'THE NARRATIVE FORMAT' FOR LEARNING
AND TEACHING LANGUAGES TO CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Traute TAESCHNER[1]
Anca COLIBABA[2]
Irina GHEORGHIU[3]

Abstract

This article presents the theoretical basis of an innovative methodology, the 'Narrative Format' used in teaching foreign languages to young children, as well as its implementation in Romania by EuroEd Foundation, Iasi. The intergenerational learning model applied both in families and kindergartens has been developed by the 'Bilfam' project co-financed by the European Union under the Lifelong Learning Programme and coordinated by the University of Rome Sapienza. Results have shown that the foreign language learning process is deeply influenced by the relationships between adults and children. Both children and adults can benefit from the experience which also stimulates a positive attitude towards multilingualism.

Keywords: narrative format, affective relationships, language learning, children, adults

1. The Narrative Format Model

In the context where knowledge of several languages represents a lifelong asset for a person for both personal and professional reasons, this article will present a possible approach to learning a foreign language for very young learners and adults alike. The article will describe the theoretical basis of the Narrative Format approach, its activities as well as the way it was implemented in Romania. It is based on both academic research results obtained by the department of psycholinguistics at Sapienza University Rome and their applications in two formats – as language courses for very young learners and training courses for professionals, young children's care givers (parents, grandparents or hired staff). The name of the model described in this article is the Narrative Format.

The Narrative Format is a teaching proposal of an innovative language learning model for schools and families. Its theory is grounded in the natural processes of language learning, i.e. as the field of developmental psycholinguistics describes

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[1] Traute Taeschner, Università di Roma "Sapienza", Italy, Faculty of Psychology 1, traute.taeschner@uniroma1.it

[2] Anca Colibaba, Gr.T.Popa University Of Medicine and Pharmacy, EuroED Foundation Iasi Romania, acolib@euroed.ro

[3] Irina Gheorghiu, Albert Ludwigs University Freiburg, Germany, irina_gheorghiu16@yahoo.com

this phenomenon, and its practice consists in a series of artistic activities, capable of activating language learning processes in humans.

Developmental psycholinguistic methodology postulates the necessity of finding ways of triggering the mental and relational processes of language learning; this is not, however, achieved by explaining but by doing, in other words by the use of the language, by creating conditions that will allow the learners to experience the new language, to use it and to speak it in meaningful contexts.

1.1. The Narrative Format Model and its theoretical foundation

The following is a description of a class activity with the Narrative Format Model, a teacher and 15 children of about 5 years old, leaning a new language. The teacher and the children wear a T-shirt over their dresses and they know that now a story of the two Dinocrocs, Hocus and Lotus, will be performed. The T-shirt is magic: it is white and has printed on it, right at breast level, the image of the two Dinocrocs, Hocus and Lotus. The children know from their teacher that the T-shirt will help them understand a new language.

The teacher smiles at the pupils, reaches out his/ her hands for the children to understand that they all should hold hands. He/ she says either in L1 or L2: 'Let's hold hands'. They now stand in a circle holding hands and the teacher will say: 'Let's close our eyes' and while saying so he/ she closes his/ her eyes and starts counting in L2 from one to ten. He/ she counts slowly and after each number he/ she waits for the children to repeat after him/ her. The intonation of his/ her voice during the counting contains mystery and expectation. By ten he/ she opens his/ her eyes and says: 'Let's open our eyes, blinc!'. By the sound 'blinc' he/ she mimes an opening with her hands which are near her eyes. The children repeat what the teacher does. They know that a performance of a story can start now.

The teacher will look at each child for a second, starting with the child on his/ her right and going round to the last child on his/ her left. His/ her eyes express love, complicity and expectation regarding the story. The message is: 'Together we are going to do something beautiful!'. Then he/ she mimes the following sentence and says: 'Now I am going to tell you a story'. His/ her gestures and the connected words are expressed at the same time: when saying 'now' he/ she points to the floor in front of him/ her, when saying 'I am going' he/ she points at himself/ herself; he/ she points at the children when saying 'you' and he/ she makes a gesture as if reading when saying 'a story'. Now he/ she looks round at the children with complicity and expectation. Then, with a gesture and an inviting look he/ she invites the children to do and say what he/ she did.

The teacher starts the story: 'Once upon a time there was an egg'. When saying so he/ she mimes the following words: once, upon a time, egg. His/ her voice has the

typical intonation of the beginning of a fairy tale. He/ she is looking at the gestures he/ she is miming. When he/ she finishes the sentence he/ she will look at the children, one after the other, inviting the children to repeat after him/ her. The children will accept the invitation and all the gestures and sentences until the end of the story. When the story performance is finished the singing performance starts: the entire story is repeated with the same gestures, words and sentences in the artistic modality of a mini-musical. The mini-musical lasts 5 minutes; after that the children watch the cartoon of that story. When the 5 minute cartoon is ended, the children stand up, hold hands again, close their eyes counting backwards from ten to zero and when opening their eyes they take off the magic T-shirt and they are back to the world of L1. The magic lesson is finished. As homework the children are invited to look at the story in the story booklets of Hocus and Lotus, to watch the cartoon again and to listen to the CD in the evening before falling asleep.

1.2. The key theoretical principles at the basis of the method

The first theoretical issue to consider is the concept of **format**. Both the child and the caregiver experience a number of activities together: feeding, changing diapers, bathing, going outside etc., which were called formats by Bruner (Bruner, 1983). The child learns his mother tongue within formats, by sharing experiences (formats) with the adults around them. Learning a foreign language should follow a similar pattern to acquiring a first language.

In the present methodology formats become stories (more challenging versions), routine experiences shared by the teacher and children where love and intentions can flourish. The formats allow people to get to know each other, to be able to anticipate and have expectations about each other, thus paving the way towards the intention to speak to each other. The intention to communicate is a prerequisite for starting to talk (Bruner, 1983).

Developing a good relationship is another principle of the Narrative Format Model. It is inside the format that **affect** takes place and develops. A good affective relationship between child and adult is essential to activate the acquisition of language in the child. The child, liking the adult, will like and learn the language that the adult is speaking with him.

During the mime theatre performance, proposed by the Narrative Format Model, the teacher enters in contact with each child by **gazing at** them one after the other in turn, just for one second. This brief gazing at the children, one after the other, establishes the contact with each child individually. The circle and the looking round at each child make eye contact possible. It is an unconscious commitment done among two people at a time and not of the teacher with an abstract entity, i.e. the classroom as a whole. This kind of relationship leads us to the **dyad.** Language is learned in a dyad, i.e. two people interacting with each other. When two people

interact they use the '**turn-taking modality**'. In turn-taking 'gazing at' plays an important role because it shows interest in what is being said. Looking at each other is therefore a crucial aspect for both the beginning and the continuation of a communicative relationship.

During the performance of the narrative format the teacher's 'gazing at' strategy goes alternatively from the children to the gestures he/ she is doing. When looking at his/ her gestures, he/ she signals the focus of shared attention; he/ she invites the children to have interest in what he/ she is doing. In fact, the direction of the gaze is a strong interest conveyer. A **teacher is called magic** when he/ she is capable of signaling these two communicative messages alternatively: 1. when gazing at the children he/ she wants to have an intersubjective relationship with each child and start a good relationship with each one, and 2. when gazing at his/ her own narrative actions he/ she signals the focus of their common interest, the story they are miming.

In the Dinocroc Model turn-taking is connected to role changing and to the fact that all participants interpret all roles. From the point of view of **psychological development and human growth** this fact is very positive because it enables children to experience and to feel what the other children experience and feel. It strengthens empathic feelings and comprehension towards the others. **Holding hands** is another way of showing friendship and acceptance of the others. When entering the magic world of Hocus and Lotus children are invited to hold hands in order to express positive feelings among the group and reinforce the group harmony.

N**arration** was included in the format to make it more challenging. Narrative formats are short stories with events taken from the children's everyday life. In the narrative format we find a multiplicity of emotions developing in contexts known by the children and therefore predictable for them. Emotions make the events interesting, easy to memorize and full of passion; the known context supplies the meaning and the predictability puts neurons to work.

The narrative format experience is also a strong **context giver.** In fact, the context is a meaning generator. Communication and verbal language initiate and develop during interactions with the others, when looking at them, by exchanging objects, sharing experiences, etc. Words stop being a senseless group of sounds the moment they are part of events, or they are experienced. Recognizing the role of context in the process of language acquisition has been an important achievement in Developmental Psycholinguistics. A universal design feature of language is that it is context sensitive (Ochs et al., 1979). Therefore, strategies for creating rich contexts for learning a language in school need to be created.

During the mime theatre, or narrative format, the meaning of the words and sentences is learned through the extensive use of gestures, intonation, facial

expressions, the structure of the story itself, and again through reference to the child's own experience. **Gestures** are essential in the narrative format because they are **cues** that help children work out the meaning of what is being done. The gestures used are as iconic as possible. This means that the gestures resemble the meaning of the word as much as possible.

The sequence of the story itself and its resemblance to known contexts give further clues about the meaning of what is being said. When playing with mud and making a mess of everything, as it happens to Lotus in the fourth narrative format, it is possible to predict that one has to clean everything up again; it is children's own real life experience that making something dirty has as its consequence cleaning it up afterwards. It is therefore not difficult to 'guess' the meaning of the sentence that Hocus says to Lotus when he comes back home: 'Now you have to clean everything up'.

The stories invented for the Narrative Format Model are therefore based on **children's real life** experiences and not on totally imaginary contents far away from children's own experiences. We do not find frogs that become human; the two dinocrocs, half dinosaur and half crocodile resemble **newborns with big tender eyes** and a small body.

Another extraordinary characteristic of narration is that it can be repeated many times without children getting bored of hearing or watching it. A fairy tale can be read a lot of times to a child. This is a key element in learning how to speak a language: **repetition with emotional content.** Repetition has at least four important functions: 1) it builds the concept and therefore denotation; 2) it enriches the semantic-pragmatic field building connotation; 3) it focuses on meaning and, 4) it helps memorization. In the process of language learning the meaning of a word is acquired gradually and it is strongly linked to the context.

Finally, as it is known, repetition leads to memorization. However, unlike learning by rote, in the case of the Dinocroc Model memorization becomes possible through a wide range of artistic ways: music, drawing or films. The Dinocroc Model uses **Art** as a technique for learning and memorizing languages.

In fact, mini-musicals have been composed by professional musicians, who give special attention to the emotional atmosphere of the story, its setting, the character's moods, the way the plot develops to its climax until it finds a solution. The story is reiterated through songs, allowing the children to consolidate the experiences lived in class.

The most important concepts of every story have been gathered and illustrated in a book. In the illustrations, cartoon bubbles have been used in order to insert dialogues in the foreign language. The child has the opportunity to repeat the story in a new way that allows him to examine and consolidate the concepts learned in the new language. With the illustrated book the child is given the opportunity to

have visual perception input and thus stabilize the concepts learned through this channel too.

A cartoon was created for each story so as to repeat the stories in an attractive way, to make the characters acquire another dimension, to clarify the meanings expressed by the stories or to transmit emotions. Cartoons help children memorise the words and sentences of the story.

The Narrative Format Model uses a certain amount of teaching strategies: holding hands, gazing at the children one by one; gazing at an imaginary object being realized through a gesture; miming objects and animals, expressing emotions (widening eyes, closing eyes, mouth opening, smiling, etc.), posture (shoulders down or up, arms along the body or in other positions, head bent over the breast or up), tone of voice (shouting, smoothly speaking, joyful, etc.). These are all behavioural micro categories, i.e. part of larger categories. While learning a concept needs a complex pragmatic and mental activity such as discovering similarities among objects of the same category, micro-categories do not need to undergo a complex mental activity but have an immediate understanding. Why are gestures and the other micro-categories so important for learning a language? Because they are perceived and understood by our brain directly through mirror neurons: they attract attention and are immediately clear. They do not need complex mental processes to occur, but are immediate processes (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, 2006). The words of the target language should be taught together with the gestures and the other micro-categories.

Language progression is a key issue in foreign language teaching. Linguists suggest going from easy to difficult grammatical aspects and from a small vocabulary to a larger one. What is easy or what is difficult in language learning is not easy to guess. We consider linguists' suggestions for deciding what is easy or difficult not reliable as they are done by adults who do not remember what they considered difficult or easy when they learned a language in a natural home environment. In the Narrative Format Model we therefore propose to look at the development of language in children and to use those structures and that lexicon for an initial and basic language course.

In the present methodology progression occurs in the learner's mind as new narrative formats are added to his experience. The vocabulary to be learnt is selected pragmatically: the events of the story demand that appropriate words are selected to describe the events. The same criterion applies to grammatical categories. The point of departure, then, is the design of stories that relate to the child's experience and, in order to tell these stories, words and constructions that native speakers usually employ in such cases, are used.

In order to reevaluate gestures and get into the proposed artistic and communicative teaching strategies adults need specific preparation. They need to

learn about the theoretical aspects of the process of language learning and they need to practise the theatrical and singing activities. In addition they need to be able to establish a good relationship with the children. In the Dinocroc model the role of the teacher and his/ her competences are changed: cognition is less important with regard to the artistic performance (Taeschner et al., 2004). In fact, the teacher gets trained to become a performer with good communicative skills. He/ she is someone who tells stories and not someone who typically teaches; he/ she is someone who performs together with the children and not someone who performs for the children. He/ she has fun while performing. He/ she trusts the children's and her own learning and performing capacities. He/ she knows that performing requires a more intensive engagement with respect to standard teaching, but he/ she also knows that the results justify the effort. The results show up immediately in terms of the joy and love the children express to him/ her and after a few lessons in terms of the children's language learning. Teaching foreign languages with the Dinocroc model has in fact proved to be highly rewarding for teachers, children and their parents (Taeschner, 2005).

2. Special training courses

To illustrate the practice of the Narrative Model special training courses were organized in various countries to check the validity of the proposed model and to collect relevant feedback. These courses were meant to train either teachers or/ and parents; some of the most successful ones was organized by the EuroEd Foundation, a non-profit organisation in Iasi, Romania. These courses fitted very well this organization whose ethos and vision is to support the reform processes of civic society by promoting high-quality standards in accordance with European Community requirements in the field of education, civil society, public policies, youth, law, culture, mass media, and regional development. Assistance for international communication to people is a main strategic direction included in the generic mission of this organisation.

The training modules organized by EuroEd Foundation were meant to provide kindergarten teachers and parents alike with the skills necessary to support the children's acquisition of a foreign language: the fundamentals of linguistic content as well as basic familiarization with an educational model whose pedagogic lines follow the natural developmental processes of language acquisition.

The trainees were kindergarten teachers, teachers of English and parents. Most of them were females in their mid thirties–early forties. Their professional qualifications varied and the common denominator was their positive rapports with the children. They also shared enthusiasm, love for children and interest in their self development. At the beginning of the training the participants were anxious in relation to their ability to teach a foreign language to the children and the trainers

consolidated their belief that they were the most suitable persons for the job thanks to their special communicative and emotional relationship with their children.

The training modules consisted of face-to-face meetings, trainers' observations and counselling sessions being soon enriched by participants' online blog contribution. This facilitated a constant contact between trainees and trainers. The trainees got acquainted with the objectives, principles, innovative teaching strategies, activities and materials to be used in order to implement the new method. The theoretical aspects of the training were used to make it clear to the trainees why certain steps should be taken in order to get the expected results, to build confidence and to invite trainees to reflect on their experience so as to get a deeper understanding from it.

The first meeting focused mostly on the introduction and practice of the first two formats. The participants were taught only the new language they would be using with the children in the form of the stories on which the formats were based. The trainers emphasized that the teaching method prescribes that the adults learn from the stories as they act them out together with the children. Thus the more practice they have, the better and more confident they will become.

During the meetings the trainers maintained an encouraging atmosphere similar to the atmosphere fostering constructive participation either in a class or family with children. Trainers planned their activities so that every learning style would be addressed by favouring a balance between theory and practice and encouraging opportunities for hands-on activities; they gave participants time to practise and see the results for themselves making them thus confident in what they had learnt; they facilitated a constant dialogue between participants allowing teachers/ parents opportunities to share their teaching experiences. The trainers also showed interest in the way the trainees related the new experience to their previous ones.

Furthermore, the training focused on how to make the most efficient use of the non-verbal communication channels (facial expressions, actions, gestures, body language and voice) in the language learning process. The participants admitted to having used body language before but without a scientific basis. These tools, if used appropriately, give children clear clues helping them understand meanings, imagine and therefore visualize the words and situations. They also create atmosphere and forge bonds among people. During the training the trainees signalled some cultural differences regarding gestures, which if not clarified would lead to serious misunderstanding.

The trainers raised the participants' awareness about eye contact and the teacher's direction of the gaze as well as the role the smile has in creating atmosphere and encouraging communication. The importance of the relation/ synchronization between teachers' gaze and their words and actions was also emphasized. During the training when observing different teachers do the formats with their children

the trainers noticed that some teachers did not manage to engage their children in the formats although they all knew the format very well and used appropriate gestures. What made the difference was the trainees' gaze, which is frequently an indicator of the adult's honest emotional involvement in the story, what they were really thinking or feeling. When there was disagreement between the verbal and nonverbal message, the nonverbal won. Their lack of involvement made them unreliable models for the children and unconsciously the kids refused to follow the message.

Later on new challenging activities on an online platform were added to the programme, with a view to enhancing participants' motivation to learn. Theoretical aspects went hand in hand with practical issues. The platform enabled families to carry out these activities according to their own learning pace. Repetition was ensured through a wide range of interesting activities, which recycled the formats in challenging ways: acting out, singing the songs, animated cartoons, e-books, puppet theatre, creating a Voki, and the dinogame of the goose. These all led to new activities suggested by children and adults alike: guessing games, learning to count and make pancakes, making own dictionaries, bird houses and masks, crafts, painting, colouring and cutting out activities. Imagination and creativity were stretched to their limits and Hocus and Lotus became a contagious craze involving both children and adults.

The quality of the emotional communication with the children was carefully maintained through eye contact, facial expressions, or through warm and open body language. Everybody agreed that nonverbal signals used by adults influence group atmosphere, students' moods, attitude and learning. Trainers found that any change in adults' attitude (lack of enthusiasm or involvement, tiredness, boredom) often put children off from doing the formats. Genuine emotional participation, pleasant atmosphere and good communication proved to be essential in Hocus and Lotus's world.

The T-shirt featuring the two main characters, Hocus and Lotus, was introduced from the very beginning. It was the password which signaled children that they were inside Hocus' and Lotus's world where only the new language was spoken or understood. Trainers tried to make it a habit by using it whenever the group acted out the formats so that they themselves took it seriously.

In terms of their level of the foreign language there were different types of trainees: advanced – the teachers of the foreign language; intermediate and beginners, mainly the families. Although trainers envisaged that they would encounter some difficulties with the beginners, things progressed smoothly and gradually over time. Having in mind trainees' different attitudes in relation to their own ability to learn the new language, trainers respected trainees' own pace of learning, encouraged initiatives and avoided being judgmental by acting according to the indications and principles of the method. With the trainers' and colleagues' encouragement, help

and support the beginners got the confidence they needed in order to be able to teach their children the formats.

The experiential method showed its results soon. Trainees learned to act out the stories along with the actions and the gestures by acting out together in the group. The material was reinforced through activities so that everything was experienced on several levels, mentally, emotionally and physically, making memorizing and internalizing the materials very easy. The decoding of the new language was facilitated by the trainers' gestures and facial expressions and the repetition of the material. Confidence was gradually built in time through personal experience and by sharing it with the others.

Throughout this time the teachers were also teaching the formats they had learned during the training to their class, which was another form of repetition. The trainees also admitted that the first format was easy to learn and act out, which made its success certain. Then as success breeds success, they were encouraged to move on to the next format and try to keep up with the previous results. It was hard work but children seemed to enjoy it, really interested in acting out the formats and enthusiastically participating in all the activities. The cohesion of the group increased: the trainees agreed that their children were more willing to help each other, to share their toys and generally to play together. All adults noticed several positive changes in children's attitude: they evidently became kinder towards animals, more polite, and more flexible (more willing to negotiate). They particularly mentioned an increase in children's creativity, self esteem and pride in belonging to Hocus and Lotus community.

The feedback from the trainees was positive. On the whole they defined their experience as being enriching on a personal and professional level. They highly appreciated the innovation and effectiveness of the methodological approach and the opportunity for meeting and exchanging experiences with colleagues.

3. Conclusions

1. **Learning a foreign language should follow a similar pattern to acquiring a first language**, which is learned by the child while sharing experiences (formats) with the adults around them. Trainees' blogs confirmed that they appreciated the narrative formats for being varied, creative, and authentic, deeply rooted in their children's world, which made them easy to understand and retain.

2. **A good affective relationship between child and adult is essential to activate the acquisition of language in the child.** As the training and parents' blog showed, learning relies on the affective relationship between adult and child. A relaxing warm learning atmosphere stimulated motivation. Adults who are warm and open and really engaged in the activities encourage children to communicate.

As the film with the children highlighted, the children benefiting from a nice atmosphere were able to act out the formats with their class or families, using all the sentence structures learned. Children were even willing to apply what they had learned in real life. Teachers' and parents' blogs mentioned that their children not only understood what they heard but they were also able to use the language spontaneously in conversation with their family, relatives or native speakers; in addition, they highlighted their own progress in the foreign language acquisition. The kindergarten/ family context, where the adults were provided with a correct and systematic method, materials and support and where the foreign language learning became part of the daily routine, provided an efficient and encouraging learning environment. Most of the teachers said that the new methodological approach influenced their teaching style and as a result their relationship with their children took on a new dimension in their work. Parents' blogs ranked high spending time with the family while playing and learning together.

3. **Gestures are essential in the narrative format and in learning because they are cues that help children work out the meaning of what is being done.** As trainees' feedback pointed out, the meaning of the words and sentences is learned faster through the extensive use of gestures, intonation and facial expressions. Trainees also highlighted the role gestures have in triggering necessary words and phrases needed in speaking. They even mentioned that whenever there was disagreement between the verbal and nonverbal message, the nonverbal won.

4. **In the Dinocroc Model repetition, which is necessary in learning, becomes possible through a wide range of artistic ways: music, drawing or films.** The trainees appreciated the variety of the activities and the element of surprise, which was a motivating ingredient throughout the intergenerational learning process. The principle of learning through fun, the use of a variety of channels of communication (gestures, expressions, actions etc.), and the systematic repetition inherent in the format were often mentioned as contributing to the success of the method.

5. The model also gave **bilingualism** another dimension by providing an innovative solution: for the first time parents were given a valid instrument to facilitate their children's acquisition of two languages. It highlights that children can become bilingual if they are given enough input in the language and they have enough fun. Bilingual children can recognise their two languages and differentiate them from a very young age. Being bilingual does not necessarily mean having perfect knowledge of two languages. It means being able to communicate in two languages at different levels of competence (Pirchio et al., 2011).

The method raised participants' awareness about the cognitive advantages of bilingualism, as shown in parents' blogs. Bilingual children have an early awareness and knowledge of the words, structures and sounds of their languages;

they often learn to read earlier than others; they are better at learning other languages and at switching tasks; they are better able to focus attention.

Postulates: Learning a foreign language should follow a similar pattern to acquiring a first language.

1. The first theoretical issue with pedagogical implications to consider is the concept of **format** (in our approach shared routine experiences: stories).

2. **Developing a good relationship** is another principle of the Narrative Format Model. Important actions to support this are: **gazing at** children, which leads the child and the adult to form a learning linguistic **dyad** focused on '**turn-taking' modality.** The model offers opportunities for the children to interpret all roles in order to strengthen empathic feelings towards the others: e.g. h**olding hands**.

3. The Narrative Format experience is a strong **context giver** as meaning generator. "*A universal design feature of language is that it is context sensitive*" (Ochs et al., 1979). Therefore, strategies for creating rich contexts for learning a language in school need to be created. **Gestures** are iconic **cues** that resemble the meaning of the word as much as possible. The sequence of the story itself and its resemblance to known contexts give further clues about the meaning of what is being said.

The above elements offer key elements in learning how to speak a language: **repetition with emotional content.** Repetition builds denotation and connotation, the meaning is acquired gradually and it is strongly linked to the context through **art** as a technique for learning and memorizing languages.

4. **Language progression** is a key issue. Children progress from one stage to another depending on their exposure to the target language. Children usually learn the words in their interaction with the adults, in everyday routines by observation, imitation and nonverbal communication. In the Hocus and Lotus model the choice of words depends on the story which is related to the child's world. Not many words are needed to tell a story at this level. Each word is repeated several times through the acting out, its meaning is made clear through its context, body language and actions. Learning experientially occurs in a very participative and emotional way. The children first retain certain words whose meanings have been explicitly revealed by the context and acting out. They are cemented in their mind by repetition and the progress towards more complicated structures is firmly ensured in time through the child's concrete experiences with the language (Taeschner, 2005).

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The authors

Dr. Traute Taeschner, Professor of Psychology of Language and Communication at the Faculty of Psychology 1 at Università di Roma "Sapienza", Italy. Prof. Traute Taeschner speaks five languages fluently: Portuguese, German, Italian, English and Spanish. The leitmotif of her research has always been language**,** considered as a learning process: native language, second language and bilingualism.

Dr. Anca Cristina Colibaba is the Executive President of EuroEd Foundation, Iasi, Romania and Professor and Chair of the Languages Department at Gr.T.Popa University, Iasi, Romania. She speaks English and French for academic use. Her professional interests are in the area of language policies, CLIL, e-education, young learners' education and adult education. Set up in 1992, EuroEd Foundation delivers training to teachers and schools in Romania, works on many European educational projects and has its own accredited nursery and primary school with CLIL teaching/learning.

Irina Gheorghiu is a PhD student in German literature at the Albert Ludwigs University Freiburg, Germany. She received her M.A. in European Literatures and cultures from the Albert Ludwigs University Freiburg, Germany. Currently she is doing research in cultural and collective memory applied to German and Romanian literature. She has also been involved in national and international projects.