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An exploratory study on English teachers’ opinions in multicultural preschools

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Abstract

Developing plurilingualism is one of the objectives of the European Union and therefore the teaching of foreign languages (FLs) has acquired particular relevance in the last decade. Spain has made a great effort to promote an early start of the foreign language teaching in all its regions; however, there is an enormous gap between the legislative and methodological level, mainly due to the lack of uniformity regarding the decentralization of the education system (Calero, 2006). This target may be more challenging in places such as Ceuta or Melilla, two Spanish cities on the north coast of Africa, due to their particular multicultural context, where preschool classrooms are already multilingual, despite the FL. Based on the interpretative paradigm, this paper presents an exploratory study on English Foreign Language (EFL) teachers’ opinions at preschools in Ceuta and Melilla. We carried out eight interviews to EFL teachers analysing their own practice in these multicultural preschool classrooms, where monolingual and bilingual children share their learning experience with the common objective of developing their communicative competence in English. Conclusions suggest that the multicultural context within these two cities may cause some conflictive situations, mainly due to limited competence on Spanish and to null motivation towards the learning of FLs.

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1. Introduction

Languages have become instruments to eliminate barriers among European citizens at the present multicultural society. Multiculturalism, being defined by different cultures in contact, is closely related to multilingualism, different languages in contact (Trujillo-Sáez, 2005). However, one of the key priorities in most European and national education policies is to go a step further, promoting mutual understanding, thus, developing a real intercultural society; and to this respect, multilingualism has a relevant role. According to the Council of Europe (2003), “the learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality” (p.43).

In relation to the teaching of languages to Very Young Learners (VYL)¹, it is relevant to note that there are important differences across European countries (Nash & Eleftheriou, 2008) where divergences among the different education systems can even be found at both regional and national level (Eurydice, 2012). The learning of a FL usually starts between six and nine years old, although there are countries, such as Belgium or Spain, which start at an earlier age. Concretely, regarding the preschool, “Early childhood is the stage at which education can most effectively influence children’s development.” (European Commission, 2014, p.19). To this respect,

[...] an adequate curriculum for the early years is one that educates both through and for diversity. It is one that takes into account the children’s needs, interests and linguistic repertoires, which educates their hearts and their minds in a holistic manner, and develops their global and intercultural awareness.

(Lourenço & Mourao, 2015, p.135)

As Mezzi (2012) affirms “an early start would help people to move, explore, work, socialise within a plurilingual Europe, feeling at ease interacting with another language and culture” (p. 22-23). Accordingly, age is a fundamental element and “it is never too early to consider children’s exposure and introduction to a foreign language” (Dolean, 2015, p.9). Besides, it can support the introduction of language learning as a basic learning in European children education (Enever, 2011). Thus, advancing this learning at the pre-primary stage is sufficiently justified, being English the first option (Enever, 2015). But apart from the onset stage, there are others factors that need to be taken into account in order to achieve an adequate provision, such as context, chances to use the learnt L2, or motivation (Haznedar, 2015). In order to help the member states to take actions in this sense clear recommendations were included in the document “*Language learning at pre-primary school level: making it efficient and sustainable*” (European Commission, 2011). However these principles are influenced, and consequently shaped, by the learning/teaching context in multicultural societies where other priorities may influence the early introduction of the FL, such as the necessity to develop the official language at preschool. The current paper reports an exploratory study on difficulties and proposals for the teaching of English to VYL from the EFL teachers’ perspective at two multicultural cities in Spain: Ceuta and Melilla.

1.1 A Multilingual context: Ceuta & Melilla.

¹ The term Very Young Language Learners (VYLL) is referred to language students before Primary Education, in Spain covering the range from 3 to 6 years old.

Ceuta and Melilla are two Spanish cities on the north coast of Africa, separated from the Spanish Peninsula by the Strait of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean Sea, respectively. Being Morocco their neighbouring country, a lot of influence from the Arabic and Berber culture is present in both cities. The population is distributed nearly equally between Arabic and Berber origins (mainly of Muslim religion), on the one hand, and Europeans (mainly from Catholic religion), on the other hand. Besides, Spanish people from the Hindu and Hebrew culture are also present, although in a less relevant proportion. In terms of Education, schools in these two cities follow the Spanish Education Policy, and the Pre-primary stage covers from 3 to 5 years old. Despite its voluntary character, most students start school at the age of three, concretely, 87,4% (Melilla) and 94% (Ceuta) according to the Ministry of Education (2015). Furthermore, in these cities the cultural diversity implies that at many schools, preschoolers do not speak the language of instruction (i.e., Spanish) at their entrance. Given this situation, some EFL teachers consider the teaching of EFL at preschool somehow problematic.

2. Method and research procedure

The main objective of this research is to explore EFL teachers' major concerns at the multicultural preschool classroom, as well as to illustrate proposals to improve the current situation. Due to the necessity of investigation on the area of VYLLs (Genesse, 2016), it is even more relevant to explore multicultural education context in which different languages play a role in the acquisition of a plurilingual competence. To this respect, the qualitative research paradigm can be particularly useful in exploring in depth situations (Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2012), allowing us to cope with the situation from the inside. Concretely, an interpretative perspective has been adopted so as to understand the studied phenomenon (González Monteagudo, 2000; Smith, 2015).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used revolving around five main variables: difficulties encountered in the classroom, the FL teacher in pre-primary education, teaching methodology, materials and good practices.

Participants

This research was conducted on 8 EFL teachers with at least 10 years of experience working at the multicultural context of the two cities of Ceuta and Melilla in Spain, reflecting on their own experience teaching EFL to preschoolers. Participants have, at least, a B2 level of English according to the Common European Framework and they were all female.

Data analysis

The information collected was qualitative analysed using mixed coding techniques, i.e. both deductively (from a pre-existed list of codes to text) and inductively (from the text expanding or delimitating the list of codes). The qualitative software Atlas.TI was used to organise and interpret the information obtained. The resulting information was analysed and organised according to two main categories: difficulties and proposals. A summary of the analysis carried out and the different codes used is portrayed in Figure 1. Qualitative research ethical issues were guaranteed.

3. Results and discussion

As shown in Figure 1, two main categories have been identified in participants' answers: difficulties and proposals to address them.

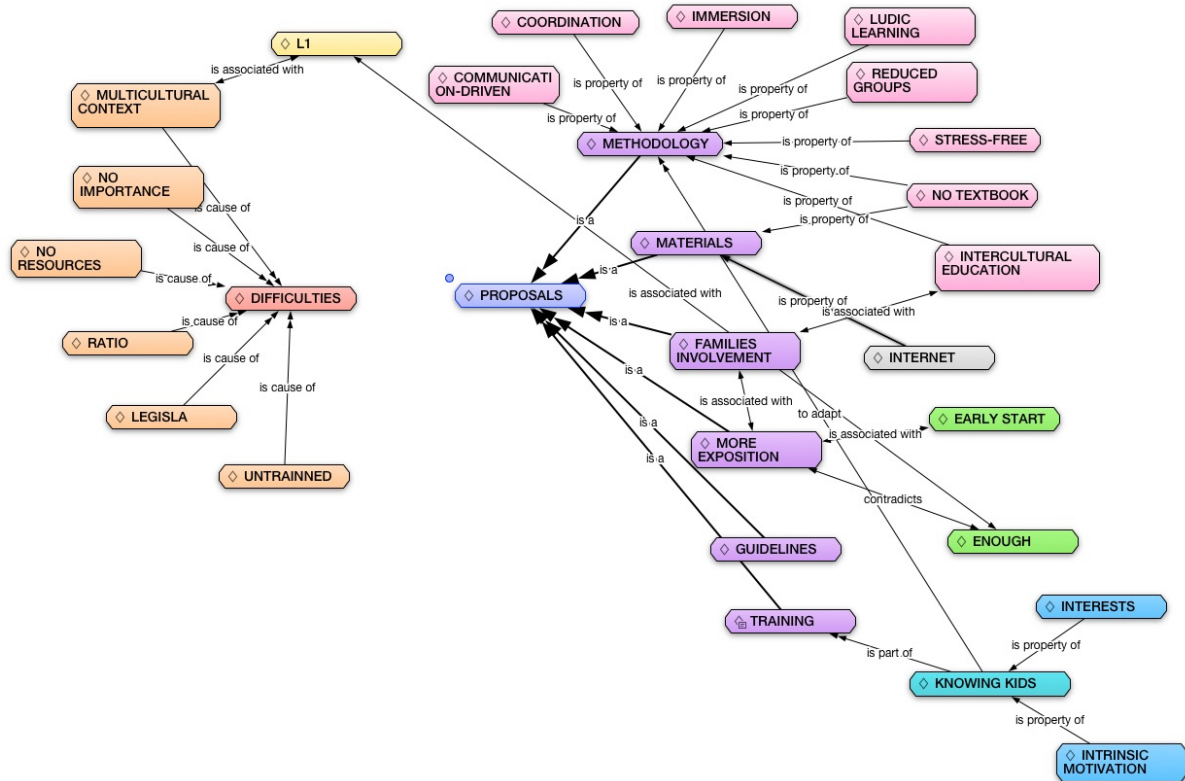


Fig. 1. Qualitative analysis summary (Code Network created with Atlas.TI Software)

On the one hand, six major concerns are described:

1) **The multicultural aspect of the two cities**, mainly in relation to having as a mother tongue a language different from the language of instruction (IL), which is seen as a hurdle, instead of envisaging this as an asset. As testified by one of the interviewees:

It is necessary to take into consideration that most students enter school without speaking Spanish, so it is very difficult with 3 or 4 year-olds that they develop their communicative competence in a foreign language, with the aggravating circumstance that at home and in their nearest context, their mother tongue is spoken, and this is not Spanish.² (Quote 5:3-Participant 5)

This problem is frequently extended to communication with the families. As expressed by interviewee 8:

² Quotes translated by authors.

We must take into consideration that Ceuta is a city bordering Morocco; hence we have many students who speak Arabic. Parents sometimes don't understand anything of Spanish and, therefore, communicating with them is quite complicated. On some occasions, parents are accompanied by a relative or friend to act as interpreter, transmitting our advice or guidelines the best they can. [Quote 8:6-Participant 8]

A few participants have also shown reluctant to introduce more languages (in this case, English) as they consider the focus should be placed more on the language of instruction (IL), rather than on FL at this stage.

2) **Little human and teaching resources** dedicated to the early learning of the FL in this context and;

3) **High student-teacher ratio**, which both hinder a communicative approach in the teaching of English to VYLs. As expressed by participants, these are common in most Spanish schools, but they seem to be more extreme in the cases of these two autonomous cities given the density of population.

4) **Lack of importance to the learning of a foreign language**, as a consequence of lack of regulation of this area within the preschool curriculum. As clarified by one of the interviewees:

Another problem I detect to this respect is the lack of importance to English and, quite frequently, it is the main preschool teacher who is also in charge of teaching the foreign language. This will not increase students' motivation towards English as it is the same teacher for everything, it is important to associate the language to another person; furthermore, not everyone is prepared to teach English [...] [Quote 4:7, Participant 4]

This idea is shared by Portikova (2015), who affirms:

Generally, very little attention is paid to this topic-little or nothing is known about many areas related to L2 learning with this age group, in particular in a foreign language context. Together with the absence of appropriate legislative regulation this give rise to a non-systematic approach to provision, based on pressure from parents, or current trends that make no critical assessment of the conditions under which the children are learning the L2 (p.187)

5) **Lack of concreteness** in the area of EFL within the Pre-primary National Curriculum. As portrayed by most interviewees, a recent report from the Ministry of Education (2015) and Andúgar and Cortina (forthcoming), there is a strong need of concreteness in this area, which is even diverse depending on the different Spanish Regions (hours dedicated to this learning, teaching guidelines, contents, recommendations, etc.).

6) **Unprepared teachers** to address the teaching of FL at preschool. This is a key element to offer an adequate learning experience, as "all children perform to their potential and that their success depends on the commitment of the teachers" (McElwee, 2015). As Morris & Segura (2003) reflects teachers do not have the necessary skills to select the correct materials for this young age, and that is necessary to provide meaningful learning and sensory experimentation.

To address these conflictive issues, interviewees point to the following proposals:

1) A **methodological transformation** is needed aiming at:

a. Promoting communication; in this context, listening activities must occupy a central role in the lesson plan because, as Fleta (2015) affirms, "by increasing awareness of sounds coming from a variety of sources, teachers are not only supporting children in differentiating between sounds, but also providing them with language to talk about these sounds" (p.146). So, VYLLs must listen in the first place, then repeat simple words and chunks of language and later, start with songs,

rhymes, storytelling, etc.

b. Coordinating pre-primary teachers and English teachers so that the learning is holistically and naturally developed (Moya, 2003; Sánchez-Reyes, 2000).

c. Adopting an immersion methodology, which implies imitating the natural processes of teaching/learning in a pre-primary classroom.

d. Prioritising playful learning, not only because it gives children plenty of opportunities to experiment with the language (Pino & Rodríguez 2010), but also because it builds on children's confidence towards the FL (Brumen, 2011).

e. Reducing groups and creating a stress-free atmosphere in class where students are not afraid of using the language creatively.

f. Not following textbook as a way of adapting the methodology to students' real interests and necessities. As explained by Fleta and Forster (2014), textbooks constrain teaching because they barely meet particular students' need; they limit contents to a specific culture or exclusively reflect designers' perspectives.

g. Finally, and particularly important for this context, fostering intercultural communication as a mean of achieving a real intercultural society.

Most of these aspects are summarised by the following participant:

In the first schooling stages the teaching of foreign languages must be done through methodologies that take advantage of situations of natural conversations. It would consist of a process of acquiring the language, in contrast to learning it, which may be more adequate for elder students. On the other hand, so that natural conversations flow, they must be related to issues that are interesting for students, even formulated by them. To foster oral expression in a language different from their mother tongue, it must occur in a stress-free and respectful context, where any conversation start is accepted and error is seen as a starting point. At the same time, it will be of paramount importance to include playful, enjoyable, visual, dynamic and concrete approach suitable for the education stage to which we refer. [Quote 3:6, Participant 3]

2) Use of **motivating authentic materials**, helped by Internet resources (Hoskins, 2015), so as to substitute the textbook. These materials need to involve sensitive-driven tasks, so as to experiment with its surrounding context (Pino & Rodríguez, 2010). Besides, Mourao (2015) affirms, "provision for child-initiated play is largely ignored in published materials for this age group" (p.64).

3) **Involving families**, thus, fostering that intercultural learning needed, given the multicultural society, as well as providing more exposition to the language. Interviewees depict the following activities that can be planned: multilingual storytelling sessions, Internet family tandem meetings, or facilitating resources in English to be used at home, among others. Parents must foster students' motivation as stated by the following participant:

In the same way [families] are participant of the learning in Spanish in schools, they must also be of the foreign language. At this age children are not capable of deciding whether they want to study language different from their mother tongue, thus parents are the ones who must decide it. They should be consciously aware of this situation since children enter the school the first day with a meeting with the FL teacher [Quote 4:4, Participant 4]

The role families have within the learning process in general, and with VYLL in particular, is today unquestionable (De Mejía, 2015; Enever, 2011; Lingdren & Muñoz, 2013; Pirchio et al., 2015; Sokol & Lasevich, 2015; Thoumi, 2003). Specifically, in the learning of FLs Flores and Corcoll (2008) affirm "Families can also support what is done at school by helping children with the foreign language at home or by welcoming positively

their initial productions. In this sense, parents meetings held at the beginning of the year are a good opportunity to present the linguistic project and to ask for their cooperation” (p.5).

4) **More exposition** to the target language, using mostly the target language inside and outside the classroom. This idea is also associated with this very early start in learning FLs, which is defended in studies such as those by Coyle (2012), Madrid (2001), Pinter (2015), Kersten (2015) or Mezzi (2012). For instance, the European Commission (2011) emphasizes that “working in pre-primary school settings through the target language can help children reach similar or at least comparable competencies in the first language/mother tongue and in the target language.” (p.14). Although participants are in favour of this early start, many have shown reluctant to it given the multicultural context and the difficulties linked to it. Contrarily, many researchers have positioned in favour of FLs in multilingual context (Enever, 2011; Genesse, 2016; Missaglia, 2010; Pinter, 2015). To sum up, Leonardi (2012) points out that,

L2 should be maximised whenever possible since foreign language students, especially in the case of very young learners, do not have so many opportunities to learn and/or practise it outside the classroom. At the same time, though, it argues that L1 can prove to be beneficial to foreign language learning if it is judiciously used, especially through comprehensive activities aimed at strengthening and further developing listening, reading, speaking and writing skills to achieve a balance bilingual approach (p.119)

5) Defining **concrete guidelines** so as to guide teachers in terms of contents, objectives and methodology.

6) Providing **more specific training** to teachers, focused on the psychological and developmental features of the target group, thus increasing students’ intrinsic motivation and adapting methodological underpinnings to their needs. As declared by Cerná (2015), the teacher is one of the key elements in L2 learning success, so it is necessary that the teacher be well adequately qualified and motivated to be a guide and reference to students (Flores & Corcoll, 2004; Morris & Segura, 2003; Mur, 2002; Navés & Muñoz, 1999; Pino & Rodríguez, 2010; Portikova, 2015; Rodríguez-Suárez, 2003)

4. Conclusions

In this paper current practitioners’ concerns about teaching a FL to VYLs within a multicultural context characterised by its linguistic diversity have been explored. Among the main difficulties related to this specific plurilingual education, EFL teachers have highlighted problems in communication with students and families due to the trilingual model at schools, in which Arabic (L1), Spanish (IL) and English (FL) coexist and are seen as a hindrance. However, we believe that there is a space for the three of them, as they should not be regarded as exclusive, but as mutually enriching. We believe that English can provide learners, teachers and families a perspective on their own language that may foster tolerance and intercultural sensitivity. As compiled by Genesse,

dual language acquisition is not a zero-sum game and, in fact, that maintenance and development of ELLs’ heritage language may facilitate English language development. The challenge now is to reconceptualise strategies for educating young ELLs so that educators draw on their existing language skills in ways that are practical, effective and feasible – even in classrooms with ELLs who speak multiple heritage languages and even when teachers themselves are monolingual. (Genesse, 2016, p.37)

Finally, we considered that this exploratory study should be extended so as to study and compare results in other multicultural contexts. Furthermore, research on the role families

have in a real intercultural education should be addressed.

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