



ELIAS Project – Intermediate Results

More than ever before, educational institutions are called upon to prepare young children for the demands of an increasingly globalised world and the challenges of preserving our biosphere upon which all human life depends. In order to provide them with the personal and professional foundations they need to participate in a multilingual and multicultural society and to grow to be responsible European citizens, European education systems must impart sound knowledge of foreign languages, intercultural skills and tolerance, and individual as well as collective environmental awareness. It is critically important to introduce children to such knowledge and skills at the earliest stage possible, i.e. ideally at the start of a lifelong learning process. As numerous studies on early education have demonstrated, children's natural learning strategies and enthusiasm maximise their learning success at a young age. The most effective method of imparting such knowledge and skills at an early age is a language immersion programme in bilingual preschools, carried out through native speakers of a second language (L2).

The multilateral ELIAS Comenius project, headed by Magdeburg University, aims to advance Europe-wide establishment of bilingual preschools and to foster the collaboration with non-academic educational institutions. A research consortium from nine universities and a zoo monitors young children's learning progress in **second language acquisition, intercultural communication, bilingual science skills** and **environmental awareness** in **ten bilingual preschools** in Belgium, England, Germany and Sweden. Located on the premises of the Magdeburg Zoo, the unique **bilingual Zoo-Preschool** thrives on its proximity to animals and provides an ideal environment for bilingual education for sustainable development ("**Green Immersion**"). Such collaboration is unprecedented in the world.

ELIAS' target groups include specialists in the European education sector, preschools, schools, research institutions and non-academic cultural institutions (e.g. zoological and botanical gardens, aquariums, museums) and the general public.

The research team employs ethnographic participant observation of preschool activities, and a number of standardised and non-standardised tests for language development. Assessment during the first half of the project revealed that:

1. strategies of intercultural competence are successfully learned in preschool
2. L2 acquisition takes place, and its success is mainly dependent on the children's contact time with the L2; with teaching principles employed by the L2 native-speaker educators as another probable impact factor
3. the first language (L1) of the children does not suffer from the intensive exposure to an L2; on the contrary, the L1 seems to benefit from early language awareness
4. children progress through steps of increasing environmental awareness, but progress seems to be strongly related to the age of the child and other individual factors.

In the second half of the project, these findings will be corroborated by continuous longitudinal observations and assessments.

ELIAS has produced a series of practical materials such as teacher training modules, Green Immersion modules, an information brochure and guidelines, and a range of presentations on bilingual learning, all of which can be accessed and downloaded from the ELIAS website at www.elias.bilikita.org. These materials will be completed in the course of the next year. The website, intensive PR activities and, notably, the final symposium in June 2010 and a two-volume book-publication will make all results accessible to the public even after the project's lifetime.

