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## Uphill, downstream, and places in between: a tour of research methods for investigating L2 proficiency in young learners

Second language (L2) learning in the obligatory school context sits squarely at the intersection of concerns for second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and those interested in classroom teaching and learning. Since SLA's beginnings last century, researchers have argued for the role of evidence-based research in decisions concerning L2 classroom practice (e.g., Hilton, 2022). Conversely, many researchers have also taken the primary or secondary school L2 classroom as the context for research into teaching praxis (Erlam & Tolosa, 2021) and language learning (Muñoz, 2017). Younger learners (YL), including children and adolescents, present specific challenges for L2 teaching and learning, and for research, given the marked differences with adults these learners present in terms of cognitive capacities and social relations. Careful consideration is required in the preparation of learning materials, the orchestration of learning activities, and the evaluation of learner production.

This talk will offer an overview of three current YL projects involving an online lexical learning platform, task-based interaction in virtual exchange (VE), and oral language assessment. In each case, the focus is on methodological issues. The online study looks at the distributed practice effect for L2 English lexical acquisition among French secondary school pupils aged 11 to 15 (Gerbiere et al., 2025), and I examine the constraints and possibilities in the design of a set of learning activities which respect our understanding of vocabulary knowledge, pedagogical practice, and reliable assessment. With the virtual exchange project, I show the value of multimodal interaction analysis for investigating what learners can do with and without teacher scaffolding (Wigham & Whyte, 2024), as well as the importance of what we have termed the *arena* of interaction, building on Goffman's 1959 distinction between front- and backstage spaces, which has particular resonance in VE contexts. In a third, primary school project (Schurz & Whyte, 2024), I address questions concerning the evaluation of oral proficiency as part of a test battery designed to assess longer-term L2 development in larger cohorts. In this way, the talk will tackle a range of methodological issues arising "uphill," or ahead of pedagogical interventions, during L2 interactions in different areas of virtual and physical spaces, and downstream, in terms of post-intervention data analysis. I conclude by considering the implications of different methodological choices on aspect of L2 learning, teaching, and research.

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