

Early additional language learning in classroom ecosystems

M. TERESA FLETA GUILLÉN

Universidad Complutense De Madrid

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ABSTRACT: In many communities around the world children are being enrolled in pre-school programmes where they learn additional languages apart from their mother tongues. This entails a fresh look at key aspects of additional language teaching pedagogies. At an early age, language learning is socially mediated, and the target language is acquired orally. This points to the importance of considering how children's biological capacities and learning contexts contribute to the development of the learning process. Thus, building on child language acquisition approaches and on the conceptual framework of educational ecosystem, this paper describes how the learning environment of preschool classrooms shapes the additional language learning process. In addition, the article sets out the building blocks that ensure a solid construction of learning ecosystems which teachers can draw on to strengthen the quality of their teaching.

Key words: preschool, child learners, classroom ecosystem, additional language learning, teaching strategies.

El aprendizaje temprano de lenguas adicionales en los ecosistemas del aula

RESUMEN: En muchas comunidades de todo el mundo, los niños acceden a programas de preescolar en los que aprenden lenguas adicionales además de sus lenguas maternas. Esto implica una nueva visión de aspectos clave de las metodologías para la enseñanza de lenguas adicionales. A una edad temprana, el aprendizaje de lenguas está socialmente mediado, y la lengua meta se aprende oralmente. Esto apunta a la importancia de considerar que las capacidades biológicas de los niños y los contextos de aprendizaje contribuyen al desarrollo del proceso de aprendizaje. Basándose en los enfoques de adquisición del lenguaje infantil y dentro del marco teórico del ecosistema educativo, este documento describe cómo el entorno de aprendizaje de las aulas de preescolar da forma al proceso de aprendizaje de lenguas adicionales. Además, el artículo presenta los componentes que contribuyen a la construcción sólida de ecosistemas de aprendizaje donde los maestros pueden inspirarse para fortalecer la calidad de la enseñanza.

Palabras clave: preescolar, niños aprendices, ecosistemas del aula, aprendizaje de lenguas adicionales, estrategias de enseñanza.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged by scientists and researchers on language acquisition that children are born with the capacity to learn multiple languages. They can develop and thrive in more than one language from birth. They are wired for it, and they are very skilled at it,

too. Scholars from different disciplines repeatedly stress that young children are better than adults at acquiring languages *implicitly* without formal instruction, yet using their social environment for learning (Conkbayir, 2021; Ferjan Ramirez & Kuhl, 2020; Goswami, 2015; Lytle & Kuhl, 2018; VanPatten et al., 2020). Regarding the contexts, studies have drawn attention to social environments for language learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 1997). Research has shown that children learn languages in environments where they have communicative social interaction with other language speakers, not if the language is only heard on radio or television (DeLoache et al. 2010, Kuhl, 2007; Kuhl et al., 2003). As active speech agents, children engage in their own learning when they feel safe and valued in emotionally supportive and friendly environments (Bransford et al., 2000). Furthermore, children thrive when they sense that they belong to the learning environment (Hayes et al., 2017).

With respect to additional language (hereafter AL) learning in pre-school contexts, little has been written on fresh methodologies that address the educational and developmental needs of emergent bi- multilingual children. This paper fills this gap by providing an ecological approach to AL learning that might be enacted in pre-school contexts. Primarily, the approach starts with a theoretical consideration of the role of learning settings built upon Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model that influences early AL development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Then, the paper frames the topic against the backdrop of child AL acquisition research which highlights the benefits of communicative interaction for early AL learning. After, the framework provides a set of ecosystem components with instructional pointers and activities to nurture preschool classroom ecosystems. The paper concludes with a reflection on teaching AL to learners from three to six in preschool.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

2.1. Educational ecosystems

Van Lier (2004) contends that "Ecology is the study of organisms and their relations with one another and their environment" (p. 21). Rich ecosystems in nature are geographic spaces formed by living organisms (plants, animals, and other organisms) and non-living elements (weather, landscape) which, while maintaining their independence, interact with each other and keep a balance to form a bubble of life (van Lier, 2010). Teaching and learning in preschool classrooms can be compared to ecology. This way of thinking about the ecology of teaching and learning has been proposed in the past by academics from a number of disciplines like psychology, ecolinguistics, linguistic landscapes or translanguaging (van Lier, 2004; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2008). Against this background, preschool classrooms can be thought of as communities of teachers, child learners, families, and environments among other elements, all interacting and working together so that children's learning can burgeon. In relation to this, Van Lier (2004) conceives "classrooms as busy workshops with lots of activity and learners who have things they want to accomplish, and who, with the help of teachers, fellow learners, and other sources of assistance, find the tools they need to achieve their goals" (p. 224).

In a similar vein, Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (1979, 1986, 2005) provides a comprehensive picture of the developing child keeping in mind the advantages of five interdependent subsystems—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem—whose “relationships and interactions form patterns that affect human development” (Duncan et al., 2016, p. 7). Each subsystem contains specific components and relationships with the other subsystems of the ecosystem, and a change in one of them may cause change in another (Shelton, 2019). Some impact on the child directly (settings at the microsystem and mesosystem levels), and some impinge the child indirectly (settings at the exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem). Figure 1 shows two of these interdependent systems which are of particular concern for children’s development of an AL in preschool classrooms because they directly affect children’s knowledge and skills.

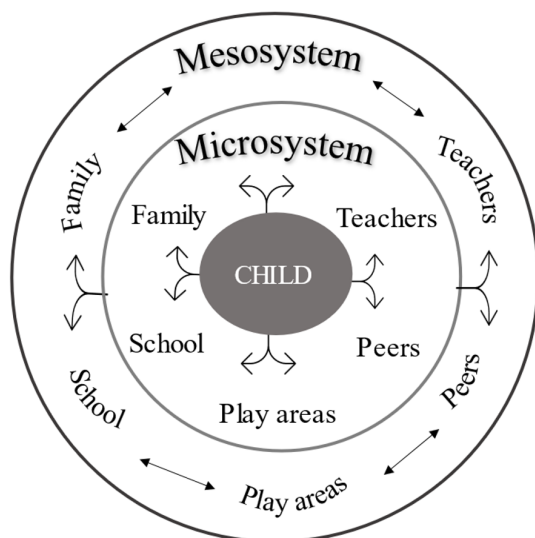


Figure 1. *Microsystem and Mesosystem in preschool*

The first level is a microsystem, a setting integrated by elements such as people, places, activities, and relationships. A setting where children’s development is directly influenced by communicative interactions and relationships with people like their family, teachers, school peers, and with other elements of their environmental surroundings. In the next level lies a mesosystem which is “a system of microsystems” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40). This applies to the manner in which the settings containing the developing child are linked and interrelate to each other. It relates to the interconnections among the settings in which children are closely involved (Shelton, 2019); such as, for example, information between family and school, where the bi-directional interactions in children’s ecosystems transmit information about one setting to the other.

To better illustrate this point, Figure 2 shows that the child learner, teachers, children’s families, and the environmental surroundings are closely interlinked.

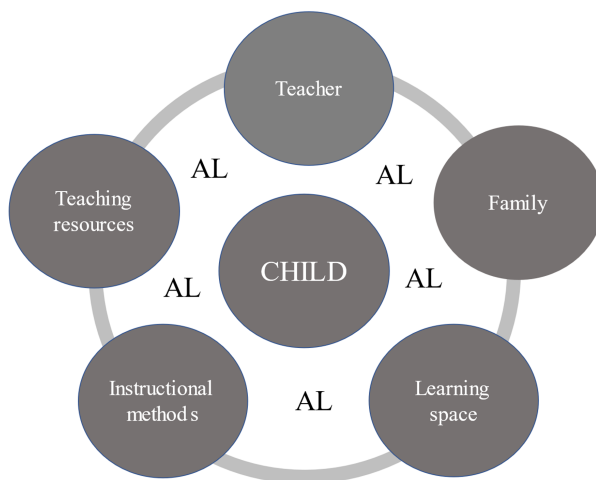


Figure 2. *Pre-school classroom ecosystem for AL learning*

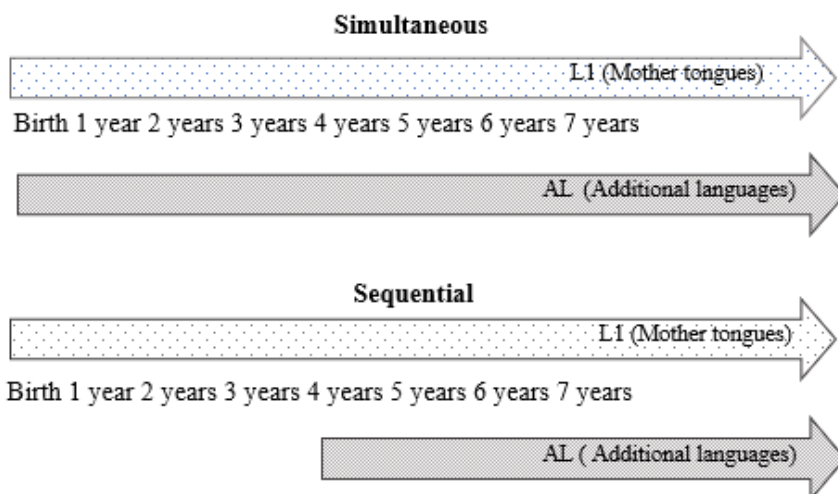
Children are at the centre of an interlinked set of multiple ecologies or settings that affect their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 2005). They are the main active living organisms around which the AL teaching is developed. In that environment, language serves as a tool for multiple uses to enable children to develop their AL learning abilities by talking to teachers and to each other. As active learners, children are closely connected with the learning environment. As speech agents, they negotiate and interact with teachers and with other children as well as with the resources within the environment to such a degree that “these interactions ultimately result in changing their environment” (Hayes et al., 2017 p. 27). Similarly, teachers are living elements of the ecosystem. They interact with children, other teachers, children’s families, and with the non-living elements within the environment. On the other hand, the AL ecosystem encompasses non-living elements that support all learning, as for example the social and physical environment with designated learning areas, the instructional methods, the curriculum, or the teaching resources. Moreover, as many children come from an increasing number of different cultures, it is of utmost importance for the children’s sake that the learning environments reflect children’s cultures and languages (Duncan et al., 2016). To sum up, the AL intertwines both the living and non-living components of the classroom ecosystem creating a diverse and collaborative community.

2.2. Child AL learners

Brain studies suggest that childhood is an optimal biological age for language learning (Conkbayir, 2021; Ferjan Ramírez & Kuhl, 2020; VanPatten et al., 2020). Regarding children’s predisposition for AL learning, linguistic research studies confirm that children who are in contact with two or more languages develop their grammatical systems in a natural manner (Cameron, 2001; Johnstone, 2002; Meisel 2011). It seems that learning AL

in preschool contexts shows strong connections with acquiring mother tongues (L1) at home. The reason being that children at an early age learn languages *implicitly*, in a natural and subconscious manner, relying on communicative social interaction with other language users through the mechanisms and principles that are known to them from L1 acquisition (Conkbayir, 2021; Ferjan Ramírez & Kuhl, 2020; Meisel, 2019). In childhood, the learning mechanisms that apply to the acquisition of the L1 are the same mechanisms that apply to AL learning (Cameron, 2001; Meisel, 2011). In Meisel's words (2011): "The suspicion thus is that whatever enables the child to acquire the mother tongue might not be lost forever, rather that it could be hidden somewhere among or underneath our other cognitive faculties" (p. 1). In line with this, it seems that once the language faculty is activated for L1, it remains available indefinitely for AL learning. This entails that young preschool children apply the L1 learning skills they possess to the AL learning situation (Cameron, 2001; Johnstone, 2002; Meisel 2011). Thus, age-related factors along with social, psychological, and contextual factors make very young learners different from adult learners (DeKeyser, 2012; Lightbown & Spada, 2021; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019).

One of the strongest arguments in favour of starting to learn AL early is precisely to take advantage of the biological predisposition that children bring with them to the task of acquiring one or various languages in the first years of childhood. Studies on AL learning outcomes indicate that the best possible achieving results emerge if exposure to an AL occurs during the first 5 years of life (Conkbayir, 2021; Ferjan Ramírez & Kuhl, 2017; Meisel, 2019). As presented in Table 1, simultaneous language acquisition emerges when equal exposure to two (or more) languages occurs within a week after birth onwards (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2007; Hernandez et al., 2005; Meisel, 2019). For these children, their homes turn out to be the conducive environments that contain all the necessary elements and conditions for languages to grow and develop. In contrast, successive/sequential acquisition of bi- or multilingualism arises if children start AL learning before age five (Conkbayir, 2021). As Meisel (2019) highlights: "successive language acquisition at preschool age can result either in another native language competence or in child second language acquisition, depending on the age of first exposure to the other language" (p. 203).

Table 1. *Simultaneous and sequential language acquisition*

As can be observed in Table 1, the key difference between simultaneous and sequential language acquisition is related to the existence in childhood of a sensitive period for optimum language development (Pfenninger & Singleton 2019). Nevertheless, in both language learning circumstances, children rely on their language-making capacity, on face-to-face communicative interactions with proficient language users, and on social environments which provide them with essential information for AL learning (Conkbayir, 2021; Gibbons, 2015; Kuhl & Ferjan Ramírez, 2019; Meisel, 2019). As Van Lier contends, learner's agency is a 'central construct' in the language learning processes (2008, p. 179). By early school years, when children are 4 or 5 years of age, they have considerable knowledge of the formal and pragmatic aspects of their L1 (Ghosh, 2015; Meisel, 2019). Metaphorically speaking, children have already 'cracked the code' for language learning, and they know a great deal about how language works (sound system, vocabulary words, grammar and how to construct meaning) (Ferjan Ramírez & Kuhl, 2020). They subconsciously apply the grammar rules, pronunciation, and pick the appropriate words to convey meaning in their L1. As a result of this, when preschoolers start learning AL, they do not need to relearn how language functions; yet, what they need to learn is the specific features for the AL (Cummins, 2005).

Thus, to create conducive environments for learning, teachers should have an understanding of AL learning processes in childhood, for example, that children follow a developmental path. Figure 3 shows a typical developmental path in which child AL learners make gradual progress through a series of a fairly predictable pattern with developmental stages.



Figure 3. *Early AL learning process*

Summing up this section, scientific and linguistic studies on AL learning outcomes indicate that the best possible achieving results emerge when exposure to AL occurs during the first five years of life (Conkbayir, 2021; Meisel, 2019). Numerous studies over the decades have delved into child language acquisition processes, considering that young learners' speaking agency is dependent on the language making capacity that humans possess (nature), as well as on conducive learning environments (nurture) (Conkbayir, 2021; Ferjan Ramírez & Kuhl, 2020; Goswami, 2015; Li, 2020; Lightbown & Spada, 2021; Meisel, 2019).

3. CLASSROOM ECOSYSTEM COMPONENTS

Children will receive the maximum benefit from instruction when classroom environments are built upon ecosystem components that respond to the social, emotional, and learning needs of young learners (Duncan et al., 2016). Within this environment, teachers play a central role in building up dynamic ecosystems that support AL learning. They can be viewed as potential partners with children for developing relationships of the parent-child type (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In preschool classrooms, teachers engage in dialogue with children, co-teachers, children's families, and interact with the elements within the environment. Figure 4 depicts powerful components that allow teachers to connect with AL learners more closely so as to help them to develop and thrive. These components, which are expanded below, are strongly related to instructional methods and strategies for teaching AL to young learners (Duncan et al., 2016; Hanson & Lynch, 2013; Machado & Zimbalist, 2022; O'Leary, 2020; Weiss et al., 2006).

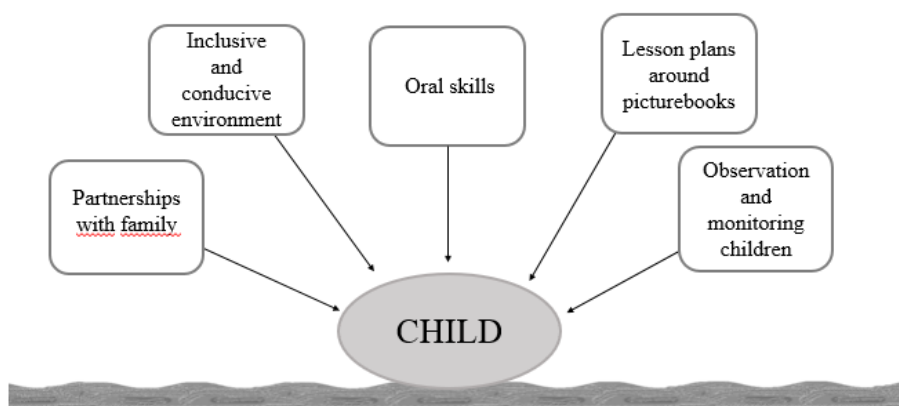


Figure 4. *Ecosystem components for AL learning instruction*

3.1. Partnerships with families

Within Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological model, families are active ecosystem partners and co-constructors. They are placed in children's primary microsystem where individuals continually interact with each other and with other elements of the subsystem, making up the mesosystem. Within this framework, families can be viewed as true partners and valuable resources that support teachers' efforts for children's development (Hanson & Lynch, 2013). They are the principal and most important teachers and decision-makers in children's life (Halgunseth et al., 2013). They are made up of diverse sets of individuals, "the people who think of themselves as part of the family, whether related by blood or marriage or not, and who support and care for each other on a regular basis" (Poston et al., 2003, p. 319).

To count on a family's engagement means to understand the makeup of the children's families, their composition culture, ethnicity, language, customs, and preferences (Haye, et al., 2017). With the focus on fostering AL learning as best as possible, teachers would benefit from being aware of the children's family cross-cultural backgrounds and embracing family diversity in the classroom (Hanson & Lynch, 2013). This can be achieved by intentionally creating home-school relationships in many different ways so that the family members feel involved in classroom functioning, since "being sensitive, knowledgeable, and understanding of the families' cultural practices enhances this process and relationship" (Lynch & Hanson, 2011, p. 24). As suggested by Weiss et al. (2006), here is a set of actions in support of teachers-parents continuum involvement:

- inviting families to actively take part in decision making concerning children's education,
- integrating information about children's lives, families and cultural background in the curriculum and teaching practices,
- setting up regular one-to-one meetings or schedule group meetings with family members,
- including in the curriculum a design for family members to share their time or talents in class,
- providing family members with opportunities to visit the classroom, taking part in school-based activities inside and outside the classroom,
- building strong partnership with families to expand practices beyond the classroom,
- use arrival and departure times as opportunities to communicate with family members to share brief comments about their child.

Lastly, in such a pedagogical ecosystem, the different learning areas, playground, or resource centres provide an opportunity for families to get involved in classroom activities (van Lier, 2004). For example, family members talk about their favourite piece of art or sculpture (Arts and Crafts area), bring props or items that represent their heritage (Dramatic Play area), bring items from nature to talk about their gardens or communities (Science area), develop a website or blog to send messages to the class (Technology area), share their favourite books (Book area), are invited to teddy bear's party, and play favourite games (Playground).

3.2. Inclusive and conducive environments

Classrooms are more diverse every day, and diversity is the mainstream, therefore, teachers need to be especially sensitive to diversity issues. Teachers play an instrumental role in helping children to identify themselves as part of this diverse society, understand differences among people, and developing fairness and acceptance of others (Hanson & Lynch, 2013; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2020). As Gardner (1995) contends, responsive educational environments function effectively when children's individual differences are taken seriously into consideration. For this reason, to build meaningful partnerships with families is key. This can be done by researching and learning about issues related to children's race, sociocultural background, ethnicity, disabilities, gender, and family structure among others (Curtis & Carter, 2013).

In order to gather information about children's language and culture background, a survey can be designed to be filled in by families. This information can be an essential feature reflected in teachers' planning and in teaching practices. That will make the classroom environment "more accommodating and empowering to a wider range of children and families" (Ramsey, 2015, p. 114). By a way of illustration, Duncan et al. (2016) recommend:

- to build a library that is representative of children's languages and cultures,
- to integrate teaching materials that deepen knowledge of diversity and multiculturalism in daily routines and the teachers' planning (dolls of different ethnicities and races, greetings in children's L1),
- to make children's cultures visible in the classroom by setting up items from children's cultures in the learning areas. These can be posters or photographs, food packaging, kitchen tools, clothing and props, or musical instruments from a variety of cultures,
- to hang a poster with photographs of each child or pictures drawn by children with the phonetic pronunciation of 'hello' and 'goodbye' in their L1 to greet each child as they come and leave the room.
- to include 'All about me books' with images of children's families, family trees, or even pictures of representative buildings of children's countries,
- to share children's cultural traditions.

Additionally, the learning environment in the ecosystem model is seen as an *activity* space, both physical and social where communicative interactions and learning take place (van Lier, 2004). Within this model, the classroom is the backdrop of the learning ecosystem acting as a third teacher (Fraser, 2012). What this suggests is that learning AL in preschool classrooms is not just dependent on children's capacity for language learning but is also reliant on the physical and social space, pedagogical practices and teaching resources provided for children (Li, 2020). Also, important to consider here is that the amount of exposure time to AL in preschool classrooms varies a lot, resulting in children being in contact with the AL a varying number of days a week for a certain amount of time each day (Tedick & Lyster, 2019). Typically, during this timeframe, educators address children mostly in the AL.

Environments as mediating components of classroom ecosystems need to provide opportunities for interpersonal relationships with the other components of the ecosystem (teachers

with children, teachers with co-teachers, children with peers) (Hayes et al., 2017). One means to create communicative interactions with young learners arises during daily routines, rituals, and transitional times (Malenfant, 2006). These daily school situations are especially precious learning times for AL learners because the environment and the situation shape the language use. If scheduled in the curriculum, they help children to build the target language, and assist teachers to manage the class effectively as well as to extend and reinforce the AL.

Moreover, in most classrooms, the target language becomes evident physically as well with teaching resources like posters, picturebooks, games, songs, and rhymes in the AL. Thus, the environment contains “also the social and cultural forces that shape the space” (Duncan et al., 2016, p. VIII), which are crucial for AL instruction in preschool. This is due to the fact that the space in preschool classrooms is usually divided into learning areas (Pinnell & Fountas, 2021). These content learning areas (blocks, toys and games, dramatic play, library, art, music and movement, sand and water, computers, quiet area) are equipped with authentic materials in AL to shape activities and experiences that promote children’s learning and development (Pinnell & Fountas, 2021).

At this point, it is worth mentioning the special learning area for developing AL oral communication skills. This physical space provides children opportunities for social interaction with peers during child-initiated play. Here children create imaginary situations during pretend play and develop their confidence in expressing themselves in AL while conducting free play activities (Robinson et al., 2015). This area might be set up with AL supporting resources and materials like games, picturebooks, flash cards, puppets, toys, posters, realia, most of which have already been introduced in class during teacher-led activities. In the AL learning area, children are encouraged to play games, or explore books and other materials. Over there, they can interact in small groups and one-on-one during collaborative pretend play.

3.3. Oral skills

An essential part of the AL learning process is to help children activate the many kinds of conceptual knowledge, experiences, and language that they already possess for their L1, and to use them to build the AL (Cummins, 2005; Peregoy & Boyle, 2017). Teachers should know that to become a proficient speaker of any L1 requires around 5 years of time, practice, and an intensive amount of exposure to that language. This means that children who learn AL in preschool contexts continue to develop their L1. Indeed, these amounts of time and exposure increase when the objective is an AL (Cameron, 2001; Peregoy & Boyle, 2017). Hence, teachers intentionally need to create responsive environments that best meet children’s developmental and learning needs (Cameron, 2001; Machado & Zimbalist, 2022; Peregoy & Boyle, 2017; Pinnel & Fountas, 2021).

It is an accepted fact that children who learn AL experience greater demand on their memory since they have to store two or more sets of sounds, vocabulary, and grammar rules (Ferjan Ramírez & Kuhl, 2020). Thus, the strategies to build working memory skills should be addressed to encourage children’s curiosity and invite further exploration (Garman et al., 2014). Besides, due also to age factors, children tend to be easily distracted and may struggle to stay on task as their attention and working memory are still developing (Nilsen, 2017). Call (2010) recommends a set path of strategies to reduce distractions, support children’s working memory and help them to internalize information:

- catching the eye with attention getter activities (clapping patterns, traffic lights, freeze, give me five, using a mascot, counting backwards),
- pre-teaching vocabulary with props, realia, flash cards,
- making connections with children’s L1 using cognate words,
- learning through chants, rhymes, songs with repeated refrains,
- scaffolding language with sentence frames,
- engaging the whole body in learning
- breaking up information into short ‘chunks’ since this takes up less working memory.

Furthermore, to tap children’s different learning styles, Machado & Zimbalist (2022) contend that information should be provided:

- using multimodal resources such as visual cues (pictures of vocabulary, miming, colours, realia, flash cards, puppets),
- offering multimedia-enhanced instruction (videos, film clips)
- fostering auditory input (songs, rhymes, storytelling),
- encouraging speaking (repetition, rote memorization, formulaic language),
- providing paralinguistic cues (attention getters, games, gesture, pointing, movement).

It is also important to consider the social-emotional skills in preschool classroom ecosystems because at an early age children learn through doing and imitating, and emergent bilinguals make use of social-emotional strategies very effectively (Farndale et al., 2016). For example, they copy and imitate adults and other children; observe peers for clues of meaning, use the context to guide them on what they should do, and even sometimes join groups where they do not understand their peers, but notwithstanding make friends with them, and this helps them practise and learn AL.

Despite children’s language learning predisposition, and even though AL listening relies on the same architecture as L1 listening, it is harder to listen and understand in AL than in L1 (Cutler, 2012; Jalongo, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2021). Consequently, when planning listening lessons, teachers should take into consideration not only children’s age, language development, and knowledge of the world, but also the demands of the learning tasks (Goswami, 2015). Fleta (2015) suggests a set of practices to foster children’s listening and attending skills.

- to listen and discriminate (environmental sounds, homemade instruments),
- listen and act (action songs, action games, Total Physical Response, follow the leader),
- to listen and do, listen and colour, listen and draw,
- to listen and react, listen, and respond, listen, and show, listen and perform,
- to listen and understand (‘Simon says’, ‘What’s the time, Mr. Wolf’),
- to listen for speech sounds (syllable clapping, sounds the same, differentiating between sounds),
- to listen for words (bingo).

Along the same lines, there are countless speaking practices that can overcome the shortcomings of input and output data that children may encounter in instructed preschool

contexts. Indeed, when new languages are introduced orally to young beginner learners, what, in principle, seems appropriate for young monolingual children may be suitable for young AL learners (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017). In this regard, there are many supporting materials that promote AL and content learning:

- props and objects,
- visuals (timetable with pictures to show the structure of the day, photos showing steps to be taken to develop activities, labels with pictures),
- pictures, illustrations, drawings,
- dramatized actions with gestures,
- songs and chants,
- cognate charts (pairing AL words with L1),
- transition sticks.

One of the challenges faced in preschool is the introduction and teaching of vocabulary and grammatical structures. As teachers dealing with young learners know, children learn words easily; yet they forget them just as easily. Thus, to help children memorize language, teaching strategies should be addressed to using words and structures in meaningful contexts several times before they become part of children’s personal repertoire (Pinnel & Fountas, 2021). Since imaginative language play provides children with opportunities to actively practise the vocabulary and structures of the new language, games which involve playing with language would help children to set the foundations before proceeding to more spontaneous speaking games (Mourão & Ellis, 2020; Neaum, 2017).

Of particular interest in building AL ecosystems is teacher-class interaction sessions during collective group work in Circle Time (Mosley, 2015; Peregoy & Boyle, 2017; Pinnell & Fountas, 2021). At an early age, children feel more secure if they know what to expect and collective group interaction during Circle Time supports them in getting acquainted with one another (Machado & Zimbalist, 2022; Mosley, 2015; Pinnell & Fountas, 2021). Hence, collective group work and turn-taking interactions on carpeted areas during Circle Time are designed to foster confidence and help children to get familiar with classroom routines. In Mosley’s (2015) words, Circle Time “facilitates language development, confidence building and the five vital skills of looking, listening, speaking, thinking, and concentrating” (p. vii). One of the aims of Circle Time is to nurture social, linguistic, and cognitive growth (Machado & Zimbalist, 2022). This way children learn rules for group behaviour such as turn taking. The duration of sessions in this area may vary from 10 to 20 minutes once or twice a day and instruction may include low-risk forms of language performance such as daily routines, read aloud, singing, reciting, and playing games (Machado & Zimbalist, 2022; Mosley, 2015; Pinnell & Fountas, 2021).

3.4. Lesson plans around picturebooks

As documented above, languages are acquired without formal instruction in early instructed settings (Johnstone, 2002; Meisel, 2019), and skills such as listening, understanding, and speaking play a key role in language and conceptual knowledge development. In this respect, one of the teachers’ roles is to help develop learners’ listening comprehension and

speaking to prepare them to read and write thereafter. This can be achieved by planning lessons around picturebooks for a number of good reasons, since picturebooks:

- help to teach children of all ages and all competence levels (Ellis & Brewster, 2014).
- contain representational language (McRae, 2022),
- help to develop the aural, oral, and visual skills (Hirsch, 2003),
- encourage thinking skills (Sipe & Brightman, 2005),
- rely on verbal and visual modes of representation to convey meaning (Lambert, 2015),
- provide opportunities for conversational interaction with teachers and peers (Mourão, 2012),
- help to raise phonological awareness (Fleta, 2017).

When teachers plan specific lessons around picturebooks, they are providing a solid basis for AL learning in the microsystem. The main idea behind this learner-centred approach is to supply the assets of picturebooks multimodality to facilitate AL learning. To that end, every feature of a picturebook can be explored in class: peritextual features (cover, endpapers, size); visual elements (line, colour, shape, texture, space, value, perspective); types of media (painting, drawing, printing, cloth, photography), and visual textual grammar (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2018). For example, aside from the actual story spreads, teachers can raise awareness of the artistic and design choices present in each picturebook. As described by Lambert (2017), here are some features of picturebooks that might be considered by educators for meaning making during read alouds *with* children:

- dust jacket
- front and back covers
- endpapers
- copyright and dedication page
- title page
- illustrated barcodes

Besides, the proposal for turning story times into spontaneous back-and-forth-conversations is presented in Table 2. This list of teachers' and children's discourse strategies during shared picturebook reading sessions is based on research on classroom communicative interaction (Lambert, 2015; Lightbown & Spada, 2021; Stilwell, 2006; Tedick & Lyster, 2020). These back-and-forth-conversations which can take place before, during, and after picturebooks read alouds integrate teacher-learner communicative interaction strategies, such as open-ended questions, predicting, guessing, hypothesising, pausing, repetition, language mixing, recasts, expansion, clarification requests and correction.

Table 2. *Discourse strategies*

Picturebook	Discourse strategies
Before reading	Activate prior knowledge. Open-ended prompts. Model language. Preview new vocabulary and text structures. Pay attention to pronunciation and intonation.
While reading	Guessing and predicting. Provide in-context word meanings. Cognates. Recasting. Expansion. Language mixing. Metalinguistic feedback. Clarification requests. Explicit correction. Discuss visual information from illustrations.
After reading	Review vocabulary. Repetition. Formulaic expressions. Creative writing.

In the light of the affordances highlighted above, picturebooks can be considered as an integral part of the AL learning ecosystem. They fulfil the requirements set out for early language learning since they involve learners in listening and speaking, increase awareness of language grammar and make links to subject areas to build up conceptual knowledge. Moreover, while increasing awareness of language and content through shared picturebook reading sessions, teachers are not only addressing linguistic issues, but also conceptual knowledge for academic needs (Fleta, 2019).

3.5. Observation and monitoring children

A crucial element of the ecosystem construction is learning what children should be able to accomplish at different ages and different language levels. Classroom ecosystems can be viewed as research communities where teachers become intentional researchers that observe AL learners in varied situations. Teachers can monitor children's learning and collect data to track language development and take what they learn to improve the teaching-learning process (Reifel, 2011). What this indicates is that by observing children learning, teachers get a picture of how children's AL change and progress over time.

Scholars contend language learning is a continuous developmental process (Meisel, 2011), and for that reason, observing and monitoring children's AL learning progress purposely would allow teachers to select the right materials, and design lesson plans with appropriate activities for children's needs (Jablon, 2011). In other words, information from classroom observation notes will help teachers to link children's background knowledge and new information (O'Leary, 2020). Teachers can observe if child learners:

- do not respond,
- respond with pointing or gestures,
- mostly use L1,
- code switch L1 and AL in a sentence,
- understand and use new vocabulary,

- communicate and use some AL in context in relationships with peers,
- comprehend content during shared picturebook reading sessions.

Besides, teachers can track AL continuum progress observing how children interact with them, with peers, or with co-teachers. As Jablon et al. (2007) highlight by observing:

- if children follow directions,
- how children communicate with peers, follow instructions, or keep attention during activities in the circle time,
- how children act in different situations,
- at different times during the school day,
- in social settings or while participating in activities,
- regularly over time, in different settings (playground, learning centres),
- across different learning experiences (storybook read aloud), during the school day (arrival, dismissal, transitions, meal, or snack times),
- during large and small group activities.

To record their observations, teachers can use language developmental checklists, matrix to write down children's utterances, take photos of children's engagement, and also make video/audio recordings of speech events (Mackey, 2012; Tedick & Lyster, 2020). Observations can be in the form of anecdotal records with brief descriptions of children's communicative interactions, or they can be lengthy detailed reports of the speech event. Observing and monitoring young AL learners' progress involves drawing attention not only to the manner in which children are able speak the target language (type and length of sentences, turns in a conversation), but also how they pay attention and understand (Jablon et al., 2007). Being aware of how classroom conversational interaction occurs and of the best practices that enhance content and AL learning, will help to step up the pace of the learning process and "to push learners beyond a developmental stage" (Gass & Selinker, 2013, p. 354).

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has given a birds' eye view of early AL learning in preschool classroom ecosystems. Firstly, it focused on the 'why', i.e., the rational and theoretical approaches behind the practices; and secondly, on the 'what', i.e., the practices that define a relationships-based language ecosystem for children. The main goals of this pedagogical proposal are to offer a cadre of ideas and to examine child AL teaching/learning from a different perspective. It appears that both, the bioecological model, and the approaches to child language acquisition, dovetail each other. On the one hand, reflecting on what has been found in language acquisition studies, oral language is the main force driving linguistic and conceptual learning at an early age. Research also shows that a solid foundation in children's L1 greatly contributes to the learning of AL given that the most valuable assets children possess in the learning ecosystems are their home languages. On the other hand, the microsystem elements (people, practices, environment) together with the mesosystem relationships are the necessary backdrop for AL learning to thrive in early instructed environments.

In alignment with this, the language that teachers push in (input) and pull out (output), the relationships with families, instructional methods, resources, and physical and social space, all contribute to the infrastructure of the preschool ecosystem. A large research base on child language acquisition suggests that preschool children develop best when their teachers and families engage in collaborative relationships on their behalf.

One limitation of the biological theory is the absence of support for practitioners. Yet, this lacuna can be redressed with instructional methods in which teachers intentionally plan lessons and activities for individual, small, and large group self-expression in AL. This way, teachers create rich language learning environments where children can develop and thrive.

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