

DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL SCENARIOS FOR EFL PRESCHOOL LEARNERS THROUGH THE EAN PROJECT

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Abstract

The present paper offers an analysis of the educational scenarios designed in the context of the EAN project in Greece aiming at supporting EFL preschool learners and their educators. The scenarios are in accordance with the latest methodology for early foreign language education but also in line with the new Greek preschool education curriculum. They aim at introducing language in meaningful contexts and promoting very young learners' multilingualism and intercultural awareness, as well as preparing them for their future roles as active citizens. Kiki the koala, the protagonist of the educational scenarios, is introduced here, along with her invaluable role in the promotion of children's active involvement in the EFL learning context and desire for communication in the target language within realistic communicative contexts.

Keywords: early foreign language learning, educational scenarios, EAN project.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 2020-2021 school year, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) was introduced for the first time in Greek public preschools. This pilot programme served as an attempt to modernise foreign language education in the Greek educational system and bring it closer to the contemporary demands for the development of 21st century skills, including multilingual competence and intercultural awareness (Baïdak et al., 2017). Considering the pedagogical benefits of the introduction of a foreign language from a young age (Alexiou, 2020), as well as the success of the pilot phase of the programme, managing to promote “young children's holistic growth” (Alexiou, Penderi & Serafeim, 2021, p.2), the Greek government introduced the English language as part of the preschool curriculum in all Greek public preschools, during the following school year (2021-2022) through a national and European funded project called EAN (“Teacher training for the introduction of English in preschool education”).

Generally, the EAN project aims to support the introduction of English in Greek preschools through teacher training, monitoring the project's implementation and developing educational materials. The present paper focuses on a brief analysis of the educational material designed for EFL preschool learners in the context of the EAN project. Moreover, the rationale guiding their design and development are analysed.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EAN SCENARIOS

The EAN suggested educational scenarios follow all new trends in early EFL and are in line with the framework of preschool education as well as its newly developed preschool Curriculum (see the new Greek Curriculum by Penderi, Chlapana, Melliou, Philippidi, & Marinatou, 2021).

The approach adopted as the most appropriate one for this particular age group is CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). With this approach, emphasis is simultaneously placed on the language as well as on another basic thematic area, which may additionally involve different thematic areas, too. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach is followed, similar to what is applied in the preschool setting and all suggested educational scenarios are educational soft CLIL scenarios. As Ioannou-Georgiou (2012, p. 496) highlights, “CLIL is claimed to be a fusion of a number of theories and approaches. In essence, it is a fusion where the best of language education joins together with the best of general education”.

The scenarios take into consideration the special developmental characteristics of preschool children, incorporate the most up to date educational methods for language learning and utilise the preschool pedagogical practices, as well as the modern digital tools. The scenarios offer a framework for meaningful learning, in order for the activities not to function as isolated subjects during the learning process. The main educational frameworks and methods of the scenarios are songs, rhymes, short stories, games, crafts, projects, cartoons and anything else that contributes to playful learning and meaningfully enhances the holistic development of preschool children (Alexiou, 2017). Moreover, emphasis is placed on appropriate pedagogical methodology such as multisensory and experiential approaches, scaffolding practices as well as activating and revisiting previous knowledge or bringing back knowledge acquired in previous scenarios. The scenarios also take into account their characteristics (cultural and linguistic background, gender, age, etc.) while promoting the development of cognitive skills such as memory, inductive skills, etc (see Alexiou, 2009).

When it comes to language, the aim is the development of oracy skills only and to expose children to lexical chunks and phrases and not just plain vocabulary. The vocabulary is contextualised and reflects children’s interests and needs. It is important not to put pressure on children to speak in English, body language and gestures are vital and translanguageing is expected at this level.

It is important to stress that the educational scenarios are indicative, and it is not expected or required that they are followed religiously; they are to be complemented, altered, adjusted and enhanced depending on the class context and the childrens’ diverse and linguistic repertoires. In fact, the EFL and preschool teachers are the ones that collaboratively, and taking into consideration the children’s interests and the existing situation in each school, decide which and what type of activities can be realised, how much time is required, and so on (Alexiou, 2022). Indeed, the educational scenarios are material to facilitate teachers of the two specialisms, rather than ready-made or spoon-fed materials. Flexibility is important, not only with regard to which and how many activities are to be employed, but also the time framework and how those activities will be implemented, as teachers are invited to adapt and expand them.

A key innovation that should be stressed is the cooperation systematic and active between the teachers of the two specialisms. Enever and Lindgren (2016) have offered an account of the issues involved regarding the teachers and practitioners in early EFL. While the role of the EFL teacher may be easily understood, the role of the preschool teacher should not be

underestimated (Alexiou, 2022). In fact, the preschool teacher is a role model for learning and supports the whole process, setting realistic demands and expectations, which are also transferred to parents. Indeed, the preschool teacher has a key-role for the smooth transition during the activities in English and can ensure smooth transition and continuity to the holistic learning experience of the children, while as. This cooperation model ensures that English is not treated as a “separate subject” in the preschool environment but is sensibly and meaningfully integrated in the existing preschool curriculum.

3. THE USE OF PUPPET IN THE EAN SCENARIOS

As literature suggests, the use of a puppet or mascot has a positive impact on learners’ participation (Lepley, 2001). It has also been highlighted that puppets help children express their feelings and thoughts freely, without any guilt or fear, free from inhibition (Aronoff, 2005). As Korosec, (2013, p. 502) has stressed, “for a shy child the puppet represents protection and enables a more spontaneous sense of inclusion”. Using puppets that attract children, stimulates learning, builds self-confidence and provides the opportunity to learn communicative skills at an early age (Brezigar, 2010).

In a foreign language learning environment, puppets are an effective resource with young learners who are learning a foreign or second language, as they integrate all the major disciplines related to child development such as perception, movement, coordination and integration with the environment, speech and narration (Korosec, 2013). Most importantly, however, when very young learners focus their attention on puppets, they are unaware of the fact that they are actually practising a foreign language (Bravo & Cisterna, 2020).

In order to create a context of communication, we have introduced the use of a puppet, with the role of the mediator, through which we give preschoolers a sense of purpose and a reason for learning, via real-life situations. Our puppet in the EAN project is Kiki, the koala. Kiki has a suggested identity and biography (this can be changed of course if the teachers want to create a different identity). She comes from Australia, and she is travelling around the world. Purple is her favourite colour and fruit her favourite food. Most importantly however, the look of Kiki is actually the children’s choice. A number of children were presented with different artworks, and they voted their favourite (see Figure 1).

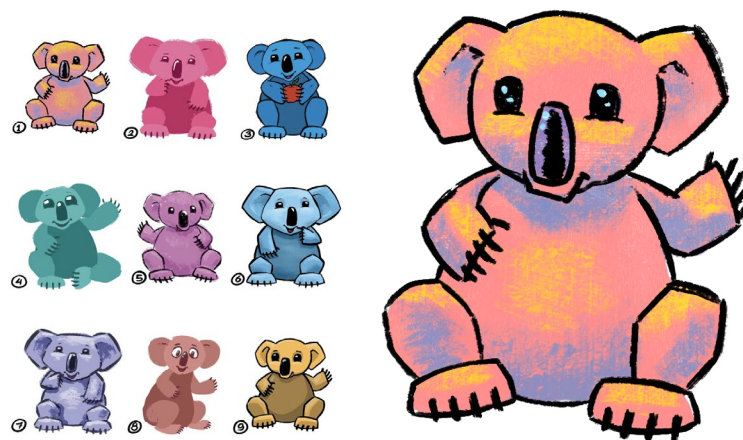


Fig. 1. Children's choice regarding their favourite version of Kiki the koala.

4. PRESENTING THE EAN SCENARIOS

One of the main aims of implementing activities in preschools is the methodological and thematic enrichment of the preschool curriculum, regarding the linguistic and comprehensive development of preschoolers, as well as the strengthening of plurilingual awareness and intercultural communication.

Following the school routines and timeframe, more than 30 soft CLIL educational scenarios and more than 150 activities have been developed around 5 thematic categories that are commonly found at preschool level and run through the year, namely “Myself and others”, “Autumn”, “Winter”, “Spring” and “Summer” (see Figures 2 and 3). The scenarios are hosted on the EAN educational portal they are authored in English and Greek, and are accessible to any teacher who might be interested. Moreover, all scenarios are accompanied by artwork, flashcards, songs, and educational e-games.



Fig. 2. The EAN thematic categories.

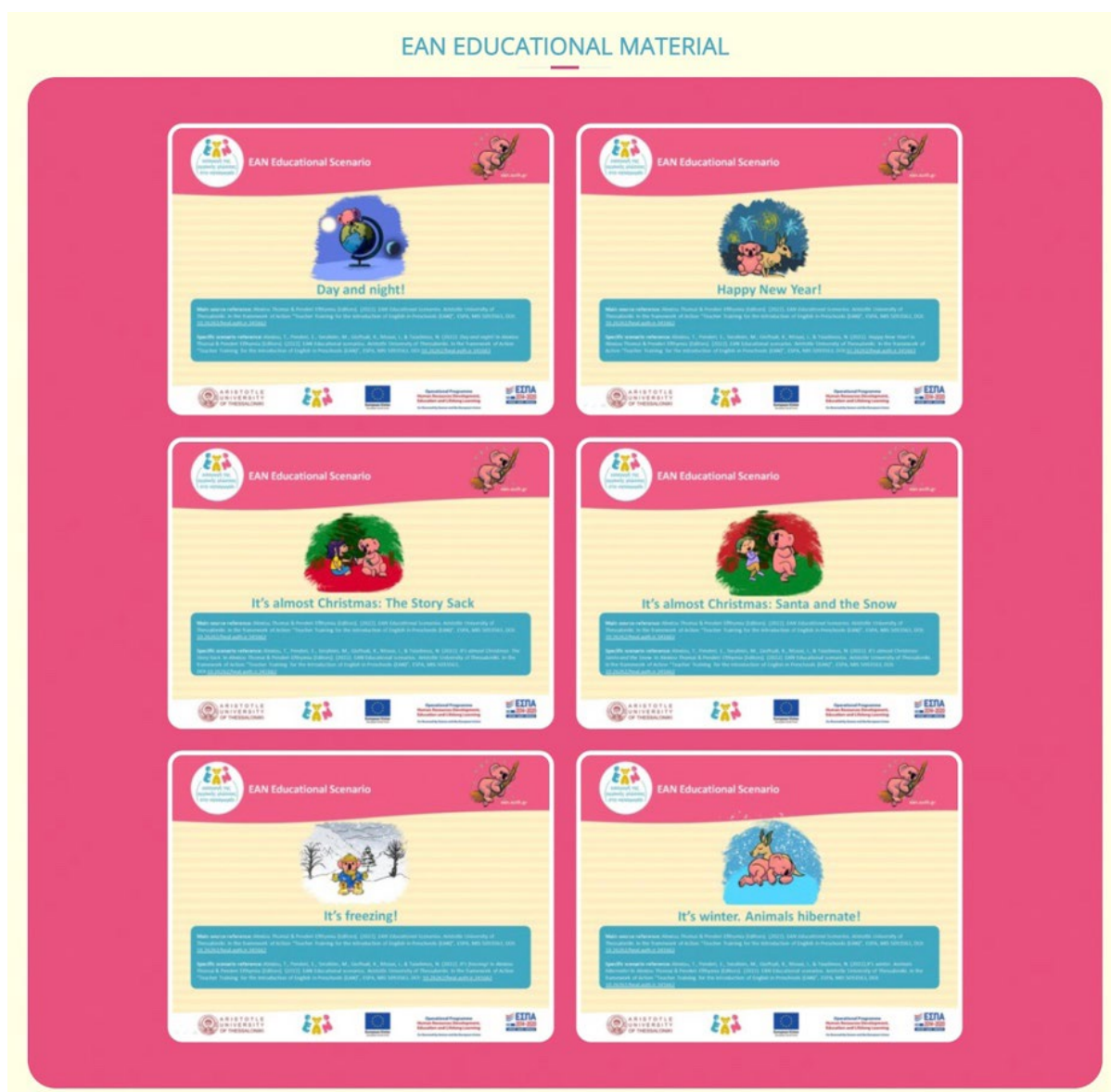


Fig. 3. The EAN scenarios under the thematic category 'Winter'.

The EAN scenarios follow a certain template with a specific structure in order to provide an informative yet brief overview of the suggested activities in English that could take place in the preschool classroom. At the beginning, the identity of the scenario, including its title, the thematic category and area (e.g. colours, spring, flowers winter, clothes) under which the scenario falls into, as well as the rationale are described. Moving on, the EAN scenarios offer information on how to prepare the context for the successful implementation of the suggested activities (see Table 1). More specifically, teachers are informed on what the children, as well as themselves, should have already worked on and what skills are to be employed in each scenario. It is important that pre-existing and prerequisite knowledge and skills are taken into consideration in order to create activities for preschoolers (Hailikari, Katajavuoni, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008). Activating previous knowledge, though, is not easy nor automatic (Hailikari, Katajavuoni, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008). Within the preparatory stage included in each scenario, creating a classroom atmosphere within which very young learners feel safe and secure is also catered for (Alexiou, 2022).

Table 1. The structure of the EAN educational scenarios.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Title of the Scenario Thematic area Rationale of the Scenario Children and educators' preparation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning goals Resources and material Description of the procedure and suggested activities
<p>Expansion</p> <p>Suggestions for formative assessment</p>

Moreover, the learning aims of each scenario are also presented, focusing on the main thematic areas (language plus one more thematic area) and those interwoven in the specific scenario. The scenarios are designed with the common themes preschool children work with so that they can be appropriately integrated within the Preschool Curriculum. Since the EAN educational materials are based on children's holistic development, a fundamental part of the aims is the emphasis placed on supporting children in developing their attitudes via the activities in English. Developing attitudes and values at an early age is very important, while providing young learners with material that have a more pedagogical orientation (Alexiou, 2022). The EAN scenarios aim at developing intercultural awareness, values, attitudes, soft skills and emotional intelligence so as to empower children's self-regulation, motivation, self-awareness, social skills, and empathy (Goleman, 2011).

After the presentation of the learning aims in our scenarios, the resources and the materials needed for each scenario are outlined, most of which are available on the EAN educational portal (see Figure 3).



Fig. 4. The EAN educational portal.

Multimodality is important within the materials (colour, picture, sound, printable, diagrams, etc) while the use of EFL books is discouraged and not 'are discouraged at this level. Instead, the use of everyday material (e.g., catalogues, labels, etc.), children literature, children's own work are strongly encouraged. Therefore, experiential learning is promoted, which may lead to increased critical thinking and problem solving. What is important however, the material and resources reflect children's needs, as well as that there is balance, in order not to overburden learners with excessive linguistic input (Alexiou, 2020).

Prior to the description of the procedure and the suggested activities, providing a stimulating context is essential. At the activation stage, a short engagement story is proposed, where usually Kiki comes in class with a question regarding the children's routines, customs, or everyday life. This engagement provides children with an actual life-like purpose to communicate with the puppet. This engagement story is important for creating the appropriate context in order for children to feel that there is a meaning for learning, but more specifically there is a purpose for learning English and it adds to the positive classroom atmosphere (Alexiou, 2022).

Before creating the activities, a few things need to be taken into consideration, such as how to create a connection between the thematic the children have already been working on, with the activities in English. Moreover, there should be a balance between known and unknown, ensuring that the child will be able to cope with the activities and expand what they know. Indeed, Kirsch (2020) for instance brought to light the importance of incorporating children's home languages and background in the process of learning a foreign language.

For the description of the procedure and the suggested activities, the EAN scenarios, the 5E model is adjusted (Bybee et al at BSCS, 1987; 2009) and focus on three stages-steps: Engage, Involve and Extend. After the step-by-step description of the activities, ideas on how to expand the scenario are offered. This part provides information on how the scenario can be broadened, offering opportunities to link the classroom experience with the neighbourhood and family at home. Last but not least, suggestions for formative assessment are listed, too.

Besides the educational scenarios, teachers can also have access to multimodal material, flashcards, songs and digital games (see Figure 4). Teachers are also presented with additional guidelines and resources, which are developmentally appropriate for very young learners. These are also available on the EAN website and under the 'Useful' category, teachers can find popular TRP games and activities, digital resources as well as popular digital tools to use in class.

The screenshot displays the website for the EAN Educational Scenario. At the top, there is a header with the European Union flag, the text 'Επιχειρησιακό Πρόγραμμα Ανάπτυξη Ανθρώπινου Δυναμικού, Εκπαίδευση και Διά Βίου Μάθηση' (Operational Program for the Development of Human Resources, Education and Lifelong Learning), the ESPA 2014-2020 logo, and navigation links for 'Home', 'The EAN Project', and 'Contact us'. Below the header is a large banner with a colorful background of leaves and a camera, featuring the text 'How many leaves can you see?'. A date stamp '© September 4, 2022' is visible. The main content area includes a thumbnail for the 'EAN Educational Scenario' with the same title, a 'Download the whole material by using the following link' button with a red download icon, and a 'SONGS' section with two video players: 'The leaves on the trees' and 'Karaoke version'. Below the songs is an 'EAN DIGITAL GAME' section showing a tree illustration with a score overlay: 0/3, 0/4, and 0/3.

Fig. 4. EAN multimodal material.

5. CONCLUSION

The main aim of the present paper was the discussion of the educational scenarios designed in the context of the EAN project. The philosophy behind the design, the scenario aims, their content, as well as the rationale behind their creation were presented, while the value of the use of a puppet in the context of the scenarios was supported.

Overall, the educational material was developed in accordance with the current methodological trends of early foreign language learning, taking into consideration very young learners' characteristics and aiming to help them develop intercultural awareness other and in

other words the scenarios drive is to develop children holistically rather than just linguistically. Childrens' empowerment and active involvement in the educational process were among the main objectives of the scenarios, along with the promotion of a quality educational experience that would be based on experiential learning and play.

As plurilingualism and the additive value of early foreign language learning can not be disputed, the EAN educational material are designed in the hope that they can inspire and support EFL and preschool teachers so as to promote plurilingualism, inclusion and essentially instill a love of languages.

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