

INTRODUCING THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE EAN PROJECT IN GREECE

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Abstract

As of September 2021, the Ministry of Education has decided to officially declare the implementation of English in all Greek state and private preschools and this was realised through the funded project EAN. In this paper, the main objectives of the EAN Project (“Teacher training for the introduction of English in preschool education”) - the project which supported this educational innovation- will be presented along with its main objectives. Moreover, an insight regarding the EAN open access educational portal will also be offered, as well as a discussion of the innovations and the pedagogical framework of EAN.

Keywords: early foreign language learning, preschool, EAN project.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, early foreign language introduction has been taking place at the pre-primary educational level in many European countries, as well as worldwide (Alexiou, 2020; European Commission, 2014). This initiative coincides with the high expectations for a multicultural and plurilingual 21st century society that sets priority in developing communication and intercultural skills (Baidak, et al., 2017; European Commission, 2014). Based on this notion and taking into account the numerous benefits of an early foreign language introduction that research suggests (Alexiou, 2020; Figel, 2005; Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek-German, 2006), the Greek Ministry of Education decided to introduce the English Language in all Greek preschools. The successful implementation of its pilot phase, which took place from September 2020 until June 2021 was a determining factor.

Research results collected during the pilot phase of the introduction of English in 52 preschools across Greece highlighted several key benefits associated with early foreign language learning (Alexiou, Penderi & Serafeim, 2021). In fact, qualitative and quantitative data collected through the course of piloting, demonstrated many multi-leveled advantages, and few mainly practical challenges (ibid).

The formal and horizontal implementation of English in Greek state preschools was supported by the EAN project which aimed at training and supporting both EFL teachers

and preschool teachers. Through the EAN project (www.ean.auth.gr), methodologically and age-appropriate educational material in the form of CLIL scenarios were also developed in order to help and support in-service teachers' educational work while systematic monitoring of the initiative was realised throughout the year.

2. THE EAN PROJECT

The EAN Project is a national project realised through the funded programme “Teacher training for the introduction of English in preschool education (EAN)” (www.ean.auth.gr). The Institution responsible for the design, organisation and coordination of the Project is the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) while the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA) and the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP) are also partners in the project. The EAN team is an interdisciplinary team consisting of university faculty members, and special teaching staff, technical personnel, researchers, and external collaborators.

The EAN project aims to support the introduction of the English language in Greek preschools through:

1. Systematic supervision and monitoring the project
2. Asynchronous training scheme for teachers and Coordinators of Education (CoEs)
3. Educational Material
4. EAN Educational Portal
5. Synchronous training for CoE

The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki is in charge of the 4 first pillars and the Aristotle University interdisciplinary team is responsible for the design, the pedagogical framework and the implementation of the EAN project and these pillars are discussed in this paper.

The EAN Project was developed in a multi-level framework and followed a multimethod approach designed by the AUTH team (see fig. 1, Alexiou & Penderi, 2022). The horizontal implementation of EFL in preschools and the need to address educational and pedagogical support and professional development of 18.000 teachers of the two specialisms (EFL and preschool teachers) along with the Covid-19 conditions and restrictions, lead to the development of a digital community of learning, using a variety of tools and methods. It is therefore important to note here that the training scheme which was developed addressed both EFL and preschool teachers so that they could understand the parameters and aspects of both specialisms (EFL methodology and learning and preschool practices and pedagogy).

The experience from the pilot year showed how important was to follow a systemic multi-level approach involving all stakeholders. Therefore, first of all, teachers of both specialisms received training (micro-level). Then they were supported and supervised by the school administrators (mid-level) and the Coordinators of Education who are responsible for the professional development of the teachers at a regional level (macro-level). School administrators and teachers developed a good communication with parents since as parents are major partners in such educational initiatives. At a national level, the EAN monitoring team organized meetings with teachers, school administrators and Coordinators of Education so as to receive feedback regarding the project and also provide guidance and support where needed.

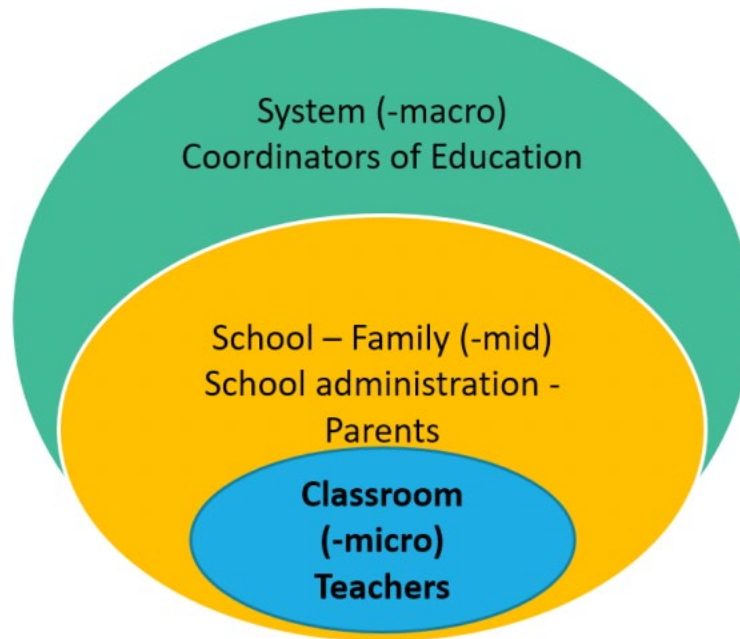


Fig. 1. Representation of the multi – levelled approach while supervising the EAN project (Alexiou & Penteri, 2022).

Monitoring and supervising the introduction of the English language in preschools was of paramount importance, as well as collecting evidence from all the key stakeholders in the implementation of the project. The multimethodological approach followed ensured the triangulation of results through the collection of both qualitative as well as quantitative data through an array of different research instruments (i.e., focus group interviews, individual interviews, interview protocols specifically designed for young children, self-reported questionnaires on a Likert scale, class observations, assessment tools for evaluating training and material as well as instruments measuring children’s cognitive and linguistic outcomes etc). One of the main aims has been to investigate the perceptions and practices of those involved in the context of the introduction of the English language in preschools (children, teachers, parents, etc.).

The rationale of implementing the English language into preschools is set on the premises of the methodological and thematic enrichment of the preschool curriculum in relation to the linguistic and comprehensive development of preschool children, the strengthening of plurilingual awareness and intercultural communication, and the promotion of active citizenship in the context of contemporary multicultural societies (see Alexiou & Penderi, 2020).

More specifically, the introduction of the English language in Greek preschools aims to enrich the existing programme in order to become an integral part of their philosophy, supporting an exploratory and interdisciplinary approach as well as playful learning. The methodology followed in the EAN Project is based on knowledge ‘of preschoolers’ developmental characteristics’ of preschoolers, follows a soft CLIL approach (Alexiou, 2022), it is in accordance with the pedagogical principles of the new preschool Greek Curriculum (see Penderi, Chlapana, Melliou, Philippidi & Marinatou, 2021) so that EFL is not treated as a separate subject. The priority of the EAN Project is to respect the holistic approach to learning, realised through interdisciplinary creative activities. Furthermore, a key success factor is the

mutual and harmonious interaction and cooperation of preschool teachers and English language teachers and the openness and collaboration with parents and broader community. Within that scope, an educational portal, the EAN website, was realised, in order to host all the necessary files and information available to all stakeholders (www.ean.auth.gr). The particular website is open to all teachers, parents and anyone interested in the field. Having in mind the holistic development of children, the EAN Project caters for children’s multilateral education.

One of the main innovations has been the effort to cultivate a ‘culture of cooperation’ (Alexiou, 2020, p. 68) between the teachers for the planning and implementation of activities that adopt the principles of differentiated and inclusive education, contributing to the formation of a positive attitude towards plurilingualism and the intercultural approach by all participants in the educational process (children, parents, educators, etc.) and utilising digital and other tools to achieve collaboration.

3. FIVE KEY POINTS ON THE INTRODUCTION OF ENGLISH AT PRESCHOOLS

The EAN Project followed a methodologically solid approach, offering a pedagogical framework which supports the implementation of English in preschool. Figure 2 below presents some of the major key points, with regard to this implementation.

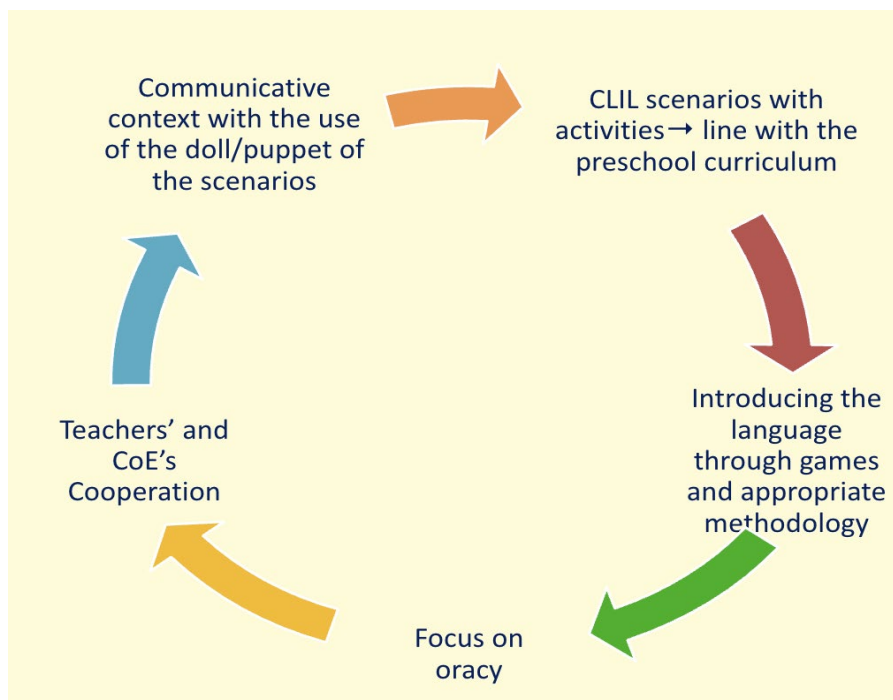


Fig. 2. The EAN circle of success, (www.ean.auth.gr).

More specifically, in order to create a communicative context which would provide children with increased motivation and therefore eagerness to participate more in the English activities, the use of a mascot or a puppet was recommended. The teachers were also provided with educational material that would assist them in successfully introducing the English language to very young learners. Therefore, CLIL soft educational scenarios are created and activities are introduced through a mascot, Kiki the koala.. These scenarios included several activities that could take place during the time devoted to English and were in line with the new preschool

curriculum in Greece. The new language is of course introduced through the appropriate methodology and techniques at this age, like games, short stories, rhymes, songs, etc. The focus is on developing oracy skills, taking into consideration the age of the learners while literacy is not introduced at this age. Since collaboration between teachers is paramount in the EAN project, teachers are strongly encouraged to cooperate during the preparatory stage, the implementation of the activities and the assessment stage.

4. EAN PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND MAIN INNOVATIONS

For the introduction of the English language to young learners in Greek state preschools, a new and innovative pedagogical framework has been developed. This framework provides a solid ground for the implementation of the English language in preschool.

First of all, there is emphasis on the importance of creating a context with developmentally appropriate for young learners, while providing an actual purpose for communicating and learning another language, through the use of mascot and the integration of English in a life-like, natural, and playful way. Regarding the content, English in preschool is not considered a separate subject, but on the contrary, it is integrated in the preschool curriculum. As for the material, a holistic approach to learning is suggested, using appropriate educational soft CLIL scenarios. The methodology followed, is also based on the cross-curricular and interdisciplinary approach, through the use of CLIL scenarios. Moreover, and as far as the cooperative practices are concerned, a model of cooperation between teachers of the two specialisms, EFL and preschool teachers, has been introduced. The same model of cooperation applies for Coordinators of Education (CoEs), who should function as role models and mentors for teachers. Another innovation worth mentioning is the fact that the introduction of English in Greek preschools is in line with the newly devised preschool curriculum. Last but not least, the importance of developing soft skills, values, attitudes, emotional intelligence and intercultural competence within the preschool educational level is of paramount importance. These innovations are summarized in Figure 3.

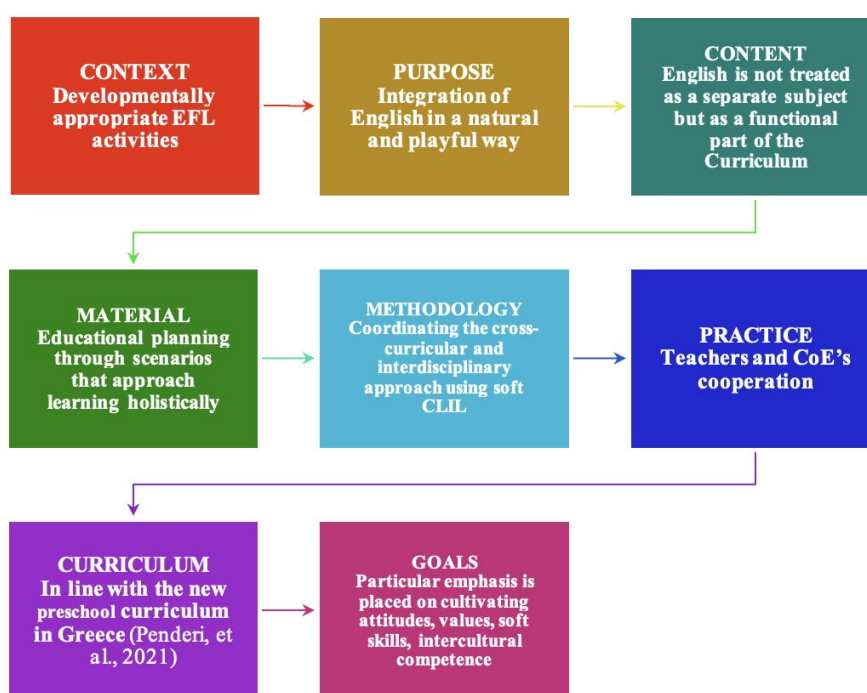


Fig. 3. EAN pedagogical framework and innovations, (www.ean.auth.gr).

The EAN philosophy of introducing English in the preschool did not treat EFL as a new trend but as a paramount contribution to the development of 21st century skills. The implementation of the English language at the preschool educational level is linked with the development of the identity of a world citizen and supports the formation of a positive attitude towards learning foreign languages, which is a significant skill both on a personal and on a professional level. The EAN principles, methodology and educational design are in line with the framework of competences described in the new Greek pre-primary education curriculum targeting not only to the sustainability of the innovations but also to the infusion of the sociopedagogical and sociocultural perspectives of early education and learning in the everyday practices of EFL (Alexiou, Penderi & Serafeim, 2021).

EFL in the preschool context is associated with the holistic development of children and aims at the “continuity” of learning experiences from preschool to primary school, especially since learning English as a foreign language has also been introduced in the first year of primary school, and therefore a smooth transition for all learners is of overriding importance.

The methodology developed by the EAN Project introduces the notion of intercultural and plurilingual communication in preschool education, thus creating the conditions for a pedagogical approach open to the local community. Family and community resources are utilised, since the approach towards the English language is based on the framework of local needs and abilities, emphasising the value of cultural aspects and children’s pre-existing knowledge. The cooperation among all those involved in the learning process is of vital importance for the development of intercultural awareness as well as for inclusive education, which can set a new “example” for foreign language learning and teaching at all levels of education. The emphasis on cultivating a ‘culture of co-operation’ (Alexiou, 2020) within the local but also intercultural society through EFL can become a paradigm shift towards a more humanistic view of educational practices (Kyriacou et al., 2009; Penderi, 2022).

5. THE EAN EDUCATIONAL PORTAL

Another aim of the EAN Project has been to create an open access educational portal for the requirements of the Project (www.ean.auth.gr), with a view to host all the necessary information for parents, teachers and anyone interested (see fig. 4). More specifically, the educational portal has been developed in order to further support and assist teachers in understanding the importance of such an initiative, by providing relevant research evidence. Moreover, the educational portal helps the parents of preschool children, as well as whoever might be interested in it, to be informed about the benefits interwoven with learning a foreign language at preschool level.

Besides being informative, the EAN educational portal presents the educational materials created for the introduction of the English language in preschools, along with appropriate guidelines on how this material should be exploited, adapted and used in class.

A short description referring to the philosophy of the EAN Project is also offered on our website, in order to ensure transparency and accountability while highlighting the course of the English language implementation for all stakeholders. Additionally, there is information posted on conferences and seminars held, publications, and online support for the EFL teachers via help-desk services.



Fig. 4. The EAN educational portal, www.ean.auth.gr

More interestingly, the educational portal constitutes an open channel for communication for everybody who wants to share an experience, to make a comment, complain or suggestion to the EAN team. This channel of communication is not an easy task for the academic team to handle but it is strong evidence of the importance placed to all stakeholders and the bottom-up approach that the EAN project is trying to incorporate in this educational innovation that relates educational policy with educational practice.

The EAN Project's scope has been to contribute to the improvement of the quality and effectiveness of the educational system, by establishing a starting strong perspective in the lifelong learning process. As Holthoff and Eichsteller (2009) have stated, this anthropocentric approach of education that focuses on personal and collective empowerment and support has effects in social cohesion and prevention of broader social problems. In this line of thought, the utilisation of modern digital tools and the development of a portal (both in Greek and English for the wider population) where teaching materials are uploaded, functioning as a portal for information, interaction and teacher training can be a pillar to ensure the quality of the education offered in preschools but also fosters the sustainability of the project. This enables the development of a community of practice at a national level and at the same time creates the base to ensure that the monitoring and evaluation processes are transparent and inclusive.

6. CONCLUSION

There is a variety of approaches and models in different countries that early EFL is introduced and these choices affect the outcomes of such efforts (Alexiou, 2020). Introducing English in Greek preschools as an integral part of the curriculum in Greece has been an ambitious challenge and the main goal of the EAN project. Starting with its pilot phase and expanding it around the country, the programme has intended to revolutionise language learning in Greece by introducing EFL pedagogy in state preschools. The present paper has engaged analysing the nature of the EAN project, its context and main goals, as well as its innovative features, in the hope that it would constitute a springboard to future discussions and innovations in the field of preschool foreign language pedagogy.

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