

# THE PILOT PHASE OF THE INTRODUCTION OF ENGLISH IN GREEK STATE PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOLS: PORTRAYING STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a review and evaluation of the pilot introduction of EFL in pre-primary schools in Greece, which took place for the first time in 2020-2021. The main characteristics of the pilot scheme are portrayed along with the process of monitoring and investigating its implementation so as to discuss the basic findings presented in the study. The research questions concerned a) the stakeholders' perceptions and beliefs regarding the advantages and challenges of the introduction of EFL in pre-primary schools, b) the issues raised concerning the active cooperation and relationship between the pre-primary and the English language teacher and c) the educators' training needs. To answer these questions, questionnaires were developed and focus group discussions were carried out so as to provide evidence regarding these issues.

The findings of the study suggest that despite the initial hesitation, numbing or even disbelief, all stakeholders recognized certain advantages accompanying the implementation of English in pre-primary settings and more specifically the benefits children receive. The importance of a good relationship between the pre-primary teacher and the English language teacher was highlighted and the need for further training in specific areas was underlined. A number of difficulties were also reported, mainly regarding lack of resources such as extra financing to support the creative activities in the English language, or availability of time within the working hours to promote collaborative teaching design. Generally, the benefits of such an innovative programme are abundant, supporting and promoting young children's holistic growth and the general organizational culture for effective education.

## **1. Introduction**

As a step towards the promotion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and in compliance with current reality of plurilingualism and multiculturalism, English as a foreign language (EFL) has been implemented in the pre-primary level of education in various parts

worldwide (Baïdak et al., 2017). The benefits, as research suggests, are numerous. The European Commissioner for Education has clearly stated that “...learning foreign languages from a very young age allows us to discover other cultures and better prepare for occupational mobility” (Figel, 2005).

With the introduction of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programme in Europe, many countries, such as Cyprus, Spain and Poland, have officially included the implementation of foreign languages, English in most cases, at pre-primary level (European Commission, 2014). In fact, in many cases, EFL was introduced to children as young as three years old (European Commission, 2014). Nonetheless, as stated in the relative Action Plan 2004-2006 (Commission of the European Communities, 2003), the benefits presuppose the existence of qualified teachers with expertise on early education, the use of appropriate learning material, as well as the construction of small classes with adequate time of children’s exposure to the target language. As Alexiou (2020) underlines, there is a variety of approaches and models through which early EFL is implemented in schools both in the state as well as the private sector. She further on highlights that early EFL success and the outcomes related to language highly depend on the curriculum and the model each country adopts (Alexiou, 2020).

Certain reviews have examined the enormous variety regarding the implementation models of introducing English at the pre-primary level. Murphy et al. (2016) have inspected some features regarding early EFL, such as methodologies adopted, type and amount of exposure to the target language, teacher qualifications, and curriculum development among others. Moreover, Enever (2011) and Garton et al. (2011) shed light on the global policies as well as the practice with regard to FL instruction and implementation, pointing out the gap between pedagogic policy and classroom practice, the lack of emphasis on communicative approaches and developmentally appropriate teaching designs and the need to develop a clear rationale concerning the scope and pedagogy of introducing EFL in the early years. As it appears, therefore, it is imperative to further explore how early EFL learning can be effective, in addition to decision making regarding educational policies, teacher training sessions and materials creation (Scheffler & Domińska, 2018).

## **2. Introducing English in the pre-primary education: The case of Greece**

### **2.1 *The pedagogical and methodological framework***

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for very young learners has become a trend across Europe. However, the variation in its implementation in pre-primary educational contexts is remarkable. In the Greek educational context, the introduction and implementation of English activities in pre-primary schools has some special characteristics with regard to its epistemology, methodology, and practice. Such an approach introduces a different perspective into how very early EFL can be implemented. This approach integrates English in the curriculum and therefore does not treat the new language as a separate subject. This approach is also in line with the cross-thematic nature of pre-primary education and follows a socio-pedagogical orientation that supports the whole child development and holistic learning, promotes the emergence of competences that are important for the inclusion and success in society and invests in collaboration and positive relationships.

Taking into account the pedagogical benefits of starting early (Alexiou, 2020) and in line with plurilingualism policies, as well as realising the multicultural aspects of the classrooms and also in agreement with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century competences development (Penderi, 2021a; Penderi et al., 2021), the Greek government introduced English in the pre-primary level of education in September 2020.

Based on an eco-systemic approach, the pilot EFL implementation programme was realized in cooperation of policymakers along with a scientific committee that consisted of two volunteering academics (one specialising on early foreign language education and one on social pedagogy) and a group of researchers. The Committee undertook the responsibility of formulating the pedagogical context and the methodological approach for the introduction of EFL in the pre-primary schools and designing the Initial Training of the English and pre-primary educators participating in the pilot phase. Moreover, they developed a framework for monitoring the implementation of the programme during 2020-2021.

The educational design is based on a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches, actively involving all stakeholders (policymakers, academics, education leaders, teachers, parents and children) in the process. This initiative has a great degree of innovation, with the active cooperation of all stakeholders being the most prominent feature. Crucially, the active cooperation between the EFL teachers and the pre-primary teachers was of overriding importance. The actual governmental guideline was that the EFL teacher is responsible for the 'teaching' of English but in the presence of the pre-primary teacher. The Committee took this a step further, by strengthening the 'presence' of the pre-primary teacher and transforming it into a solid, grounded and active cooperation during 'EFL time'. This cooperation was grounded in all phases of the teaching practice, from the introduction of the rationale of the EFL in the school programme with children and parents, the design and incorporation of creative activities to the existing programme, and to the implementation and the evaluation of the activities.

This cooperation does not mean that the English teachers lose their important role in the EFL practice or that the pre-primary teachers acquire an auxiliary role. The conceptual and methodological approach introduced provided the framework for each part to make the most of their specialty and change roles according to the situation and the nature of the activity or the task. This approach is also in line with the principles and the philosophy of the new pre-primary curriculum (Penderi et al., 2021), that promotes the function of the pre-primary setting as a learning community within the scope of its socio-pedagogical role. This cooperation between professionals constitutes one of the pillars of the project as one teacher complements the other and both are important in the educational process, so as to promote children's EFL motivation and learning (Alexiou, 2021). Moreover, an intercultural approach was introduced giving rise to the cultural characteristics of the language and the importance of multilingual and multicultural communication.

Furthermore, because EFL in pre-primary Greek schools is not considered a separate or an isolated subject in the curriculum but is integrated in the existing school programme (Alexiou, 2020), this cooperation is vital to provide children with seamless learning experiences that should be understood and promoted by both educators (Penderi, 2021b). Thus EFL teachers are encouraged to devise materials

and creative activities parallel to the thematic areas the children are working each week, which means that the activities fit into the school's curriculum and the children's experiences but also facilitate memory associations while providing context and purpose for learning English (Alexiou et al., 2019) and boosting children's cognitive skills (Alexiou, 2009). This practice reinforces and safeguards the cooperation and constant communication of both educators.

Within this line of thought, and with an aim to promote mutual understanding, knowledge and skills formation for both English and pre-primary teachers, the Initial Training was designed to provide them with materials, methods and opportunities to exchange ideas to design and practice EFL creative activities collaboratively with an emphasis on meaning rather than form (Alexiou, 2015). Firstly, an initial training session of 18 hours took place at the beginning of the academic year 2020 – 2021. 326 teachers of English and pre-primary teachers received information regarding the developmental characteristics of young children, the pre-primary curriculum, the activities design process as well as the methodology of teaching foreign languages in the early years. The pilot phase of the introduction of EFL addressed almost 3054 children.

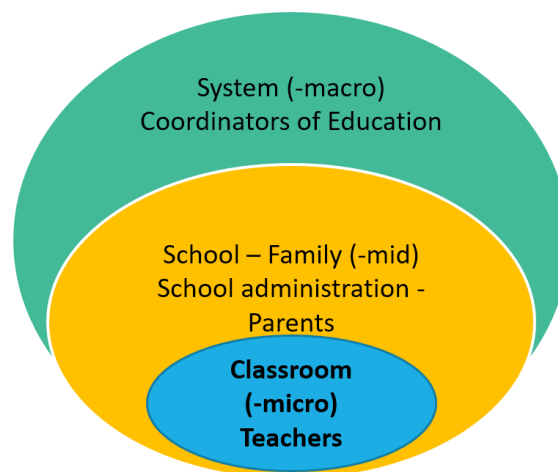
## **2.2 Supporting and supervising the pilot phase**

Supporting and supervising the pilot phase was a multi – levelled and multi – methodological approach (See Figure 1). The Committee worked closely with basic stakeholders during the pilot phase of the introduction of the EFL in the 58 pilot schools. The pilot schools were selected randomly throughout Greece with geographical (urbanity) and organizational (working positions) criteria. Sampling process was a basic variable for the validity of the design, as teachers' involvement was not determined by their stance towards the introduction of EFL in the pre-primary grade (for example if they were in favour or against the pilot), but it was driven by educational authorities. This choice resulted in teachers having different starting point regarding their attitudes towards the introduction of EFL as it was realized during the focus group discussions, described below.

According to the systemic approach, support and monitoring concerned all levels of the educational context. Starting from the micro-level, teachers were firstly

trained and then supported and supervised by the school administrators (local level) and the Coordinators of Education who are responsible for the pedagogical and professional development of the teachers at a regional level. At a national level, the Committee organized meetings with teachers, school administrators and Coordinators of Education to get feedback regarding the program and provide guidance and support.

At the same time, the Committee informed the policymakers about the developments of the pilot phase. Policymakers also made contact with representatives of the teachers and the coordinators to establish an immediate flow of information and a basis for the mutual commitment to the educational innovation under piloting. School administrators and teachers developed a good communication with parents regarding the program so as to ensure relevant and realistic expectations and collaboration regarding the EFL activities. Coordinators also helped in the communication with parents so to make them realise the potential of this innovation.



*Figure 1: Representation of the multi – levelled and multi – methodological approach while supporting and supervising the pilot phase*

Furthermore, questionnaires were distributed to all stakeholders and focus group interviews were carried out with a representative sample from all specialties. Additionally, the activities that educators were asked to prepare during the initial training sessions were indexed and evaluated (See Table 1).

Table 1: Actions taken to support and supervise the pilot phase

<b>1. Initial training sessions</b>	18 hours, for all educators and coordinators:  4 Sessions: a. The Introduction of the EFL in pre-primary education (research and educational policies), b. The developmental characteristics of the pre-primary school children, c. The philosophy of the pre-primary education and d. Examples of EFL creative activities in the pre-primary education.
<b>2. Perception Questionnaires</b>	a. Importance of the introduction of EFL in the pre-primary education b. Perceptions towards the introduction of EFL in the pre-primary education c. Roles and cooperation d. Collaboration with the families
<b>3. Meetings with teachers and coordinators of education (online)</b>	6 meetings throughout the pilot phase, 2020-21
<b>4. Focus Group Interviews</b>	8 focus groups with educators and coordinators
<b>5. Indexing the activities developed during the initial training session</b>	Indexing according to the theme, the content and the methodology
<b>6. Evaluation of the activities developed during the initial training session</b>	Evaluation based on quality criteria regarding the pedagogical and methodological framework and the content of the activities

In this paper, we will focus on the results that emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires and the focus group discussions data.

### 3. Research methodology and monitoring of the pilot phase

In this section, the research methodology along with the research questions are presented. The participants, as well as the research instruments employed, are described and the data collection procedures are explained and analysed.

### **3.1 Aim and research questions**

With the purpose of investigating the first impressions and perceptions regarding the pilot implementation of EFL in the pre-primary education, we used a mixed-method approach. Therefore, using a combination of both qualitative and quantitative techniques and a multi-source approach, data was gathered following a coherent research design to ensure the validity of the results (Araceli Ruiz-Primo, 2006).

There were four basic axes (advantages, challenges, relationships and training needs about EFL in pre-primary education) regarding the participants' perceptions and beliefs on the pilot implementation of EFL in pre-primary education, that are reflected in the research questions of the study:

1. What are the advantages of introducing English in pre-primary schools?
2. What are the challenges of introducing English in pre-primary schools?
3. What is the relationship between the pre-primary teacher and the English language teacher?
4. What are the educators' training needs realised from the pilot implementation?

### **3.2 Participants**

The quantitative data was elicited from 477 participants. Of these participants 102 were educators (33 EFL teachers and 69 pre-primary teachers) who implemented the introduction of EFL in 58 pre-primary schools in Greece and 27 were principals of the involved pre-primary schools. Additionally, 23 school Coordinators of Education filled in the questionnaire, 13 of whom were EFL Coordinators and 10 Coordinators of pre-primary teachers. Finally, the questionnaire data was provided by 325 parents whose children were exposed to the English language at pre-primary level during this pilot phase.



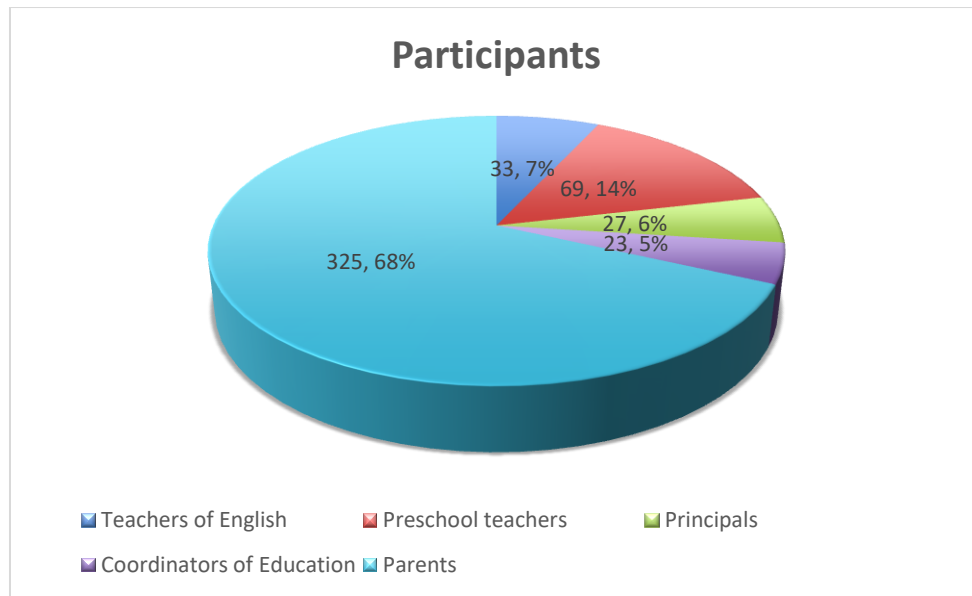


Figure 2: Participants - Quantitative data

Regarding the geographical allocation of the sample, it is important to note that the participants were from various and different regions from all over Greece.

The data elicited by means of qualitative collection strategies came from the participants of the focus discussion groups who were 21 educators (12 EFL teachers and 9 pre-primary teachers) and also 18 Coordinators of Education (8 EFL and 10 pre-primary) who participated in separate discussions. The above-mentioned participants were split into different focus groups, approximately four to five people per group, based on their specialty and role (see Table 2).

Table 2: Participants - Quantitative and qualitative data

QUESTIONNAIRES	FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS
102 Educators (EFL and pre-primary) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 33 EFL teachers (48%)</li> <li>➤ 69 pre-primary teachers</li> </ul>	21 Educators (EFL and pre-primary) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 12 EFL teachers</li> <li>➤ 9 pre-primary teachers</li> </ul>
325 parents	
23 Coordinators of Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 13 EFL Coordinators of Education (65%)</li> <li>➤ 10 Pre-primary Coordinators of Education (19%)</li> </ul>	18 Coordinators of Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 8 EFL Coordinators of Education</li> <li>➤ 10 Pre-primary Coordinators of Education</li> </ul>

### 3.3 Research instruments

Five different versions of questionnaires using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) were distributed to all stakeholders who participated in this study to examine their views and perceptions concerning the implementation of English in pre-primary schools. All five questionnaires broadly examined the same parameters, but there was a difference in the number of items included in each one. This difference derived from the particularities of the stakeholders' different roles in the introduction of EFL in pre-primary education. The different number of the items in each version of the questionnaire did not affect reliability of the scales as shown in Table 3, but boosted their content validity capturing the development of the concepts and matters for different stakeholders (Koller et al., 2017). More specifically: (a) a 35-item questionnaire was administered to teachers of English and pre-primary teachers, (b) a 26-item questionnaire was administered to pre-primary administrators, (c) a 28-item questionnaire was administered to Coordinators and, (d) a 50-item questionnaire was administered to parents. Moreover, a set of demographic questions were included, but these are not used in the present analysis.

Table 3: Cronbach's Alphas of the different versions of the Questionnaires and Scales

Scales	Questionnaires				
	Teachers of English	Pre-primary teachers	Coordinators of Education	Administration	Parents
<i>Perceptions</i>	( $\alpha = .82$ )	( $\alpha = .89$ )	( $\alpha = .88$ )	( $\alpha = .81$ )	( $\alpha = .92$ )
<i>Advantages &amp; Challenges</i>	( $\alpha = .89$ )	( $\alpha = .90$ )	( $\alpha = .92$ )	( $\alpha = .87$ )	( $\alpha = .94$ )
<i>Teachers' cooperation, relationship &amp; interactions</i>	( $\alpha = .64$ )	( $\alpha = .82$ )	( $\alpha = .80$ )	( $\alpha = .84$ )	( $\alpha = .92$ )
<i>Cooperation with parents</i>	( $\alpha = .88$ )	( $\alpha = .88$ )			

For the qualitative part of the research, the interview protocol consisted of eight open-ended questions that were in line with the axes of the scales of the questionnaires, as aforementioned, to elicit the participants' views with regard to

the course of implementing English in pre-primary schools. These open-ended questions were:

1. What are the benefits of introducing English to pre-primary children, based on your experience so far?
2. Which were the challenges that emerged regarding the implementation of English activities in pre-primary?
3. What kind of challenge might emerge later on?
4. To which degree are the activities in English in line with the pre-primary curriculum? Any suggestions?
5. What is your relationship with the pre-primary / EFL teacher? Any suggestions?
6. What is your relationship with the parents? Any suggestions?
7. In which areas do you feel you need training in order to cope with your task?
8. Is there anything else you would like to mention regarding the introduction of English in pre-primary?

### **3.4 Data collection procedure**

Generally, the data collection lasted from September 2020 to June 2021. More detailed, all types of the questionnaires were distributed via e-mail to the participants (online survey). The parents' questionnaires in particular were sent to the school administrators who were asked to forward them to the parents' email addresses. The questionnaire completion in all cases lasted approximately 15-25 minutes. The interviews were carried out via online conference calls, using the Zoom platform. This condition ensured everyone's safety, following the protocols for the COVID-19 pandemic. The whole procedure lasted approximately 1 to 1 and a half hour, depending on the group's dynamics. Participants in both quantitative and qualitative research processes provided their informed consent after the purpose and the process of the research had been explained to them and they were also ensured about anonymity in data reporting.

#### 4. Results and discussion

In this section, the four main research questions will be revisited and answered, based on the data obtained and analysed. The discussion of the findings will shed more light on the pilot phase of English in pre-primary implementation in Greece.

##### 4.1 Research question 1: What are the advantages of introducing English in pre-primary education?

With regard to the advantages, the analysis of the responses showed that all participants believe that the introduction of EFL will provide very young learners with exposure to *cultural diversity*. In fact, EFL teachers agree to this statement 97%, with pre-primary teachers agreeing by 80% and Coordinators of Education by 96%.

Moreover, 91% of the EFL teacher participants and 87% of the Coordinators of Education stated that the introduction of English in pre-primary education may enhance children's *cognitive development*, a claim that is in line with data from similar studies (for the relationship between early EFL and cognitive skills, see Alexiou, 2009).

The majority of the Coordinators of Education (83%) believe that learning another language in pre-primary education increases the child's ability to *develop social relationships* with others and increases young learners' levels of *motivation* for learning languages in later stages of education.

Finally, 94% of the EFL teachers highlighted that the introduction of English in pre-primary education may improve young learners' creative, social, cognitive, emotional and language skills leading to a *holistic development* of young learners (see Table 4). These findings agree with previous findings in early EFL education (for an overview see Alexiou, 2020).

Table 4: Participants' responses concerning the advantages of introducing English in pre-primary schools

Questions	EFL teachers <i>Agree</i>	Pre-primary teachers <i>Agree</i>	Coordinators of Education <i>Agree</i>
The introduction of English in pre-primary will provide young learners with exposure to <b>cultural diversity</b> .	<b>97%</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>96%</b>

The introduction of English in pre-primary helps pre-primary learners' <b>cognitive development</b> .	<b>91%</b>	61%	<b>87%</b>
Learning another language in pre-primary increases the child's ability to <b>develop social relationships with others</b> .	79%	62%	83%
The introduction of English in pre-primary increases young learners' levels of <b>motivation</b> for learning languages in later stages of education.	82%	70%	83%
The introduction of English in pre-primary may enhance / improve young learners' creative, social, cognitive, emotional and language skills ( <b>holistic development of young learners</b> ).	<b>94%</b>	59%	<b>78%</b>

When discussing the advantages with the focus groups, the EFL teachers underlined the *socio-emotional benefits*, the *enhanced self-esteem* as well as the *cognitive and cultural advantages*. For example, one EFL teacher mentioned that "... English minimized the distances between children..., the use of the doll draw everyone's' attention". Pre-primary teachers focused on the *multicultural advantages*, *parents' positive attitudes* and the *fact that children use English throughout the day*, by stating that "...in multicultural groups... English has a unique value... [making] children feel proud of speaking English".

Coordinators of Education mentioned *children's positive attitudes* as well as the *cognitive gains* by stating that "... children from different backgrounds were presented with linguistic stimuli... the taboos of introducing new people into the classroom started to change".

Besides other advantages they admitted, parents mostly commented on their children's ability to develop *social relationships* with others (80%) something that was also found in the parents' questionnaire responses. On a different note, they also mostly agreed with the statement that the introduction of English in pre-primary schools may positively affect their children's future success in language learning (75%).

In general, parents were enthusiastic. As one EFL Coordinator of Education said: "Parents responded beautifully to this initiative. Children would say a word or two in English at home; this made them very happy. They expressed their enthusiasm. They

also mentioned that they feel lucky that their child is a student in a pre-primary school where English was implemented. They saw their kids being happy and they loved it”.

On the whole, the advantages were apparent to all participants, who recognized the importance of introducing another language to very young learners. There seems to be a consensus especially when it comes to the cultural benefits but also regarding the cognitive, social, motivational and holistic development of children. Parents and teachers demonstrated enthusiasm, which is of paramount importance, guarding therefore, the positive outcomes that this initiative may bring.

#### **4.2 Research question 2: What are the challenges of introducing English in pre-primary education?**

When it comes to the challenges, the vast majority of the participants disagreed with the myths that the introduction of English in pre-primary could delay children’s Greek language acquisition nor did they believe that English would confuse young learners in relation to their national identity. Most importantly, participants did not support the claim that English in pre-primary could create negative feelings to the very young learners or harm their self-concept and confidence. The percentages of the responses can be found in Table 5 below and the numbers speak for themselves.

*Table 5: Participants’ responses concerning the challenges of introducing English in pre-primary schools*

<b>Questions</b>	<b>EFL teachers <i>Disagree</i></b>	<b>Pre-primary teachers <i>Disagree</i></b>	<b>Coordinators of Education <i>Disagree</i></b>
English in pre-primary could <b>delay children’s Greek language acquisition.</b>	<b>88%</b>	73%	<b>91%</b>
English in pre-primary could <b>confuse young learners’ national identity.</b>	<b>88%</b>	84%	<b>96%</b>
English in pre-primary is a <b>burden</b> for young learners, due to their exposure to new stimuli.	85%	70%	<b>96%</b>
English in pre-primary could create <b>negative feelings</b> to the young learners.	82%	80%	<b>87%</b>
English in pre-primary could <b>harm children’s self-concept and confidence.</b>	<b>85%</b>	84%	<b>87%</b>

During the focus group discussions, the participants mostly mentioned technical challenges, related to the lack of *appropriate/adequate equipment or commuting* from one school to another. *Distance learning* (due to the COVID 19 pandemic) was another challenge mentioned by many participants who felt that “...the experiential and game-like aspect was lost when we had to move from a live classroom to a screen”. Some of the participants also mentioned the need for educational material and scenarios that would enable their work in pre-primary schools. Nonetheless, despite the practical challenges these people faced, the conclusion was that all obstacles can be overcome as long as “...an educator wholeheartedly wishes to be working with children”.

Parents proved to be very optimistic regarding the challenges, too. In detail, 77% disagreed with the notion that early FL exposure could lead to mother tongue confusion. Another 79% rejected the notion that children might forget words in their mother tongue due to FL exposure. Finally, 89% of the parents stated that early FL introduction cannot confuse children’s national identity. In fact, during the focus group discussion, a pre-primary teacher explained that “...the benefits are well recognized by parents...they told me that they feel their children are moving away from the notion of “learning for the sake of acquiring a diploma... the children are gradually getting familiar with the English language”. Moreover, an EFL teacher stated that “... the parents’ interest in this initiative is huge”.

As our data portrays, all participants disagree with the idea that introducing English to pre-primary children could result in confusion, negative feelings or delay in L1 acquisition. The idea that English would be a burden for very young learners and may harm children’s self-concept and confidence is disproved by the vast majority of all stakeholders and they all once again confirm previous findings (Lindahl & Sayer, 2018). Teachers’ and parents’ testimonies promote a very optimistic view towards the initiative of the discussed pilot programme.

### 4.3 Research question 3: The relationship between the pre-primary and the English language teacher

Both the quantitative as well as the qualitative data obtained indicated a great pattern of communication and cooperation between EFL and pre-primary teachers. Both specialties commented that they cooperate to a great extent and characterized their working relationship as very good. They also agreed that the good relationship between the teacher of English and the pre-primary teacher helps pre-primary children participate more during the activities in English. Most importantly, participants stated that if the teacher of English and the pre-primary teacher do not cooperate well, pre-primary children may develop negative attitudes to English (see Table 6).

Table 6: Participants' responses regarding the relationship between teachers

Questions	EFL teachers	Pre-primary teachers	Questions	Coordinators of Education
How would you characterize your <b>relationship</b> with the teacher of the other specialty?	82% <i>very good relationship</i>	90% <i>very good relationship</i>	<i>Teachers should cooperate during the creative activities in English</i>	<b>100% agree</b>
To what extent do you <b>cooperate</b> with the teacher of the other specialty?	<b>91%</b> <i>to a great extent</i>	<b>71%</b> <i>to a great extent</i>	<i>Teachers should discuss children's behaviour</i>	<b>100% agree</b>
If teachers do not cooperate well, pre-primary children <b>may develop negative attitudes</b> to English.	67% <i>agree</i>	62% <i>agree</i>	70% <i>agree</i>	
A good relationship between teachers may <b>help pre-primary children participate more in the activities.</b>	<b>97%</b> <i>agree</i>	<b>87%</b> <i>agree</i>	<b>100%</b> <i>agree</i>	

In the focus group discussions, EFL teachers asked for a more active participation of pre-primary teachers in the activities, clarifying however that there is, in general, an atmosphere of cooperation and trust. All parties mentioned that any minor miscommunication issues were due to the lack of time, as teachers have to move



from one school to another during their working schedule. One EFL teacher specifically underlined that “... we have an exceptional relationship and cooperation...I am blessed to work with these pre-primary teachers... they helped me tremendously in understanding how to deal with very young children”. Similarly, a pre-primary teacher praised the EFL teacher by saying that “...she is amazing! Children love her and cannot wait for her to come to school!”.

The EFL Coordinators of Education commented on teachers’ cooperation, saying that “They had a very good relationship and constructive cooperation...they bonded since the very beginning...the pre-primary teachers always praised the EFL teachers”. A pre-primary Coordinator of Education added that “...we, as Coordinators of Education, had a very smooth cooperation, maybe this functioned as an example for the teachers to follow and cooperate well”. The cooperation between the two experts in the Committee has certainly worked as a model for everyone involved and was commented to them numerous times throughout the pilot year.

#### **4.4 Research question 4: Need for training**

When asked about the Initial Training that took place in September 2020, the questionnaire participants stated that they found the material covered quite useful and effective. The Coordinators of Education, in particular, agreed that they feel this training might actually enhance the cooperation between EFL and pre-primary teachers. Moreover, they stated that they feel confident in assisting the process of training teachers (see Table 7).

*Table 7: Participants’ responses on the usefulness of the initial training session*

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Coordinators of Education</b>
How useful and effective do you believe the Initial Training was <b>for the Coordinators of Education?</b>	78% <i>found the training very useful for themselves</i>
How useful and effective do you believe the Initial Training was <b>for the teachers?</b>	74% <i>found the training very useful for the teachers</i>
Training EFL teachers and educators will <b>enhance their cooperation.</b>	<b>91% agree</b>
As a Coordinator, I feel that <b>I can help training educators</b> regarding the implementation of English activities in pre-primary.	<b>91% agree</b>

In the focus group discussion teachers and Coordinators of Education were asked to suggest areas that could be covered in the next training cycle. EFL Coordinators of Education insisted on “...the need to learn how to cooperate with a teacher of a different specialty, maybe to form work groups with EFL and pre-primary teachers”. Pre-primary teachers underlined that “...besides training, classroom observation is very important in order to understand the pre-primary context”.

Besides providing some insightful ideas, participants mentioned something of paramount importance, namely, that a shift in mentality is required. More specifically, it was stated that “When you believe in something, it will definitely go well. The perspective needs to change... English in pre-primary is not about teaching but about having fun. The colleagues who grasped the idea succeeded to the fullest”. Table 8 summarizes the areas for future teacher training, as suggested by the focus group participants.

*Table 8:* Participants’ responses on their need for further training

<b>EFL teachers</b>	<b>Pre-primary teachers</b>	<b>EFL Coordinators of Education</b>	<b>Pre-primary Coordinators of Education</b>
Developmental characteristics	Interculturalism	Developmental characteristics	Differentiated learning
Methodology of teaching young learners	Creating materials	The pre-primary context/philosophy	The pre-primary context/philosophy
Creating materials	—	—	—

The feedback received regarding the initial training session shows that all stakeholders recognized the importance and assistance they received in order to successfully implement the English activities in pre-primary education. The participants expressed a positive attitude towards the initiative of the pilot programme, no matter what their initial attitude towards the implementation of EFL activities was. Moreover, it was evident that their understanding of the introduction of activities in the English language in pre-primary education was based on a holistic approach involving play and interactive learning, rather than a traditional teacher-centered and explicit language teaching approach.

## **5. Summary and concluding remarks**

English as a foreign language has been implemented in pre-primary level of education worldwide (Baïdak et al., 2017). Within the existence of a huge implementation of models and approaches (Alexiou, 2020), the Greek context introduced a new model. The present initiative adopted the necessary age-appropriate methodological tools, setting realistic goals for language learning (Bland, 2015; García Mayo & Basterrechea, 2017). Introducing English in pre-primary education was designed via a multiliteracy perspective and in accordance with the developments regarding the new pre-primary curriculum (Penderi et al., 2021). It was understood as a cultural practice, which relates to children's experiences and the world around them. The aim was to help children gain multiple and multi-dimensional benefits through ample exposure in the English language through creative activities that developed oracy skills and used ELT methodology but also pre-primary school practices (Alexiou, 2020).

Moreover, English worked "as a bridge or a common code for other contexts" (Alexiou, 2020, p.65). Therefore, building the foundations to shape their European and global citizenship identity (Penderi, 2021a) was also an important goal. Through a socio-pedagogical perspective, emphasis was placed on introducing English to very young learners in order to:

- promote children's expressive tools and multilingual awareness,
- boost their motivation, love and confidence in language learning,
- develop inter-cultural sensitivity and respect, and
- enhance culturally and linguistically diverse children's identity, positive self-image and use of mother tongue, as an asset in the learning process and communication.

Although the results presented above depict data collected from the pilot phase of English implementation in 58 Greek state pre-primary schools, the advantages and benefits for the children seem to be abundant. Moreover, a new partnership pedagogical model was introduced that seemed to promote these benefits not only for children but for a positive school climate (Penderi, 2021b). The cooperation

between the two educators was proven as a vital factor for the success of the program (Alexiou, 2021). Despite being challenging, cooperation boosted educators' roles and effectiveness of the teaching design. The role of the coordinators was also crucial as the cooperation between them helped educators to find their own steps and their support in all the phases of the pilot function as a catalyst to overcome problems or misunderstandings. At the top of the pyramid, the impeccable collaboration between the two academics of the Committee paved the way for the development of a much needed "cooperation culture" (Alexiou, 2020, p. 68) and provided the methodological and pedagogical tools for the educational partnership to flourish.

The pilot phase and study provided evidence for the mature societal and educational circumstances for the introduction of EFL in the pre-primary education in Greece. Parents, educators, coordinators and policy makers seemed to embrace the innovative program developed in this pilot phase. The collected data also provided abundant evidence, criteria and factors to be taken into consideration for further professional development and training and also broadened the policy makers' knowledge regarding the needs and the perspectives of the basic partners of the innovation. This initiative was supported and guided by experts who strive to promote an unparalleled model of SL or FL implementation in pre-primary level at these beginning stages of this effort. They gathered data throughout the pilot study and this data was presented in June 2021 (Alexiou & Penderi, 2021) and were taken into consideration for further developments. However, as Scheffler and Domińska (2018) have underlined, further exploration regarding the effectiveness, the training and the whole process is required before any firm conclusions are drawn.

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