

## *Children's Incidental Learning of English Through Cartoons: An Italian Case Study*

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### **Abstract**

The presentation concerns a qualitative and longitudinal case study of two young Italian children acquiring English incidentally, while enjoying cartoons in a domestic environment. The data from a log kept by a participant observer over eight years are investigated to reconstruct the main steps of the process, from reception to various forms of production. Unlike most of the literature about similar cases, the language perspective chosen in the present study never considers words separately: the evidence given by the two siblings does not show language as a set of isolated items, but as formulaic sequences, also used as speech acts, gradually developing into more complex cohesive texts. Through a linguistic description of the data, the research attempts to establish a parallel with Halliday's (1978) view of mother-tongue acquisition as social and cultural practice: thanks to the children's emotional participation in their heroes' adventures, the virtual world portrayed in the cartoons becomes the social context where communication takes place according to a shared semantic system.

Keywords: Incidental Learning, Cartoons, Formulaic Language, Language As Doing, Bilingualism

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## **Introduction**

Acquiring a second language through everyday TV and film exposure, more recently mainly through the internet, has been taking place for decades in countries where foreign multimedia resources are available in their original voices. Unlike that trend, in Italy dubbing has been a thriving industry for a long time. Today, viewers of some TV channels can opt for films that have not been dubbed, or can search for them online. However, they need a strong motivation to avoid Italian, and a context willing to accept the choice. Consequently, to the best of the writer's knowledge, in Italy literature about incidental acquisition of a second language is rare (Leotta & Di Gregorio, 2020). Therefore, the intention is to report on a case that seems to go against the mainstream.

The study is about two Italian children, brother and sister, the former being almost three years younger, both acquiring English while enjoying cartoons at home since they were one and a half. So far, the little brother, Giovanni, being seven and his sister, Anna, just ten, have never visited an English-speaking country. They live in an environment where English is never spoken, although the adults around them, parents and grandmother, are proficient speakers. The experience began accidentally, having fun with an online English song, and continued with nursery rhymes first, then with animated series suitable for their ages. Cartoons were watched daily, initially for a few minutes, later up to one hour: the children were never unhappy with cartoons in English, thanks to involving tunes, animation and stories. The whole family was encouraging: their grandmother would often share the cartoons with them; their parents would add some evening films in English as family amusement. Consequently, English must have been associated by the two siblings with a pleasant atmosphere.

When their grandmother noticed that the children were profiting from the exposure to English, she started adding notes to a log she was already keeping about Anna's growth developments first, later also Giovanni's. The comments referred to the children's easy acceptance of English, the excitement they had singing along, their native-like pronunciation, their readiness to memorise the utterances and reproduce them, their ability to apply some lines, even adjusting them, to real situations spontaneously, finally, their free use of English, for the time being particularly evident in the elder sibling.

The analysis of the data from the log is the focus of the present longitudinal study, which covers eight years, beginning when each child was a year and a half and ending with Anna being ten and Giovanni seven. The paper opens with a definition of incidental learning, which refers to the way English is acquired in the case studied. Then, it continues with the data organised around the main steps that are interpreted from two language perspectives, which are consistent with each other: the formulaic and socio-semantic ones. A parallel with Halliday's (2004/1976; 1978) theory of first-language acquisition is attempted, which leads to a tentative conclusion about the case as a form of bilingualism. The paper ends with some reflections on early learners' shift from incidental to formal teaching.

## **Incidental learning**

The term 'incidental' was originally applied to natural language acquisition, which takes place thanks to mother-and-child interactions (Warren & Kaiser, 1986). Jylhä-Laide (1994) conducted a survey regarding the literature about a widespread attitude against the confidence that children could learn a language watching television, the evidence to be found on the absence of "modified input and interaction", which "leads to a situation where the learner

receives incomprehensible input and has, because of the ephemeral nature of television, too little time to process it.” (93). The author argued against this reasoning, reporting on a six-year-old Finnish girl, who acquired English as a second language incidentally, through cartoons on television, without any formal teaching or any interaction with English speaking people: she was helped by repetitive viewing of the same cartoons, since she could record and view them as many times as wished. Lowery & De Fleur (1995:283) maintained that “[t]he amount of identification that a child has with a television character is another factor which affects the amount of incidental learning that takes place.”

Much later, after a detailed overview of the discussion about “implicit”, “explicit”, “incidental” and “intentional” learning, Andringa & Rebuschat (2015:192-193) revisited the issue, indicating requirements that produce incidental learning, like regularity of exposure, repetitive viewing of the same material, and motivation to follow what is not completely clear. They established a parallel with Krashen’s theory (1981), according to which a mental language device, together with a favourable affective filter, would allow implicit acquisition at early ages.

All the requirements were met in the case under scrutiny: cartoons were watched daily for years; repetition of the same cartoons was inevitable because of the limited number of episodes, which provided a smooth progress towards more complex language; the affective component was guaranteed too, thanks to the conducive family milieu; motivation was always very high. This last aspect requires further explanations: the quality of the images and the nature of the episodes induced the impression of involvement in a virtual world and identification with some characters; although the animation resources were aimed at English-speaking children, comprehensible input was never an issue, thanks to the characters’ physical performances, and their non-verbal facial expressions, as well as the presence of suprasegmental features, which helped the siblings make sense of the events, no matter how much they could understand the verbal language.

## **The data**

The present study is based on the qualitative data from the log of a participating observer, the children’s grandmother. The notes on language acquisition were not systematic in terms of type and frequency of observation. The reasons are manifold: unlike a first language, the experience unraveled slowly over eight years and the observer’s remarks might have been caused by changes that became evident accidentally; an incubation period of the language intake very likely occurred all through a long-term exposure to the new code; each change might have evolved earlier, without having a chance to be exhibited; the two siblings needed the right stimulus to indicate the learning stages they were in, especially when moving from a receptive to a productive use of English. Besides, more comments referred to Anna, both because of her age, and because she seemed more prone to manifesting her skills playing, acting and switching to English in the presence of her grandmother.

As already mentioned, it all began, unplanned, when a YouTube song was played for Anna, by then one and a half. It was *In the Jungle the Mighty Jungle*<sup>1</sup> accompanied by an animation in which a dog dances to the rhythm of the song. Anna responded with joyful participation, trying to imitate the movements of the animal. The episode triggered her grandmother’s

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<sup>1</sup> A Pat & Stan production.

memories of nursery rhymes from her far away experience with young English children. So, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*<sup>2</sup> was followed by many more, all accompanied by animated cartoons. The moment marked the entrance to a fascinating virtual world, where native-English-speaking characters were perceived as real.

English never seemed to discourage Anna, who responded to each single Rhyme without minding how many times it was played. She was almost two when she could sing various songs. She was two and a half when she would sing and perform the characters' actions even with cartoons off, as in *Humpty Dumpty*, *Head Shoulders Knees and Toes*, *If You're Happy, Roll Over Roll Over*. By the same time, she could use the main motifs in episodes like the following: the first time she could spot stars in the dark sky, she sang *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*; in Venice, seeing a boat in the lagoon, she started singing: *Row Row Row Your Boat*; walking on a little bridge in a park, she said, pretending she was afraid: "Nonna, ho paura"<sup>3</sup>, *London Bridge Is Falling down!*<sup>4</sup>.

When Giovanni was almost two, he was also absorbed by the animated songs, his most favourite one being *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*, together with other cartoons involving animals, like *Five Little Ducks*, *Baby Shark*<sup>4</sup>, and, later, *Caterpillar Shoes*<sup>5</sup>. Soon he showed he was able to make the noise of the animals indicated in English by his grandmother, then, before he was three, he could indicate the animals by their names wherever he could spot them. At a very early stage they both proved they could understand the main points of the songs, could memorise them thanks to endless and never-tiring repetition, and could practise them singing along, while reproducing the movements mentioned.

The entertainment continued with more cartoons where singing alternated with dialogues, like *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*<sup>6</sup>, requiring some verbal and non-verbal responses from the viewer: the repetition of a statement, a yes/no answer, the choice of a tool to solve a problem and a final applause. Anna was almost three when she liked enacting the episode *Sleepy Minnie*, in which she was Minnie, who had fallen asleep due to a magic spell, and her grandmother was the one who would break it playing a 'golden harp'. She was three, when, after telling a little lie, she would say: "Telling lies?", a question from the Rhyme *Johnny, Johnny*. The episodes provided evidence that she could reuse lines from the cartoons appropriately.

They continued watching cartoons daily, from half an hour to one hour: songs connected to festivities, like Halloween and Christmas, were their favourite all through the year. Repeating them and gradually moving to new ones, at the age of five, both children were able to adjust some chunks of the cartoon language to real-life needs: Anna modified the rhyme *Did you ever see my tail* into "Did you ever see my mummy ...", and, seeing her father who had just come back, she substituted 'mummy' with 'daddy'. She did the same with the Halloween cartoon *Guess Who?*<sup>7</sup>, a question for the family to guess whether it was a witch, a monster or

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<sup>2</sup> All the Nursery Rhyme cartoons mentioned are produced by ChuChu TV Nursery Rhymes & Kids Songs and by Super Simple Songs.

<sup>3</sup> English translation: "Grandma, I'm afraid".

<sup>4</sup> It became very popular in 2016, thanks to Pinkfong, a South Korean entertainment company.

<sup>5</sup> Produced by The Old Branch.

<sup>6</sup> A Disney Television Animation production.

<sup>7</sup> A Pinkfong production.

Frankenstein, on the basis of some details. The same happened with *Trick or Treat, Who Are You?*<sup>8</sup>, performing the various characters portrayed in the cartoons.

For a few years, Anna was charmed by *Peppa Pig*<sup>9</sup> with episodes depicting every day events of a young child like herself. Gradually she turned to *Ben and Holly's little kingdom*. When Giovanni was four-to-five years old, unwillingly because the new cartoons did not suit his taste, he would join his sister, provided they would watch cartoons of his choice too. So, on a rainy day, while enjoying splashing water in a puddle, five-year-old Giovanni said: “slip in the mud! *Attenzione!*”<sup>10</sup>, with the purpose of inviting everybody to cautious behaviour, freely reusing an exclamation from *Peppa Pig*, typically amused by jumping in puddles. Anna was almost seven when, on holiday, she reused the king's typical phrase in *Ben and Holly's little kingdom*, “Bad news!”, to inform a new German friend, with whom she had spoken some English, about her departure time.

Both children, at times, switched to English, without being asked: when Giovanni was six years old, during meal time, he would spontaneously say: “Can I have some more, please?”, or, with the same intention, “I like it”, and “A little bit”; when asked to explain the meaning of “it's a piece of cake” from an English resource, he answered “easy peasy lemon squeezy”. By the time Anna was nine, to please her grandmother who liked *Ben and Holly's little kingdom*, a cartoon that did not suit her any longer, she suddenly said in English with a condescending tone: “OK, I've run out of cartoons. You can watch it!”; talking to her brother about a selection of cartoons, making an effort to be flexible, she said about her preferred cartoon: “Ok, we can skip it”; on a different occasion, leaving her grandmother alone in the garden to play with her friends, she said, again choosing to speak English: “Sorry grandma, I left you because my friends are here. Do you feel lonely?”.

The spontaneous use of English in situated utterances struck their grandmother, who had not expected them: a feeling of disbelief was entered in her log, together with the intention to focus on her grandchildren's language acquisition more specifically. As a result, she took some initiatives, the first one when the siblings were respectively seven and almost ten. It was about their comprehension of a *Pokémon*<sup>11</sup> episode, *Don't touch that 'dile*: after turning off the video, she checked their understanding, asking them to take a turn to give the Italian for each of the following quotations: “What's going on here?”, “He's a good friend of mine”, “He may sound tough, but he's nice”, “I couldn't even sleep the night before”, “We didn't find any fingerprints”, “Let me remind you”, “How dare you!”, “How are you doing?”, “I mean”, “Just a moment”, “In the meantime”, “What's wrong?”, “I guess I was wrong”, “You've got it”. The answers were all correct, proving that their comprehension could be independent of the visual stimulus. The ‘test’ proved also that Giovanni had reached a high receptive level, considering his younger age: as his grandmother noted down, he must have profited from following also his sister's more complex cartoons, like *Miraculous Ladybug*<sup>12</sup>, *Superhero Girls*<sup>13</sup> and *Star Darlings*<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> A Super Simple Songs production.

<sup>9</sup> *Peppa Pig* and *Ben and Holly's little kingdom* series are produced by Astley Baker Davies and Entertainment One.

<sup>10</sup> Italian for ‘Be careful!’

<sup>11</sup> A Pokémon Company production.

<sup>12</sup> A Jeremy Zag & Aton Soumache production.

<sup>13</sup> A Warner Bros production.

<sup>14</sup> A Disney-published franchise.

The second initiative involved Anna, when she was heading towards her tenth birthday: she was invited to tell a story, which she willingly accepted, not minding being recorded either. So, she improvised the following story about a dream of hers:

Ok, but, listen, the story is a really big story, because there is magic in it. It's all my imaginary world, and, well, first, why I don't\*<sup>15</sup> sleep on the border\* of my bed? Why am I covered with toys? Well, because the last time I sleep\* on one border\* of my bed, I have\* a terrible dream (I was in the other house, not in this house). Well, why am I dreaming speaking in English? Well, I can't imagine their voices in Italy\*. So, I need to speak in English, because, then, I can't talk to them any more, because, if I speak in Italy\*, they don't understand me. Well, one of my friends, called Sofia, is a captain like me, because my name is Lite, not Anna or something bla, bla, bla, or other names like fancy names. My name is Lite, not 'light' like 'luce'<sup>16</sup>, no, only Lite, it doesn't mean anything, only Lite. My friend Sofia needs a name, she can't have my name. Yes, she can have my name. But I don't want\*. Well, I need to find a name for her. But ... I will think later. Now, I have never told Sofia she is a captain, because, one, I'm afraid, two (I'm telling you the true\*) two, because, if I tell her, even one person of my club, she will disturb. It's only in my imagination, something fancy in my imagination, so, not real. So, I'll wait for the right moment to tell her 'You are a captain'. My captain is bla, bla, bla. ... It's a long story. If I tell you the whole story, the battery of your phone will weeee!

Rather than the content - which sounds loose for lack of planning - in spite of some grammar errors, the fluency, the overall prosody and the way the text is held together coherently produced a deep repercussion on her grandmother, who wanted to take the third initiative: a telephone conversation with an American relative in New York, called on purpose while Anna was present. Without informing either party, she invited Anna to say hello. So, a conversation ensued, during which she answered questions about her identity ("I'm Anna and I am ten"), then about the weather ("I live near a wood. So, it's everything, sunny, windy, rainy"), about Venice ("A great place!"), her interests ("drawing dragons, elves, shadows, yes, things that are a little dark"); she gave feedback to the interlocutor, like "Yes, I got it", "Wow!", "it's a beautiful name!"; when her grandmother thanked the American lady for giving her the first chance to speak to an English native speaker, Anna remarked "No, this is not the first time: I have speak\* English to my friends all the time! Grandma thinks they are imaginary friends, but they are real, they come from another galaxy"; then, suddenly remembering that a pizza was being cooked in the oven, she said: "Grandma, is the pizza burning? Boom! It's exploded!"; when ending the call, she said "Have a good day! Goodbye! See you", apparently being carried away by the event.

Although Giovanni's grandmother was convinced it was too early for him to be challenged with a similar request, since he had been present at his sister's narration of the dream, she asked him if he did not mind telling his own story. This is what he said: "My mum Amazon\* two books. She was wrong. My father, my dad, port\* me two books". The comments in the log proved his grandmother was very pleased: first of all, he had managed to communicate his thoughts very effectively, secondly, using the two verbs that might have been regarded as errors, he had demonstrated he was assimilating English morphology without the Italian

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<sup>15</sup> The asterisks indicate major language errors.

<sup>16</sup> Italian for 'light'.

inflectional suffix: as a whole, his English was evidence that he was moving on, heading towards more autonomous speaking.

## Language analysis

Most studies about incidental language learning focus on vocabulary, as quantitative evidence for its efficacy. There are few exceptions, like Nightingale (2018) who includes pragmalinguistics in the exploration, and Alexiou & Kokla (2019) who focus on formulaic language. The present study shares the belief that incidental learning takes place with full utterances, which gradually reach discourse features. Wray (2002:4) initiated the reflection on formulaic language, defining it as follows: “Words and word strings which appear to be processed without recourse to their lowest level of composition are termed *formulaic*”.

Recently, Siyanova-Chanturia & Pellicer-Sánchez (2019:3-4) have connected formulaic sequences specifically to second language acquisition, identifying the main features in “frequency, familiarity, predictability, fixedness, and pragmatic function [...]”, which play a “role in how we learn, process, and represent language [...]”. From the data collected in the log, it seems clear that incidental learning and consistent exposure to cartoons seem to facilitate the storage of this type of language, rather than a list of disconnected words. Essays in the book deal with various implications of formulaic language for second-language learners. In one of them Bardovi-Harlig (2019:97) highlights how “[...] formulaic sequences characterise language use within speech communities [...]”, which should make second-language learning critical. But the cartoon virtual worlds the children in the present study watched are inhabited by characters who speak a variety of English from authentic communities, mainly American and British. It is this language the two siblings were exposed to. In another essay, Lin (2019:79) gives relevance to formulaic sequences for second-language learners with regard to prosodic features, like intonation, pauses, rhythm and stress. The data from the log underline that these aspects were learned together with other aspects of English. In a third essay, Granger (2018:230-240) defines two main types of formulaic sequences, collocations and lexical bundles, the former referring to the recurrence of words within different span sizes, the latter being fixed language strings. Collocations can be detected everywhere in the collected data, as in the nursery rhymes with “clap your hands”, “stomp your feet”, “nod your head”, “world so high”, “like a diamond”, “in the sky”, “Did you ever see my tail?”, and more all through the cartoons, which the children stored and retrieved to sing and, gradually, to express themselves, as with “some more”, “bright blue”, “a long story”, “fancy names”, “something fancy”. The same can be maintained with reference to bundles, as “a little bit”, “run out of”, “telling the truth”, “telling lies”, “it’s a piece of cake”, “easy peasy lemon squeezy”, “there is magic in it”, “covered with”.

The language segments were perceived by the children according to their functions. Evidence was given when they were asked to translate utterances into Italian: they supplied the equivalent function they served in their first language, as in “I mean” translated into “Io penso” and “io intendo”, “I guess I was wrong” into “Penso di avere sbagliato”, “I don’t have any more” with “Non ne ho più”. The idea of “How to do things with words” was first conceived by Austen (1962), then by Searle (1968) with his “speech acts”. Halliday applied the idea of “Language as doing” (2004/1975:28) to mother-tongue acquisition throughout the three phases (1978:112-113): the “ideational” phase, in which children act mainly as “observer[s]” to express their experiences “about something ... creatures, objects, actions, events, qualities ... - of the world ...”; the “interpersonal” phase, during which a child uses the language as an “intruder”, “[...] to participate ... engag[ing] in dialogue”; the “textual”

phase, characterised by the production of a cohesive text, which encapsulates all the three “[...] functional components of the semantic system [...] in a context of situation”. The coexistence of the three phases marks “the transition into the adult system” (121), although further lexicogrammatical developments will occur.

The data in the present inquiry seem to be consistent with Halliday’s description of first-language acquisition, in spite of various differences with the children’s second-language learning: the process has spread over a longer time span; the psychological features have developed further; their feeling of pride would force them to be silent, rather than mumbling patchy phrases or uttering them with rough articulation, as babies do.

Although the phases (2004/1976:71-73) overlap, the data from the log have been arranged mostly separately according to their prevalence. The “ideational” phase can be traced very early, when the two siblings used English to refer to an entity nearby, like Giovanni saying “[it’s] a dog” with an “informative” and, at the same time, “interactional” function, and Anna singing “Row, Row Your Boat” in Venice with a “personal” function, a manifestation of her feelings of pleasure. After some time, the “interpersonal phase” became clearer, with Giovanni asking “Can I have some more, please?”, expressing the “regulatory function”, or with Anna uttering an “interactional function” like “Bad news!”, or giving feedback on the phone. Evidence for the “textual” phase came from Anna’s story, which sounded cohesive (Halliday and Hasan, 2013/1976) thanks to various aspects: conjunction, like “ok”, “but”, “then”, “first”, “one”, “second”, “so”; reference, like “I”, “me”, “my”, “you”, “she”, “her”, “them”, “this”, “that”; lexical cohesion, like magic/imaginary/imagination/fancy/not real, and “something like that”, “something fancy”.

In the narrative, the “ideational” phase about the dream coexists with its various functions: the “interactional”, through expressive-conative gambits like “listen”, “no”, “yes”, “it doesn’t mean anything” and suprasegmental features in the different voice pitch in asides, as in “it’s a long story”, “I was in the other house, not in this house”; the “imaginative” function by means of phrases like “really awful”, “a really big story”, “there’s magic in it”, “It’s a long story” and “I’ll wait for the right moment”.

According to Halliday (2004/1976:88) talking of his son, “Language can now serve [...] as an effective means of cultural transmission, as a means whereby in the ordinary everyday interaction in which he himself takes part the essential meanings of the culture can be transmitted to him.” It is an aspect that is present in the two children’s language, in spite of the fact that the world they were exposed to was virtual: it was a world that borrowed the language “relevant to the context of culture” (1978:124) of the community where the specific variety of native English is spoken. For example, politeness reveals shared behaviour within a social system: the emphasis with which Giovanni asked “Can I have some more, please?” does not correspond to the Italian code, in which the addition of ‘per favore’ to an interrogative form would sound exaggerated, especially in a familiar surrounding; his phrase “a little bit” is another cultural way to soften a request, making it more socially acceptable; Anna’s locution “Like now” is a strategy useful to sound less imposing when asking the interlocutor to respond immediately; her dream story is rich in gambits to keep in touch with the addressee while speaking, like “Listen”, “It’s a long story”, and the closing signal “If I tell you the whole story, the battery of your phone will weeee”.

While following Anna's recorded narration, the listener is struck by the perception that she is playing the role of a character she is identifying with: well beyond the fact that her speech is organised around meaningful chunking, the effect emphasises a harmonious articulation by means of suitable suprasegmental features, like rhythm, intonation, stress and pitch, which mark the social relevance of communication items, her feelings about the content and her continuous perception of somebody listening to her monologue. In her analysis of the influence of cartoons during childhood, Poštič (2015:188-190) states: "It is known that when adopting a new language, people adopt a new personality based on the perception they have about the target culture. This phenomenon is called 'mirroring'. Adopting a personality of a cartoon character is very common in childhood, because those characters are funny, interesting and care-free. They appeal to children".

The phenomenon goes beyond imitation: as Halliday (1978:124) states about his son learning his mother tongue, the two siblings did "not, of course, learn all this from single instances, but from the countless sociosemiotic events of this kind that make up the life of social man."

## **Conclusions**

The case of the two children acquiring English incidentally, enjoying repetitive viewing of online cartoons, has been studied on the basis of qualitative data from a log kept over eight years by a participant-observer. The language perspective from which evidence has been analysed is formulaic, since the children's attempts to produce free language reflect the previous storage of language, especially in collocates and bundles (Siyanova-Chanturia A. & Pellicer-Sánchez A., 2019), and are consistent with native speaking.

The two siblings' second-language evolution has been found consistent with Halliday's first-language acquisition phases (2004/1975), of which the elder child has already displayed features of the third one, while the younger one still seems comfortable mainly in the second phase, at the same time showing clear signs of further growth. An issue has been raised with regard to the idea that language is a "means of cultural transmission" (2004/1976:88) when learning through cartoons too. An answer has been attempted: the virtual world that is portrayed borrows one or more varieties of English from the real world, together with their cultural codes.

Can the language outcome be considered bilingual? The answer is positive if we accept Halliday's description of Phase III with its textual component: "[...] it is only in combination with textual meanings that ideational and interpersonal meanings are actualised" (1978:112-113). The little girl's production of a cohesive text, with its cultural strategies to appeal to the listener, may easily support this view, while opening a further issue about the type of bilingualism. Peal and Lambert (1962) offer the answer supplying the concepts of "dominant" and "balanced" bilingualism, which can be applied to the present research: the children's mother tongue is by far the "dominant" one in their lives, until they enter their virtual or imaginary world, where English becomes the only language.

When moving from incidental acquisition to formal learning of English, early learners approach language awareness, reducing uncertainties and errors. At the same time they may feel uncomfortable, even lose their enthusiasm, having to attend beginners' classes. On the other hand, a teacher who is not prepared for their presence may feel challenged by the management of the uneven levels. The answer is that specific tasks with different roles

should be organised in the classroom, so that everybody, according to their individual needs, can gain from the situation.

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