlen, Katharina Neils, Thorsten Piske, Christian Trumpp</i>	
Intercultural Encounters in Bilingual Preschools	137
<i>Lydia Gerlich, Holger Kersten, Kristin Kersten, Ute Massler, Insa Wippermann</i>	
Green Immersion	177
<i>Shannon Thomas, Petra Burmeister, Michael Ewig, Kristin Kersten, Suzanne Akerman</i>	
Animal-Supported Environmental Education in a German-English Zoo Preschool	213
<i>Inge A. Strunz, Shannon Thomas</i>	
Profiles of the ELIAS Preschools	239
<i>Insa Wippermann, Christine Tiefenthal, Annelie Schober, Lena Gotthardt</i>	



## Introduction

The recent and intensified implementation of early foreign language education in European policies shows how multilingual competence has become increasingly important in a globalised world:

Language competencies are part of the core of skills that every citizen needs for training, employment, cultural exchange and personal fulfilment ... It is a **priority for Member States** to ensure that language learning **in kindergarten and primary school** is effective, for it is here that **key attitudes towards other languages and cultures** are formed, and the foundations for later language learning are laid, ... **in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age.**<sup>1</sup>

Early bilingual programmes are one of the most successful options to address the need for early foreign language education. However, compared to research in primary and secondary schools, there are very few systematic large-scale studies on very young learners at the preschool level.

The two volumes of this publication aim to fill this gap in the current research debate. They provide an insight into research studies which were carried out in eleven different bilingual preschools across Europe. The studies derive from a multilateral EU Comenius project carried out in Germany, Belgium, Sweden and England between 2008 and 2010. The ELIAS project (Early Language and Intercultural Acquisition Studies) comprises eighteen partners including academic and educational institutions, preschools, as well as the Magdeburg Zoological Garden in Germany. Under the lead management of Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg, every bilingual preschool in the project has been monitored by researchers over the last two years. The studies cover first and second language acquisition<sup>2</sup> of the children, the language input of the preschool teachers<sup>3</sup> who provide the input in the second language (L2) to the children, as well as intercultural education and bilingual environmental education ("green immersion") at the zoo preschool in Magdeburg.

More than 400 children and over 20 L2 preschool teachers participated in the ELIAS studies. To our knowledge, the project represents the largest longitudinal study in European preschools to date. The research team combined qualitative and quantitative approaches. Field observations and data elicitation were carried out by participant observers who took part in the daily preschool routines once a week over a span of two years between 2008 and 2010. Where possible, the team used existing data elicitation procedures. However, due to the special focus on very young learners not all required

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1 European Commission: *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 – 2006* (p. 8), emphases added.

2 The terms 'second language' and 'foreign language' are used interchangeably throughout the book.

3 Due to the vast differences in preschool terminology throughout Europe, educators and other pedagogical staff in the preschools is referred to as 'preschool teachers,' independent of the pedagogical approach used in the respective institution.

tools were available on the market. Thus, an observation checklist for the input of the L2 teachers, a score for the intensity of the L2 input, a comprehension test for grammatical phenomena, a field guide for the observation of intercultural encounters, and an observation tool for green immersion were developed by the research group. They represent an innovation to systematic data elicitation at preschool level.

Volume I presents the results of the different research studies in detail. It has a strong theoretical and empirical focus and is aimed at the research community in the fields of first and second language acquisition, intercultural communication, environmental education and foreign language teaching. The volume begins with a study on the L2 teachers' input and its relation to the results of the test results by Martina Weitz and her team. The data were elicited with a newly developed ELIAS observation tool, the IQOS (Input Quality Observation Scheme). In the following four chapters, the results of the language studies are presented, starting with Andreas Rohde's paper on L2 lexical comprehension based on the standardised and readily available BPVS II (British Picture Vocabulary Scale II), and Steinlen et al.'s paper on the comprehension of L2 grammatical phenomena based on the ELIAS L2 grammar comprehension test. Christina Schelletter & Rachel Ramsey's chapter includes comparison data of monolingual and bilingual speakers in England on both comprehension tests. Steinlen et al. then go on to describe the children's first language acquisition in the German project preschools, which is based on the standardised SETK test. Kersten et al. introduce a new angle to the preschool studies, describing the intercultural encounters observed in bilingual preschools between children of various cultural backgrounds, and between children and their non-native teachers who provide the L2 input in each programme. This paper develops categories of ICC observation, which present a new step in the research on intercultural behaviour of very young children. The following two chapters by Shannon Thomas and Inge Strunz & Shannon Thomas focus on research in the zoo preschool. Thomas identifies stages of development in the L2 encounters with nature and animals while Strunz & Thomas include the perspective of parents and teachers on the reactions of the children at the zoo preschool. Volume I concludes with a presentation of the profiles of each project preschool. Insa Wipperman & Christine Tiefenthal take various factors into account which constitute the unique structure of each programme and which help understand the multifaceted nature of preschools that the research studies were faced with. This final chapter may serve as a detailed reference point for the data presented in the preceding sections.

Volume II, on the other hand, contains a description of best practices in various different bilingual preschool programmes as well as background information on important preschool-related topics, which was derived from teacher training units developed in the ELIAS framework. It is of interest for practitioners, teachers and other educational staff, parents, politicians and researchers alike. The volume starts out with Henning Wode's introduction to bilingual preschools on the European level, which gives an example of a successful model of bilingual immersion education from preschool to high school in Kiel, Germany. The second chapter summarises the most important research