

Advancing English Language Education

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Chapter 4

Introducing EFL in Preschools: Facts and Fictions

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Abstract

English as a foreign language has been introduced to pre-primary educational contexts across Europe and abroad, and a large number of preschools, both state and private, have made considerable efforts in this respect. There is an abundance of studies that show benefits from introducing EFL at pre-primary settings, and notwithstanding some initial reservations, all indications we have so far are optimistic. In this paper, I will try to (a) review studies on EFL and preschools, (b) discuss facts and fictions regarding early EFL, and (c) refer to the challenges of implementing EFL in pre-primary settings.

Introduction

English as a foreign language (EFL) has been introduced to pre-primary educational contexts across Europe, and this is in line with plurilingualism and multicultural aspects of the classrooms in the 21st century (European Commission, 2014; Baidak, et al., 2017). Lending much support to the benefits that can emerge from early EFL, UNICEF (2012) in a report regarding early education in Serbia, has placed emphasis on the significance of preschool education in general, which enhances children's development and improves their "health, success in education, labour productivity and even the nation's prosperity and competitiveness in the long run" (UNICEF, 2012, p. 21).

Moreover, in 2005, Ján Figel, European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism stated that "In an enlarged and multilingual Europe, learning foreign languages from a very young age allows us to discover other cultures and better prepare for occupational mobility" (Figel, 2005). The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programme was introduced across Europe (European Commission, 2014). Within this programme, some countries (e.g., Poland, Spain, and Cyprus) have formally introduced foreign language instruction, usually English, at pre-primary level, sometimes with children as young as three (European Commission, 2014). Other countries that have introduced EFL initiatives at pre-primary level include Albania, Montenegro, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Norway, and others. However, the Action Plan 2004-2006 clarifies that:

offering another language at an early age is not inherently advantageous, but can only be effective if teachers are trained to work with very young children, classes are small enough, the learning material is adequate and sufficient time is allotted in the curriculum. (Communication, 2003, p. 449)

What is impressive is that there is enormous variety of implementation (both in state and private schools) in how very early EFL is introduced. Language-related outcomes depend on the model of the education curriculum, which is adopted. Setting realistic objectives and using methodological tools that are age appropriate are imperative, as these would boost the presumable benefits of an early start (Bland, 2015; García Mayo, 2017).

Murphy and Evangelou (2016) review many aspects of early EFL such as type of exposure, teacher qualifications, resources, parents' role, curriculum development, methodology, and learners' motivation and attitude. Furthermore, Enever (2011) and Garton et al. (2011) through their large-scale studies provide comprehensive insights on the global policies and practices involved in foreign language instruction (Scheffler & Domińska, 2018). It is therefore apparent that in order to investigate effective learning of very young learners, policy decision-making, teacher training and material resources (Scheffler & Domińska, 2018) need also be reconsidered.

Before all these aspects are discussed, it is important to clarify certain misconceptions or myths that exist in this field.

Fictions regarding EFL and very young learners

Fiction 1: Children learn languages easily and without much effort.

The superiority of the child as a learner has been claimed for decades now. Children's brains are argued to be more flexible, and researchers support that there is a “window of opportunity” at the early ages. In a similar vein, children are thought to be like “sponges” and able to absorb any language presented to them almost effortlessly.

However, this is not really the case as even though children can be very successful in acquiring vocabulary, set phrases and some structures, this can only be achieved with continuous exposure of the right kind. So this idea of a window of opportunity is not unconditional. Realising that languages are not just being “picked up” or effortlessly “absorbed” is important.

Another implication of this myth is that the teacher's job is easy, but it really is not. Often it is said that teachers only need to know “a, b, c,” and they can teach very young learners, implying that not much competence in language is needed. This frame of mind is actually dangerous as perhaps the last thing a teacher needs to know is “a, b, c” (no literacy skills are promoted at this age – just oracy); since this admittedly involves listening and pronunciation (DeKeyser & Larson-Hall 2005), the teachers' language proficiency and fluency needs to be high.

However, pedagogical knowledge is of overriding importance here as well. Motivation is crucial at this stage as attitudes are shaped, so a teacher also needs a strong pedagogic background. Very young learners are restless by nature, and they lose interest quickly. Trying to teach anything at this is age is primarily a pedagogical task, so teachers of very young learners need to familiarize themselves with all relevant pedagogic principles “in order to find the best ways to ‘talk’ to the children's minds and ‘touch’ their hearts” (Alexiou, 2015, p. 286). Teachers actually need to be very talented, imaginative and creative so as to keep the children's minds active and their interest alive. If the teacher does not know the pedagogic teaching methods appropriate for this age, this opportunity may be forever missed.

Fiction 2: The earlier a foreign language is introduced in schools, the better and faster the child will learn the language.

The earlier the better trend is still a hotly debated issue. There is vast evidence in the literature discussing the issue of the critical period hypothesis for language acquisition (Lenneberg, 1967; Singleton & Lengyel, 1995; Birdsong, 1999; Newport et al, 2001). One major argument for early EFL is that “if foreign languages are not learnt in the early years of schooling, the opportunities for mastery later on are dramatically and negatively affected” (Banfi, 2015, p. 2). Researchers argue that the earlier children begin to learn a second language, the better. Yet when learners receive only a few hours of instruction per week, those who start later often catch up with those who began earlier (Muñoz, 2014; Marinova-Todd et al., 2000). Therefore, the provision of opportunities for learning (i.e., context, both inside and outside the classroom – see Enever, 2015), continuity, input, the motivation to learn as well as individual differences in aptitude, personality and learning styles severely affect the rate of learning and eventual success.

Edelenbos et al. (2006) in their review succinctly elucidate this issue:

An early start can confer considerable advantages on children by activating such natural languages acquisition mechanisms as they possess, by affording them more time overall and by providing them with a linguistic and intercultural experience which can have a beneficial formative influence on their cognitive, social, cultural, acoustic, linguistic and personal development (including qualities of persistence and participation) and on their sense of self. An early start by itself however guarantees nothing; it needs to be accompanied minimally by good teaching, by a supportive environment and by continuity from one year to the next, taking children smoothly from pre-primary to primary, and from primary into secondary education. (2006, p. 147)

These qualities require careful planning, monitoring and evaluation of the language programmes for such initiatives to lead to any form of success (see Pfenninger, 2018). Still, the main consideration at the very young ages is the advantages that do not relate just to language and future success but to other pedagogical and cognitive benefits that accompany learning an additional language (Table 2).

Fiction 3: If a foreign language is introduced early, there will be confusion with the first language (L1).

This is a common misconception causing confusion and worries mainly to parents. However, it is important to clarify that this cannot really happen in an EFL context since the aim is just exposing the child to the language and offering linguistic stimuli and not formally teaching the language. Children are usually exposed to the additional language for a very limited amount of time, so any confusion with L1 is not expected (Lindahl & Sayer, 2018; Łockiewicz, Sarzała-Przybylska & Lipowska, 2018). The methodology is also very different when only oracy is cultivated.

However, once again, amount of input is paramount. Muñoz (2014) made it clear that for any implicit learning to take place, young learners should be provided with substantially larger amounts of input in order to exploit their implicit learning abilities (Scheffler et al., 2020).

Review of EFL in preschool settings

Let us now turn to some evidence regarding implementation of very early EFL in the preschool settings. Table 1 shows some examples in countries that EFL is introduced in preschool settings with their results. As can be seen, positive results emerge. There is no perfect homogeneity but there are common elements in the implementation practices.

Table 1

Modes of implementation in Europe

Country	Onset age	Exposure	Methodology	Teacher	Results
Cyprus Compulsory	3-4 (since 2010)	30 mins, 2x/ week	Aural-oral approach; Free play, routines, songs, greetings & CLIL showers	Pre-primary teacher with a high level of English language proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive attitudes towards language learning • Multilingual awareness • Positive impact on cognitive abilities (Ioannou-Georgiou 2015)
Spain Compulsory	3 & 4 (as of 2007 but differs in each region)	age 3: 30 mins, 2x/ week age 4 & 5: 45 mins, 2x/ week	Routines, functional/ communicative tasks, songs, greetings	EFL teacher	<i>Very positive views by the teachers regarding this experience esp. regarding motivational factors but certain conditions apply (Andúgar & Cortina-Peréz, 2018; Zhou et al., 2013)</i>
Poland Compulsory	4 (in most parts)	30 mins, 2x/ week	Games, reading aloud, nursery rhymes, songs, etc.	Preschool teacher with EFL specialisation	<i>The automatising of correct linguistic habits equips children with skills for their later FL educational success (Łockiewicz et al., 2018, p. 1)</i>
Slovenia Not compulsory (Network Innovative Project 1998-2008)	3	35-45 mins, 1x or 2x/ week (depends on region)	CLIL showers; Everyday curricular activities	EFL teacher and in some cases preschool teachers with high level of language proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased motivation • Sense of pluralism • Intercultural awareness • Socialization (Brumen, et al., 2017)
Iceland Not compulsory	2-6	20 mins, 4x/ week	Themes parallel to curriculum, guided play, TPR. (Activities took place mainly outside the classroom.)	Co-teaching: English teacher and presence of preschool teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive attitudes • Increase of self-confidence • Sense of pride (Lefever, 2014)
Greece Not compulsory (1year pilot project supervised by School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)	4-5	30 mins, 2x/ week	Integration of English through free play activities, circle time, puppet, cartoons, story telling, arts, songs, drama, role play, routines.	EFL teacher in cooperation with preschool teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language gains with children were exposed to 9 topic areas, ~400 words and phrases • Affective gains with highly motivated children, very positive parents and educators (Kaiktsi & Alexiou, 2017)

Some common elements that can be found between countries who introduce English in a compulsory mode in preschools involve the following: (a) English is not a separate subject but integrated in the school programme; (b) the exposure takes place usually twice a week for 30 minutes; and (c) methodology is based on oral approaches, communicative tasks and play-like activities. It is also clear that whoever is responsible for the classes needs to have both a strong pedagogic background and a high level of English proficiency.

Studies in pre-schools where EFL is not yet compulsory also provide insights. In Norway, for example, 30 preschools and over 1000 children participated in a longitudinal, 3-year project (2008-2011). The evaluation of the project in these preschools, according to Tkachenko (2014), showed “multiple positive effects for pedagogical work in the preschool regards the language stimulation development of metalinguistic awareness, and enhance linguistic and cultural diversity in the preschools pedagogical environment” (p. 125). What was also evident and particularly interesting was that positive attitudes to learning a language were demonstrated even by those who did not speak much or were experiencing delayed language problems. “They appeared to show a feeling of ‘a new start’ with a new language, and a positive feeling of mastering their linguistic challenges’ (Tkachenko, 2014, p. 125), and they were satisfied that their linguistic resources were now useful. This is a very important point as English or any other additional language can then work as a bridge or a common code for other contexts as well such as multilingual, refugee settings, etc.

Lefever’s (2010, 2014) research in three private preschools in Iceland is intriguing. In these schools, English was introduced four days a week for 20 minutes, and themes were parallel to what it taught in the general school curriculum. A native speaker was teaching with the presence of the mainstream preschool teacher to make the children feel secure and comfortable in a contextually rich setting. The exposure was done through guided play, visuals, and Total Physical Response (TPR), and the activities took place mainly outside the classroom. Once again positive attitudes, engaging practice and increase of self-confidence emerged while children were spontaneous, creative and proud of one more skill. According to Lefever (2014, p. 81):

...the benefits of this English program for preschool children are both personal and pedagogical. The children develop an interest in learning English and other languages and gain self-confidence as language learners and the integration of English teaching into the preschool curriculum strengthens cooperation between teachers and enhances the focus on creativity and active learning.

Consistency and cooperation as well as effective planning and organisation seem to be paramount for any positive outcome of such initiatives to emerge.

Some preliminary efforts were made in the year 2015-2016 in a state preschool in Greece with a pilot project supervised by the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The lessons took place twice per week; each lesson’s duration was 30 minutes. The methodology followed a natural integration of English through free play activities, circle time, puppets, storytelling, arts, songs, drama, role plays, and routines. EFL teachers in cooperation with the preschool teacher were responsible in these sessions. Oracy was the main source of acquiring language and new vocabulary (Harris et al., 2011) as well as lexical chunks. Language was viewed as a social product following Montessorian principles of assuming responsibility and the psycho-pedagogic theory of Bruner, so language was presented in the way the child views the world. Cartoons like *Peppa Pig* (Alexiou, 2015), puppets and toys

were part of their exposure. Results were encouraging, as the children were enthusiastic, and teachers and parents were positive, while preschoolers were exposed to more than 400 words and chunks during one academic year (Kaiktsi & Alexiou, 2017).

Even if it is too early to examine longitudinal systematic data, none of this research implies or suggests that early foreign language learning and exposure can be detrimental. After reviewing some of the studies in this area, certain facts become clear and are discussed in the next section.

Facts regarding EFL and very young learners

Fact 1. Gains in early EFL are not just or merely linguistic and do not only concern English but any additional language introduced in preschools.

One of the ideas that needs to be clear here is that English has become a basic skill, not merely a foreign language. This would be true for any additional language integrated, not just English although English is the language of the world or at least the language that provides access to the world. Studies in Luxembourg (Kirsch, 2018) and elsewhere demonstrate positive results in all these areas although they introduce a number of other languages in preschools (i.e., French and German).

It is important to remember that the advantages of learning languages early do not relate merely to language learning and future success but to other pedagogical and cognitive benefits that accompany it. Learning a language in preschool is beyond a language skill; it is a creative process affecting holistic development. Certain linguistic, social, cognitive and emotional development characteristics of young children make this period of their life crucial to FL learning and generally language education (Edelenbos et al., 2006; Elvin et al., 2007). Table 2 reflects some of the gains reported in different studies for EFL and preschool settings.

Table 2

Studies on Benefits of EFL in Preschool Settings

Domain	Benefit	Studies
Affective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase of motivation & self confidence • Positive attitudes to other languages • Sense of pride 	Wu, 2003; Brumen et al, 2017; Ioannou-Georgiou, 2015; Lefever, 2014, Chen et al., 2020
Socio-cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of children’s awareness of cultural diversity • Greater multilingual and intercultural awareness • Increase in socialization 	Lourenço & Andrade, 2015; Brumen et al., 2017; Alexiou & Kokla, 2019
Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory • Inductive skills • Reasoning • Problem solving 	Alexiou, 2005; Stewart, 2005; Johnstone, 2002
Linguistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary • Lexical chunks • Language awareness • Future language achievement 	Alexiou, 2015; Coyle & Gómez Gracia, 2014; Lesniewska & Pichette, 2016, Schelleter & Ramsey, 2010; Alexiou & Kokla, 2016; Chen et al., 2020

As we can see, apart from linguistic benefits (e.g. vocabulary and chunks) there are cognitive benefits that come into play such as developing strategies and language awareness. Greater mental flexibility, more creativity and evidence of divergent thinking have been found. It has also been shown that preschoolers' cognitive abilities such as memory, inductive learning, reasoning, spatial ability, and problem solving are cultivated and can facilitate and impact positively on EFL (Alexiou, 2009).

Other qualities such as respect for cultural diversity, further development of motivation as well as decrease in anxiety are also substantial. Lourenço and Andrade's (2015) study lends support to the idea that contact with language diversity in the early years can enhance children's awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and the awareness of several linguistic characteristics, both in the mother tongue as well as in other languages. Moreover, Löger et al. (2005) report on the evaluation of 80 kindergartens with 2,800 children (aged 3-6). Results show progress, affective gains (pride and self-confidence) and a positive effect on the general language education.

Early language learning offers opportunities to broaden children's cultural horizons, and develop positive attitudes to languages and open-mindedness while at the same time fostering tolerance, interpersonal skills and motivation (Kearney & Ahn, 2013). A social factor that should also be considered is that in this case, the advantages of exposing children to FL at preschool may level out socioeconomic parameters, thus promoting equality in education.

Therefore, there is solid evidence that exposing very young learners to another language affects important aspects of the whole child and has general pedagogical benefits; therefore, any studies in the area should not restrict themselves merely to language benefits.

Fact 2. Materials and methodology are different from other educational settings: The foreign language is not instructed at preschools; it is integrated, and the choice of materials is fundamental.

English or any additional language is not supposed to be treated as an individual subject in the early childhood educational setting; instead, it needs to be integrated in the curriculum in a more natural, informal way. The FL is not supposed to be taught or even instructed formally; the child should be educated through the language with communicative activities where language is used in meaningful contexts that resemble preschool practices (Mourão, 2019; Murphy et al., 2016).

Materials commonly used at these ages are picture books, flashcards, rhymes, art, story cards/boards, puppets, technology, board games and projects. Moreover, materials need to be as authentic as possible if we aim at developing lexical competence and incidental word building (Siyanova-Chanturia & Webb, 2016) while there should be no explicit grammar instruction as children do not develop metalinguistic skills until much later (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010; Pinter, 2011; Shin & Crandall, 2014). Some techniques include the use of popular animated series, television programs or other media to provide opportunities for interaction and support implicit vocabulary uptake (Sydorenko, 2010; Alexiou et al., 2019). The importance of cartoons has been highlighted in different studies and shows how they facilitate memory recall and cognition (Alexiou, 2015; Lefever, 2010).

Davis (2017) carried out three studies on EFL learners, aged five years old or even younger. Conclusions drawn from his review reveal that songs, exploited as teaching materials in

preschools, can actually improve the development of children’s vocabulary knowledge and relate to real world experiences (Coyle & Gómez Gracia, 2014; Davis & Fan, 2016; Lesniewska & Pichette, 2016).

It is imperative to create materials based on children’s needs but to strike a balance so as not to overwhelm children with overly demanding input as incomprehensible lexis will dishearten children’s efforts and may impact negatively on their attitude and motivation towards other languages. However, there should be a systematic and clear focus on goals when devising activities; these activities should follow a spiral curriculum and build on what children already know or what children ‘revisit’ and reconstruct (as they are still in the process of acquiring concepts).

Fact 3. The role of the teacher is paramount.

The role of the teacher cannot be overestimated in early FL education. It is actually wise to consider that failure of the teacher to meet the challenges of EFL in preschool will inevitably and surely lead to failure on the part of the children, which is disheartening as at this age attitudes and motivations are formed.

Appropriate teacher qualifications and professional development are seen as a major challenge globally, and there are differences among countries in their requirements (de Mejia, 2016; Enever, 2011; Murphy et al., 2016) (see Table 1). Cerná (2015) highlights the lack of qualified English teachers in the pre-primary sector in the Czech Republic. A lack of language training has been found in teachers in Swedish preschool contexts as well (Schröter & Molander Danielson, 2016). In Cyprus, Ioannou-Georgiou (2015) emphasises that language competence in English is vital for the successful implementation of FL programs in preschools. Portiková’s (2015) survey inspected the matter of Slovakian teacher education, and she noted the conspicuous challenge of the shortage of qualified teachers for L2, pre-primary levels of education.

The fact is that whoever is responsible for the implementation needs both high language proficiency and a strong pedagogical background. Therefore, cooperation of the EFL teacher and the preschool teacher is important and needs to be cultivated in teacher education and training programmes; this can eventually lead to ‘multi-powered’ educators. To support this change and create a ‘cooperation culture’, investment in pre- and in-service teacher education is required if we strive for successful and sustainable implementation that can actually make a difference.

Conclusion: Setting the records straight

The introduction of any language at preschool level impacts positively on motivation, cultivates positive attitudes to languages, fosters respect and intercultural sensitivity, develops cognitive abilities and contributes to the holistic (and not just additive) approach of learning at this age. Therefore, it is a pedagogically solid step.

As we, as educators, do not envision early language skills monolithically, we realise that emergent literacy is not the only concern. Critical and social literacy are very important as well, and these are cultivated through the new language. The core aim of kindergarten education is to encourage children in developing a love for learning.

When implementing initiatives, a baseline evaluation should be designed: Establishing aims, context, curriculum, materials and training are key factors for sustainability. Then any initiatives need to be piloted first for recording and monitoring effects on all stakeholders; this needs to be done in cooperation with universities and researchers. The infrastructure proposed looks like a jigsaw in which if one piece is missing, the whole picture is distorted. Finally, we need to understand the nature and eventual outcomes of different models of the languages education curricula that are implemented up to now. We are in urgent need of a model of processes of learning, not just of good practice or of tasks, for preschoolers. There is still room for innovation and vision in EFL preschool education.

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Advancing English Language Education

Edited by

Wafa Zoghbor & Thomai Alexiou

This volume contains a selection of nineteen articles that focus on skills and strategies for advancing English language teacher education in several contexts where English is taught to speakers of other language. The volume focuses on the teachers and learners as the prime participants in the learning process. The papers selected for inclusion represent the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and research interests of EFL educators and showcase contribution that document theory, research and pedagogy. The volume comprises six sections:

Teacher Education and Professional Development

Young Learners

Testing and Assessment

Teaching of Writing Skills

Context-Specific Issues in EFL

Teaching, Learning, and Pedagogy

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