Research into the teaching of English as a Foreign language in early childhood education and care

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Introduction and definitions

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) – care and education services before entry into formal schooling – has a variety of labels around the world: for example, nursery, day care, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and pre-school. The referent for early childhood education and care used by the United Nations is ‘Early Childhood Education’ (UNESCO-UIS 2012), which covers ‘early childhood educational development’ – children from birth to two years old (infants and toddlers), and ‘pre-primary education’ – children from three years to the start of primary education, which varies between five and seven years old. I will be using these latter terms in this chapter, which focuses on foreign language (FL) learning in pre-primary education.

Foreign language education, also referred to as ‘language exposure programmes’, is said to ‘prepare and help children to learn a new language’ (European Commission 2011, p. 15). Children receive a restricted amount of exposure to the FL in a classroom setting – often as little as 30 minutes, once a week; there may be little or no access to this language outside the classroom, and there are no opportunities for interacting with peers who speak the FL, for children share a common classroom language. English in these circumstances has been referred to as a drip-feed language programme (Baker 2011), turning English into a subject, which is hardly comparable to bilingual or immersion education, where children learn through the medium of another language and experience a higher degree of exposure to this language.

Historical perspectives

The development of early childhood education and care

Early childhood education and care has secured increased policy attention since the 1960s, mainly due to the recognition that care and education is a child’s right. According to Papa-theodorou (2012, p. 4) research has shown that:

- Early exposure to rich and diverse educational experiences through quality provision improves development and learning.
• Provision in ECEC increases children’s educational opportunities and counters social and economic disadvantage.
• Provision of ECEC contributes to reducing poverty and increases household income as a result of enabling parental employment or by being a source of employment.
• With a relatively small investment, the above results in reduced dependency on state welfare and later criminal activity costs.

In all, Papatheodorou highlights that provision of ECEC is ‘a service to children, their families and communities and to society in general’ (p. 4). Commitment to children’s rights and educational requirements are reflected in five of the eight Millennium Developmental Goals (United Nations 2000), and as a result enrolments in pre-primary education worldwide have increased by 64% since 1999 (UNESCO 2015).

Compulsory education in most countries begins with primary education, with just one-fifth of the world’s nations with statutory pre-primary education laws (UNESCO 2015, pp. 63–64). Israel (since 1949), Peru (since 2003) and Hungary (since 2015) are the only countries to mandate pre-primary education from the age of three, at the moment of writing. Despite the low number of countries assuring free statutory pre-primary education, recent figures from OECD reports show that as many as 71% of all three-year-olds are enrolled in some form of early childhood education programme (OECD 2016, p. 298) – with public provision also on the increase, resulting in 68% of children enrolled in pre-primary education attending public institutions (OECD 2016, p. 299).

Pioneers in early childhood education, such as Friedrich Froebel in Germany, Maria Montessori in Italy and Rudolf Steiner in Austria, were all influential educational thinkers who left their mark on the different approaches to early childhood education around the world. These approaches also integrate the ideas of twentieth-century cognitive psychologists like Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner. However, practices in each country will vary according to the different perspectives that distinct societies and their specific cultures have towards the child and childhood in general (Cambell-Barr and Georgeson 2015).

Pre-primary education is recognised, in Europe at least, as being qualitatively different to primary education (European Commission 2011), and according to de Botton (2010, p. 7) the different philosophical traditions sit at opposite ends of a continuum: a teacher-led, education-focused approach related to school-readiness skills such as numeracy and literacy (for example, in the USA and China); and a child-directed, social, pedagogic approach, where attention is given to educational goals, play and interactivity with both teachers and peers (for example, in Nordic countries and Germany). In reality, most early-years programmes fall somewhere between the two extremes; however, UNESCO recommends that pre-primary education focus on children’s language and social skills, logical and reasoning skills and alphabetical and mathematical concepts, and should aim to develop a child’s understanding of the world (UNESCO-UIS 2012, p. 27).

**Foreign language education in early childhood education and care**

Foreign language education in ECEC has no clear tradition or history in relation to implementation. However, Edelenbos et al. (2006) note that early language learning (mostly English) existed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, especially in the private sector. The latest British Council report on policy and practice suggests English is ‘cascading into Early Years teaching’ (Rixon 2013, p. 13). With a growing recognition of the importance of ECEC, it is not surprising that English, in particular, is rapidly being introduced into
this sector, where parents are also highly influential (Edelenbos et al. 2006; Enever 2015; Rokita-Jaśkow 2013).

The last fifteen years in Europe have also been influenced by language education policy stressing the importance of ‘teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age’ (Barcelona European Council 2002, p. 19). The most recent Eurydice report (2017) showed that just over a third of the European community officially implements second or foreign language teaching to children of six years and under. These countries include Cyprus and Poland, where English was introduced as a compulsory part of their pre-primary programme from the age of five in September 2015. At the time, both countries began their statutory pre-primary education law for five-year-olds; however, under the new government in Poland plans were revoked and compulsory education, including English, returned to the last year of pre-primary education at age six.

In Spain, bilingual Spanish and English projects in pre-primary began as pilots in 1996, with English becoming part of the pre-primary programme in 2006 (Andúgar et al. forthcoming; Fleta 2016). English is now compulsory in ten of the seventeen Autonomous Regions, with 2015 figures showing that 79% of all pre-primary children learned English starting at age three in Spain. Since 2008, a select number of bilingual Spanish-English schools in the Madrid community have included two 45-minute sessions of English per week in the final year of pre-primary education. However, the Madrid Community recently announced that these programmes would be expanded in September 2017, to begin at age three, with at least three sessions of 45 minutes a week, increasing to five sessions a week at age five, if these schools have the appropriate staff – pre-primary trained with at least C1 level of English (Comunidad de Madrid 2017).

The lack of national regulations does not deter early English initiatives – for they are well established in many European countries where pre-primary education is not mandatory, bringing about a variety of learning experiences and varied quality (Mourão and Lourenço 2015). English is reportedly taught as a FL in around 50% of the pre-primary institutions in the Czech Republic (Černá 2015), Portugal (Mourão and Ferreirinha 2016), Romania (Dolean 2015), Slovakia (Portiková 2015) and Slovenia (Brumen 2010), and in many cases starting at age three. In Italy a report by Langé et al, (2014) showed that English was taught in 84% of the ECEC centres.

In Eastern Asia, Zhou and Ng (2016) describe English being introduced at ever earlier ages due to parents wanting to give their children ‘the best start in life’ and accordingly they state that ‘the majority of very young (aged three to six) […] are therefore learning English as a foreign language’ (p. 137). Ng and Rao (2013), writing about Hong Kong, confirm that 97% of local pre-primary institutions teaching through the medium of Chinese offered English to children from age three by 2008. The emphasis, as in most East Asian countries, is on developing academic skills with the support of a textbook, resulting in a focus on developing early literacy skills over oral skills.

The more cosmopolitan cities of China introduced English into pre-primary education at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and gradually this has escalated to parents sending their pre-primary children to after-school and private English lessons despite Chinese educational authorities advising institutions not to run extra-curricular English activities ‘in order to reduce “study pressure” on children’ (Jin et al. 2016, p. 3). Similar accounts have been given in relation to Taiwan, where enthusiastic parents are also sending their pre-primary children to English classes as an after-school activity (Tseng 2008) or English only pre-primary institutions, despite government restrictions on their creation (Butler 2009). Furthermore, in South Korea, there are
a growing number of fee-paying pre-primary establishments claiming to be ‘English kindergartens’ (Song 2012, p. 40). Reports that learning English starts in the womb have also been associated with South Korea, where mothers are including English in pre-natal routines to ensure their children survive in a ‘hypercompetitive educational environment’ (Park 2015).

The trend for languages, mostly English, entering the Latin American educational agenda emerged towards the end of the twentieth century (Banfi 2017). In Mexico, English has been mandatory from the final year of compulsory pre-primary education since 2009; however actual implementation averages at 25% for the primary school population (Sayer et al. 2017) with no data regarding pre-primary. Argentina begins English in Grade 1; however, it has had private, fee-paying bilingual education since the early 1800s, which usually includes pre-primary. The majority of these bilingual schools teach through English and Spanish, though vary dramatically with regards to their socioeconomic student population and curricular content and approach (Banfi and Day 2004). Finally, in Peru where 80 percent of the pre-primary provision is public, a recent baseline study (Mourão 2018a) confirmed that 85 percent of private pre-primary institutions included an early English initiative, compared with 15 percent in the public sector.

The lack of clear research directions beyond surveying national situations is a consequence of the fragility of ECEC due to the insufficiency of formal policy around statutory provision and attendance. In Europe, a European Commission Policy Handbook (European Commission 2011) containing a set of guidelines for early language learning was published with the intention of supporting the already growing initiatives. Since 2015 more robust academic volumes are also becoming available, discussing, to some extent, the issues related to FL learning. However, it is clear that early language learning in ECEC still needs to formulate effective language policies and (re)consider appropriate programmes of implementation (Mourão and Lourenço 2015; Murphy and Evangelou 2016).

Critical issues and topics

The emerging evidence that English is being introduced at an ever earlier age on a worldwide scale could, in itself, be called critical, for guaranteeing that any language policy is effectively and sustainably implemented is complex when a system often lacks an educational policy of its own (Mourão 2016). The different issues can be teased apart, however they are interrelated.

Beliefs

The impact of global processes on policy and practice is responsible for forging English into a ‘generic skill’ (Enever and Moon 2009, p. 6) to be included in compulsory education as early as possible. Within ECEC, governments and policy makers may not be interested in taking official action towards ensuring a FL is included in pre-primary education due to the absence of statutory early years provision; however, parents continue to be hugely influential, as they foresee the social and economic benefits of their child learning English in a pre-primary education they may already be paying for (Černá 2015; Jin et al. 2015; Portiková 2015; Rokita-Jaśkow 2013). Decisions to enrol a child in English are often supported by the ‘the earlier the better’ belief, despite the inexistence of research to support this notion (Jaekel et al. 2017; Murphy 2014; Munõz 2006; Singleton and Pfenniger, this volume). Research has also shown that parents are keen to ensure their child is successful
in compulsory education by getting a head start in pre-primary education (Jin et al. 2015; Rokita-Jaśkow 2013).

**Equal access**

Despite an increase in the number of children attending pre-primary education around the world, there is ‘considerable difference between urban and rural areas, rich and poor families and communities, and thriving and deprived regions within countries’ (UNESCO 2015, p. 59). Butler (2015) laments the scarcity of research into socioeconomic status (SES) and FL education and highlights a concern regarding the gaps in opportunities ‘based on region, student SES and ethnic/linguistic status in many parts of the world’ (p. 413). Rokita-Jaśkow (2013) has indicated that a child’s SES is the major factor contributing to inequality in her study into parental aspirations in Poland.

**The staff and teacher education**

The ideal teacher profile for English in pre-primary is unclear – a pre-primary professional who speaks English well enough, or an English teacher who has training in early years pedagogies. European Commission guidelines highlight the relevance of staff qualifications as a critical factor in the quality of pre-primary settings and the children’s learning experiences. This holds for staff supporting early language learning activities (European Commission 2011, p. 17). Teachers working with such young children require an understanding of the principles of ECEC pedagogy and child development, age-appropriate foreign language methodologies as well as a competence in English that gives them confidence to speak fluently and spontaneously to children in the L2. Hanušová and Najvar (2006, in Černá 2015, p. 173), suggest that ‘the younger the child starting to learn an L2, the higher the importance of teacher qualifications’; proficiency in English alone is not sufficient, for English should not be seen as a discrete subject within an ECEC curriculum that generally takes a holistic approach to educating children.

**Age-appropriate practices**

The European Commission Policy Handbook highlights what they call ‘proven orientations’ (2011, p. 8) for pedagogical processes and states:

> Language-learning activities should be adapted to the age of the learners and to the pre-primary context. Children should be exposed to the target language in meaningful and, if possible, authentic settings, in such a way that the language is spontaneously acquired rather than consciously learnt.

*(European Commission 2011, p. 17)*

These orientations show, above all, that we should be ensuring the FL takes into consideration the educational attributes of pre-primary education; these focus on educating the whole child – learning and developing through a language, not learning a language for the sake of the language. Unfortunately, a review of practices undertaken by European member states implementing language-learning projects shows that there is ‘little evidence of agreed processes, uniformity of approach or established indicators of achievement in early language learning’ (ibid.). Edelenbos et al. (2006) describe a variety of language-learning
models that have been observed in pre-primary education. These range along a continuum from low to high exposure:

- **A language awareness model**, which provides access to a number of languages and cultures in order to develop a plurilingual curriculum.
- **A language exposure model** to a FL, which sees the language learning experience as an end in itself.
- **Content and language integrated learning model** (CLIL), which associates the language with individual subjects, such as music.
- **Bilingual or partial/full immersion models**, where children are taught in an official or minority/regional language other than the child’s home, community or heritage language.

The very nature of pre-primary education, following a curriculum supporting the holistic development of the child, would suggest that the language exposure model, viewing language as a specific subject and not as a ‘communication tool to be used in other activities’ (European Commission 2011, p. 14), is inappropriate for pre-primary education. In addition, where CLIL is subject-based it might also challenge the relevance of its suitability with such young children. As such, an **integrated model** (Brumen, Fras Berro and Cagran 2017; Moja Guijarro 2003; Mourão 2015b; Robinson et al. 2015) has been described which proposes emulating the way children learn in their ECEC context and would appear more suitable for low-exposure initiatives. An integrated model also suggests that the FL is planned to accompany what the children are doing in their daily ECEC activities so connections can be made between learning through the languages (Dolean 2015). Such a model also implies a collaborative approach between the pre-primary professional and FL teacher, if they are indeed two different staff members (Mourão and Robinson 2016).

**Current contributions and research**

**Parental motivations**

Parental involvement in a young child’s education is recognised as being highly relevant and this naturally holds true with FL learning. Rokita-Jaśkow (2013) describes the educational aspirations of Poland’s emerging middle class as one of their defining features, and as a result, she suggests that Polish parents’ visions of their children’s future linguistic competence contribute to arousing their child’s own educational aspiration, therefore developing intergenerational success. Rokita-Jaśkow concludes that “an investment into child FL education does require some financial resources” (p. 221) and appeals to policy makers to provide quality pre-primary FL education for all children, not just those whose parents can afford it.

Jin et al. (2015) have also researched attitudes and experiences of Chinese parents with pre-primary children learning English. They describe parents (and grandparents) in China putting ‘all their hopes and resources on the single child of each family’ (p. 3) in the belief that English will ‘help ensure a child’s future’ (ibid.). The study involved 243 parents of children attending pre-primary institutions in urban and rural areas in three different locations in China. Their data suggests that parents with undergraduate or graduate qualifications were more likely to support their child’s FL experience, either due to higher expectations, or because they were able to spend more time with their child. Just over half of the parents in the study paid extra for their child’s English education and though SES, regional and urban
and rural divides were significant in relation to parental attitude, the authors highlight how
difficult it is to interpret their data as it is sometimes contradictory. Nevertheless, it is clear
that parental views have an impact on the children’s perceptions of English, which were
generally positive.

Parental motivation can result in a variety of different approaches to ensuring a child is
taught English. As such, research into home-schooling in English (and other languages),
which usually involves families of a higher SES, is also emerging (Pirchio et al. 2015;
Prosic-Santovac 2016; Sokol and Lasevich 2015).

Policy

Coherent, clear policy regarding the official implementation of FLs in pre-primary educa-
tion is rare, and research into these policies and their implementation is negligible. Andúgar
et al. (forthcoming) share an exhaustive analysis of how the eighteen Autonomous Regions
in Spain approach the national regulations of 2006, which suggests that it is the responsibility
of the local education authorities to include a FL from three to six years old. The variety of
interpretations includes a difference in guidelines around who is responsible for the English
teaching (the pre-primary professional, an English teacher or both); the teachers’ language
competence; whether language assistants are involved; the number of hours devoted to Eng-
lish; and the different approaches, which may or may not be labelled bilingual language
education or CLIL. Andúgar et al.’s study concludes that only three Autonomous Regions –
Andalucía, Cantabria and Navarra – successfully implement pre-primary language educa-
tion according to the criteria established by the European Commission (2011). Fewer than
half of the regions have elaborated a comprehensive plan for English in pre-primary educa-
tion and many regions are limited for economic reasons. The relationship between English
and the regional languages, such as Catalan or Basque, has also affected implementation.
Andúgar et al. consider the heterogeneity of the regions to be the major stumbling block in
a successful nationwide implementation, which is likely to be the reason in most countries
where there are larger differences between urban and rural areas, e.g., Mexico or China.

Staff profiles

In primary education, C1 level is considered more desirable ‘as it enables teachers to be
fully functional in the informal and incidental language regularly required in primary class-
rooms’ (Enever 2011, p. 26). The opportunities for informal and incidental language use
in ECEC contexts would appear to warrant this higher proficiency, so C1 may well be the
level of competence required for pre-primary professionals teaching English. In Cyprus,
where English is generally spoken to a fairly high proficiency, due to its history as a British
colony, pre-primary professionals are said to be of C1 level (Ioannou-Georgio 2015). Here,
a structured in-service training programme has ensured that pre-primary professionals are
given training in FL teaching methodologies to teach English in the last year of statutory
pre-primary provision (ibid.). Those professionals who were trained initially showed con-
cern about their ability to implement the project, mostly due to lack of confidence in their
own language proficiency. However, after two years of the programme their self-assurance
increased as they began to ‘identify emerging results in their children’s learning’ (p. 101),
which included a high level of listening comprehension, development in language produc-
tion and communication strategies, a positive attitude towards English, languages and cul-
tures generally and a positive response from children with learning difficulties.
In Italy, the pre-primary professionals are generally responsible for early language learning with a required language proficiency of B2 (Langé et al. 2014). Ng and Rao (2013) have reported that in Hong Kong there is a relative balance between native English speakers and pre-primary professionals teaching English; however, just 15% of these professionals have training in ECEC and English teaching, and around 30% of the pre-primary professionals have received no training in English. Andúgar et al. (forthcoming) reveal that in Spain nine of the autonomous regions recommend that English be taught by pre-primary professionals with a level of English at B2, with one autonomous region recommending a C1 level, and four autonomous regions recommending that specialist English teachers teach English. Fleta (2016) surveyed the Madrid Community in particular, where she found that just over 50% were trained primary teachers who had re-qualified as English teachers and around 40% were pre-primary professionals. Seventy percent claimed to be B2 or C1 level English. The present law (Comunidad de Madrid 2017) requires that all Madrid Community English teachers be C1 level.

Other studies have reported that staff trained to teach English to older children and adults are brought into pre-primary as peripatetic English teachers as well as individuals who may not have any formal qualifications in English or ECEC (see Cortina-Pérez and Andúgar 2017; Černá 2015; Lugossy 2018; Mourão and Ferreirinha 2016; Ng 2013; and Portiková 2015). The section below shares research that looks at the extent to which these different models are successful or not; however, it is clear that due to the lack of legislation generally, national standards or quality control visits to regulate practices are non-existent. Where policies exist, they are often implemented without consideration of who would eventually be responsible for teaching English.

Classroom practices

Classroom practices will be affected by any number of specific contextual concerns, which include national or localised approaches to ECEC, existence of national FL policy, stakeholder interest, funding, staff profiles and training as well as access to resources. The following section looks at research into learning outcomes and specific approaches to teaching and learning in a FL.

Peripatetic staff and collaborative practices

When English teachers are peripatetic, and do not belong to a school’s permanent staff, making connections between the children’s learning and English is challenging. Ng (2013) shares research undertaken in Hong Kong, where the pre-primary professional teaches English with the support of a visiting English teacher. The English teachers in the study came from different educational backgrounds: a local pre-primary professional with no training in English, a native speaker English teacher with no training in ECEC and a native speaker with neither ECEC or English training. Ng suggests that the low-exposure setting resulted in a ‘product-oriented approach’ by all visiting English teachers, which was characterised by the use of ‘teacher-dominated strategies, with fewer chances for teacher-child or child-child free interaction but a major focus on the form-focused activities like drilling of language items, in particular the vocabulary learning’ (p. 18). Limited professional knowledge together with an inappropriate textbook was also considered a reason for form-focused activities, which were even observed in the English teacher who had ECEC training. Another result emerging from the study was the lack of sensitivity shown by the native
speaker with no teaching qualifications. In another report of this study Ng (2015) highlights the absence of three enabling factors in these contexts:

- The pedagogical factor, where neither staff has the knowledge or training to develop a professional relationship which was beneficial for all involved.
- The logistical factor, focusing on the peripatetic staff’s part-time status which hindered joint planning and the necessary creation of a professional relationship.
- The interpersonal factor exasperated by the lack of time for collaboration.

On a more positive note, research by Mourão and Robinson (2016) has shown that when peripatetic and permanent staff collaborate and both take responsibility for the children’s English experience, English was integrated and meaningful. In a project which investigated the set-up of an English learning area to foster opportunities for child-led play in English, English was seen as part of the children’s everyday activities and not restricted to the teacher-led English sessions which made sure ‘children were exposed to English in a systematic way’ (p. 262). During the rest of the time, the pre-primary professional was a key motivator, ‘ensuring children saw English as part of their everyday lives’ (ibid.). She was also ‘responsible for organising the space and planning time for English to be part of the classroom’ (ibid.), and was essential in guaranteeing parental involvement by helping them understand what was happening to support and motivate their children at home.

**Pre-primary children’s attitudes and motivation**

Jin et al. (2016) used elicited metaphor analysis to gain insights into pre-primary children’s ‘conceptual thoughts’ towards English (p. 11) in China. In a study involving 243 children from urban and rural settings, the authors ascertained that just over 50% of the children’s metaphors were positive and 36% were neutral, suggesting that children’s attitudes towards English were positive. The same study also provided evidence that these children’s attitudes, and consequently their motivation, towards English were dependent upon peers’ attitudes and parents’ views towards English and learning in general (p. 22), as well as the kinds of activities they engaged in during English sessions. Jin et al.’s study did not include detailed analysis of the learning environment.

Regarding intrinsic motivation and its relationship with environmental variables, Wu (2003) reported on a quantitative study with 72 pre-primary children (four to six years old) learning English in Hong Kong. Using an experimental and control group, a setting was created which furnished a predictive learning environment for meaningful and genuine communication; included challenging and open-ended activities that encourage creativity and initiative; provided opportunities for variety in learner organisation (e.g., whole group, pair work, small group work); and allowed for formative assessment activities and strategy training to facilitate self-improvement. Results show clear evidence that the teaching method was a significant predictor of intrinsic motivation. In addition, perceived competence and perceived autonomy exhibited direct relationships with intrinsic motivation. Brumen (2010) has also described Slovenian pre-primary children’s motivation towards English in a study where 120 children ages four to six years old were involved in semi-structured interviews after participating in English and German lessons. Intrinsic motivation was noted as being very positive in a context where ‘children learnt the foreign language on the basis of concrete experiences and active participation in activities’ (2010, p. 723). Taking a more qualitative approach, Brumen concluded that children showed intrinsic motivation through an
evident desire to learn the FL for its own sake. This was also demonstrated in their awareness of, and pride shown in, their ability to use the FL in a variety of different ways. Elvin et al. (2007) report on a qualitative study which makes similar assertions around the visits of a dynamic English teacher to two pre-primary institutions in Norway.

**Developmentally appropriate practices**

The studies described above demonstrate that by creating a learning environment that is developmentally appropriate in terms of learning content, as well as child-centred in approach, children’s motivations and attitudes are positive. Developmentally appropriate practices include the use of songs, chants and nursery rhymes, stories and picturebooks, games and game-like activities, movement and hands-on interactive pursuits and an integrated approach to learning experiences which develop the whole child (Brumen 2010; Elvin et al. 2007; Fleta 2006; Ghosn 2016; Ordóñes 2016; Robinson et al. 2015; Wu 2003). For research into quantitative studies around using song, see Coyle and Garcia (2014) and Davis and Fan (2016). For a more qualitative example of research into using picturebooks, see Mourão (2015a).

A report on a recent comparative study in the Madrid Community (Ramirez and Kuhl 2017) provides an excellent description of optimal conditions for an early language learning initiative, albeit with infants from seven to 33 months old. The study involved 126 infants in intervention groups and 124 matched infants attending the bilingual Spanish English initiatives mentioned earlier. The intervention grouped 12 infants, in homogeneous age groups, who spent one hour a day with four different native English speakers who had been trained in a method which involved:

- High quantities of English input, organised around weekly topics.
- Use of parentese (higher pitch, slower tempo and exaggerated intonation contours).
- Highly social interactions, meaningful and engaging activities (routines, game-like activities and picturebook reading), all supported with prompt and contingent responses by adults.
- Children being encouraged to talk and interact.
- Access to multiple native speakers (groups of 12 children with four adults).
- Play-based activities.

After 18 weeks, the intervention group showed rapid gains in English word comprehension and English speech production. SES levels were not considered a significant factor in their learning. Though difficult to replicate such conditions, mainly due to the high child-adult ratio of 3 to 1, this study reinforces the importance of quality interaction and the relevance of more time dedicated to developmentally appropriate activities in and with the target language.

In countries where a more academic perspective is associated with pre-primary education, English activities may involve the use of a textbook and focus on acquiring early literacy skills, though this is an approach which has been attested (Ghosn 2016; Ng 2013; Ng and Rao 2013). Research into these specific activities in FL settings remains scarce.

Including free play in English is considered highly relevant in pre-primary English as it emulates good practice in ECEC. Mourão (2014) elaborates on the importance of providing for a balance of child-initiated and adult-led activities in FL learning, and in order for this to be possible, English is made available to children in an English learning area (ELA). An
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ELA is one of any number of learning areas in an open plan classroom set up to promote child-initiated play. Research by Robinson et al. (2015) in Portugal and South Korea has shown that children learning English in low exposure settings enjoy playing in ELAs and interacting in English with the resources they find there. Child-initiated play in the ELA extends the amount of time children are exposed to English, as this play occurs outside the formal English sessions with the English teacher. Robinson et al. suggest that the resources stimulate memories of teacher-led English sessions, as children re-enacted teacher-led activities, took on the role of teacher and student and replicated familiar sequences of English associated with teacher-led activities (p. 28). Nevertheless, play in the ELAs also prompted experimental use of English, which implies children are creative with English during play. Mourão (2018c) has shown that children scaffold each other in novice/expert interactions during child-initiated play in the FL as well as make the most of their linguistic repertoires by using both Portuguese and English, thus assuring peer interaction takes place successfully.

**Classroom language**

Llinares Garcia (2007) has investigated pre-primary learners’ functional use of language in low exposure FL sessions. Using Halliday and Painter’s six main language functions – heuristic, informative, personal, regulatory, informational and interactional – she analysed transcriptions of lessons where a teacher used ‘activities and role-plays that promoted the pupils’ discourse initiations in the L2 and the use of this language to perform the same communicative functions as in the L1’ (p. 41). Her results show that children were able to initiate interaction very successfully in the FL and used less L1 after the treatment. Llinares Garcia suggests this was due to the teacher’s controlled activities which were adapted to the learners and the move from using display questions to providing children with real reasons for using and interacting in English. The most common function used by both experimental and control groups in the classroom language was the personal function, but in the experimental group this function was greater in English. Llinares Garcia concludes that appropriate use of activities to encourage the personal function can succeed in more use of the target language.

Mourão (2018b) has reported on similar interactive language use in teacher-led activities during English sessions, which later support child-initiated activities in ELAs. She highlights the relevance of routines which provide what Bruner (1983, p. 45) describes as occasions for ‘systematic use of language with an adult’, and refers to them as ‘closely circumscribed format(s)’ (1983, p. 46). ‘Formats’ contain a structure, clearly marked turn-taking roles and a script-like quality, which combines action and communication. The repetitive nature of circle time, where routines are paramount accompanied by teacher-led, often game-like activities which naturally contain multiple closely circumscribed formats, provide children with opportunities for prediction to support their understanding as well as favour language development.

**Recommendations for practice**

First and foremost, we have seen that policy is rarely existent, so the implementation of sound policies, which take national contexts into consideration, are essential to support the implementation of English in a pre-primary education system. This policy should take into account the staff available to teach English, the time required to train them, together with the opportunities for continuation into primary education. Parents should also be better
informed of the limitations of a low-exposure learning model, which is nothing like immersion or bilingual education, and as their voice appears to contribute to policy making, they should be encouraged to insist on quality language education by trained staff. Teacher education is of essence, for as yet institutions that train pre-primary professionals to teach English or English teachers to teach in pre-primary are rare.

Classroom approaches require an understanding of how children learn in ECE, so recommendations should clearly emulate local ECE approaches, which are likely to include providing a balance of child-initiated and adult-led activity. English should also be integrated into the children’s everyday learning and not seen as a separate subject, isolated from their daily realities. In addition, expectations of what children can do in English require care and attention, and opportunities should be created for language to be used in meaningful situations which are relevant to children. Finally, all staff involved in the children’s education need to work together to ensure that the children’s English experience is a positive and joyous one.

**Future directions**

Precious little research involves pre-primary FL learners, so research in any direction would be welcome. But of extreme importance is research that looks at the learning journey a child follows when beginning English at age three – data from longitudinal studies in a variety of low-exposure FL contexts would be very useful. Comparative studies where learners begin in pre-primary versus those that begin later would also be of relevance. Research into different staff profiles and the resulting learning approaches and outcomes including the systematic collection of examples of good practices seen in relation to different settings would contribute to a greater understanding of the relevance of these factors to successful learning outcomes.

Investigating different practices using both quantitative and qualitative research approaches would contribute to a more robust collection of data to support policy making. Areas that desperately require evidence from research to inform practice include literacy development in the FL, FL education in settings where children come from minority language backgrounds, peer interaction in the FL, classroom interactional language and collecting evidence of progression in a FL.

**Further readings**

   A European document, available online, which provides useful guidelines for implementing early language learning, with a collection of good practices from different countries.

   A useful article which discusses the importance of incorporating play into FL education and provides a suggestion of how this can be organised.

   This is a collection of chapters that draws on a synthesis of theory, research and practice to explore language learning in a range of geographical contexts and includes second language learning, foreign language learning, bilingual education, plurilingualism and home-schooling.

This is a collection of chapters that provides a more focused look at the issues involved in teaching English in the early years (up to age seven) including English as a second language, English as a foreign language and English immersion. It is also available online.

**Related topics**

Materials, research methods for investigating TEYL, projects, listening and speaking

**References**


