

THE LEXEI PROJECT. DESIGNING A NEW FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER PROFILE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE SPANISH CONTEXT¹

BEATRIZ CORTINA-PÉREZ*, ANA ANDÚGAR** AND SILVIA CORRAL*

*University of Granada

**University of Alicante

bcortina@ugr.es

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the Early Childhood Education as a key stage for the integral development of the individual (Marope & Kaga, 2015) as well as the raised of multilingualism as a distinctive feature of our society (European Commission, 2002, 2003; Enever 2015) has led to a growing interest in the area of early foreign language learning (EFL). Within this scenario numerous European projects and policies during the last decades aimed at introducing and researching foreign languages at the pre-school stage, such as ELLiE (Enever, 2011), Bilfam -Proyect Bilingual Family Project- (Pirchio, Taschner, Colibaba, Gheorghiu and Jursová, 2015) or PASS -Parents as Successful Teachers- (Sokol and Lasevich, 2015) or Pepelino (Goullier, Carré-Karlinger, Orlova and Roussi, 2015).

In this context, teachers are key factors to success (González-Davies, 2007, cited in Celaya, 2012) and yet, as some European studies suggest (European Commission, 2003, 2005, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Edelenbos, Johnstone and Kubanek, 2006; Enever, 2011, 2014), there is a lack of adequately trained teachers in Europe to meet this new demand.

1.1. The Spanish Context

ECEC is a non-compulsory Education stage in Spain, despite being the fourth country in Europe, after Denmark, Belgium, France, and the UK, at 0-4 school enrollment rates, with 97.5% of their 4-year-olds attending an ECEC program in 2019 (Eurostat, 2020).

The Spanish ECEC system, regulated in the Royal Decree 95/2022, is a Ministry of Education-regulated non-compulsory stage that is in a middle position between the split and

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the integrative model (European Commission, 2019). There are two differentiated phases, although under the umbrella of the same educational authority:

- From 0 to 3 years old, children attend specific early childhood centers that are mainly focused on caring and whose practitioners are required to have an advanced specific vocational degree issued by the Spanish Ministry of Education.
- The 3-6 years old stage is frequently offered within primary schools, which is the reason why it is frequently known as pre-primary education. Teachers are required to have an early childhood education university degree. Although the holistic approach is encouraged, three main areas of content are detailed in the ECEC curriculum, and English as a foreign language (FL) is encouraged, mainly through Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach.

This mid-way model is similar to many other European countries such as Romania, Austria, Malta, and Ireland, among others (European Commission, 2019), although there exists a current tendency towards the integrative model and some countries are planning reforms in their ECEC provisions. Introducing a foreign language at pre-primary education is compulsory according to the Spanish national educational legislation, although provision varies from region to region. Most of the teachers responsible for introducing the foreign language at Spanish pre-primary level are language specialists, with bare psycho-pedagogical training to work with 3-6 year olds.

1.2. Research problem and questions

With this situation we detect the following **problem**: pre-service teachers does not receive the training that will enable them to meet the current demands in terms of teaching foreign languages in Early Childhood Education, and therefore we **hypothesize** that a new teaching profile is needed: the LExEI teacher (Foreign language–Early Childhood Educator). The following **research questions** are considered:

1. What are the beliefs and needs demanded by in-service teachers for this new professional profile?
2. What are the requirements to teach FL in Early Childhood Education?
3. How are future Early Childhood Education teachers being trained?
4. Are there discrepancies between teachers' demands and the training provided by universities?
5. How could we improve this training?

1.3. Objectives

In this scenario, we define the **overall objective** as to analyse the profile of the teacher responsible for introducing a foreign language in Pre-school Education (LExEI teacher).

From this general objective, we set out the following **specific objectives**:

- To detect the teaching competences of in-service teachers with experience in teaching Foreign Language in Early Childhood Education (LExEI teacher) in Spanish schools.

- To analyse the training currently offered in Spanish universities related to the profile of Foreign Language teacher in Early Childhood Education (LExEI teacher).
- To compare in-service teachers' needs to the training offered by Spanish universities
- To provide a training model for higher education institutions that meets the requirements of the future LExEI teacher.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Early Childhood Education is a live and education stage with peculiar characteristics that make it unique, as children are in the pre-operational period, as described by Piaget. This makes it necessary for teachers to know the cognitive developments of the child and what pedagogical principles govern in order to adapt their teaching to their potential and limitations. Therefore, the learning of a foreign language, understood as exposure to more than one language at the Early Childhood Education (0-6 years) in an educational context (European Commission, 2011), must be approached with respect to these capacities and principles. Currently, there is a trend that favours the learning of a foreign language at an early age as a result of the targets of the European Union, which as early as 2002 determined that European citizens should learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue from an early age (Barcelona European Council, 2002). Based on Penfield and Roberts' studies (1959) supporting that brain plasticity is lost over time, the early introduction of the language is an asset for the child's later professional career. More recently, research such as those by Kuhl's team conclude the cognitive advantages of learning a foreign language from a very early age (Kuhl, 2010; Kuhl et. al, 2016). In addition, there are other reasons based on the child's ability to imitate or the better results that can be obtained in the long term (Madrid, 2001) and a positive and more tolerant attitude is created towards people who speak that language, favouring cultural sensitivity (European Commission, 2011; Kersten, 2015; Mezzi, 2012; Rico-Martín and Jiménez, 2013; Riestra and Johnson, 1964; Unesco, 2010).

Therefore, it seems that there are no cognitive or educational constraints to learn a foreign language at a very early age, provided that other key factors are taken into account, such as the quality of the input offered, the learner's own characteristics (personality, intelligence, attitude or motivation), or the learning context provided (Cortina-Pérez and Andúgar, 2018).

The teacher in charge of teaching a Foreign Language in Early Childhood Education must be trained in different areas that enable him/her to carry out teaching adapted to the interests and needs of these early learners. At present, this is a field of study which suffers from a lack of professionalisation for two main reasons. On the one hand, the introduction of English teaching at an early age, although increasingly widespread at European level, does not start at the same age in the different countries, not even regions within the same country, nor it is compulsory in all countries due to diverse provision models of Early Childhood Education (Eurydice, 2017). For example, in Spain, it was not until 2006 that it was introduced in most Spanish regions, although the onset age differs from region to region, nor they follow similar didactic guidelines, so there is great heterogeneity in this respect (Andúgar, Cortina-Pérez and Tornel, 2019). On the other hand, the teachers who are normally responsible for it are usually primary school teachers specialised in foreign languages, and they are not trained for this purpose.

These and other reasons mean that there is a significant lack of training on how to teach EFL in Early Childhood Education both at European level (Alstad, 2020) and at national level

(Flores and Corcoll, 2008; Enever, 2015; Fleta, 2016). Thus, more and more voices are calling for the need of a foreign language Early Childhood teacher profile (Andúgar, 2017; Alstad and Mourão, 2021; Cortina-Pérez and Andúgar, 2021). It is therefore necessary to reflect and define the aspects in which the future FL teacher at the Early Childhood Education stage should be trained.

According to different research (Andúgar, 2017; Mourão and Ferreirinha, 2016; Ping, Vicente and Coyle, 2013), this training must include 3 fundamental areas:

- Firstly, at the didactic level, that is, in everything related to the most appropriate teaching guidelines and methods. According to Andúgar (2017) and Andúgar, Cortina-Pérez and Tornel (2020) these guidelines should focus on creating a natural learning environment that respects the pedagogical principles that govern this stage, such as the holistic or play-based approach, enhancing oral communication, using active methodologies such as the 'Total Physical Response', and resources such as songs, poems, dramatizations, the English corner, or storytelling; or through materials that provide visual support, such as flashcards, mascots or 'realia' and maximizing the use of the foreign language.
- Secondly, language training must be adequate in order to provide an appropriate language model for pupils of this age, especially at the oral level, as these are the skills on which the teaching of a foreign language in early childhood education should focus.
- Thirdly, at a psychological level, that is, teacher training must include aspects related to children development so that they are able to adapt teaching to the abilities and limitations of the learners, respecting their learning pace, since cognitive, psychomotor, socio-affective and personal development is very different within the Infant Education stage itself, depending on whether we are talking about children aged 3, 4 or 5.

This three-dimensional training model will enable the teacher responsible for teaching a Foreign Language in Early Childhood Education to be able to offer a suitable linguistic model to the children, using an appropriate methodology and always respecting the evolutionary characteristics of the child.

3. METHODOLOGY

Mixed research methodology is becoming an increasingly common practice in education research, given the complexity of the events studied in this context. Mixed method nowadays obtains greater profitability by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to provide answers to complex research questions that cannot be analysed simply with one of the traditional approaches. *Mixed methodology or mixed methods (MM)*, as it is known, stems from pragmatism as a solution to the problems posed by the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy. For the research we have proposed, this methodological framework allows us to gather information from different sources and of different natures, thus approaching the problem in an interdisciplinary way.

It is a mixed research with a **sequential exploratory DEXPLIS model (CUAN->CUAL)** that starts with a quantitative research (research objective 1) whose results inform a second qualitative phase (research objective 2), **with** both data interacting in a third triangulation phase to respond to objectives 3 and 4. The summary of the research methodology is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of research methodology.

PHASE	RESEARCH TECHNIQUE	INSTRUMENTS	DATA	OBJECTIVES
PHASE I. DEFINITION OF TEACHER PROFILE LExEI	SURVEY	Questionnaire	Quantitative (CUAN)	1
PHASE II. ANALYSIS OF CURRICULA	DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS	Analysis matrix	Qualitative (CUAL)	2
PHASE III. TRIANGULATION	TRIANGULATION		CUAN+CUAL	3,4

3.1. Research instruments

Two instruments created ad hoc for this research were used, so a rigorous process of design and validation of the instruments through expert judgment was necessary to ensure the reliability of the results obtained.

1. **Adhoc online questionnaire (phase I):** a questionnaire of closed questions was developed to obtain the information for objective 1, specifically, the consultation of in-service experienced teachers on the profile of the LExEI teacher. To do this, based on the research of Andúgar (2017), Andúgar, Cortina-Pérez and Tornel (2020), as well as the result of the relevant literature review, we designed a series of categories that will become statements about the training demands of the future LExEI teacher. These statements were converted into items in a questionnaire with a Likert-type scale to indicate the degree of agreement in each of them.
2. **Analysis matrix (phase II).** According to the demands detected in phase I of this research and with the theoretical framework, we elaborated an analysis matrix to evaluate the university programs for pre-service teachers (both Early Childhood Education Degree and EFL specialist Primary Education teachers) of Spanish Higher Education Institutions. This instrument allowed us to synthesize a large amount of information into data units, according to previously established categories. In addition, a documentary analysis of some study guides was carried out by means of qualitative content analysis using the NVIVO software.

3.2. Participants

In this mixed research, we envisage different samples depending on the phases of the research:

1. **Non-probability purposive sampling (phase I):** given the difficulty of identifying the target population for probability sampling, it was decided to collect a representative number of teachers willing to participate in the study, as is commonly done in educational research. These participants were contacted using the snowball technique through teachers' continuous development centers and through professional networks and associations. The final participant sample was 425 teachers.
2. **Non-probabilistic purposive sampling (phase II):** the object of study was the Spanish university curricula of the Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education that contain some training in language teaching or foreign languages, and on the other hand the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education (EFL specialisation). Therefore, all those

universities offering these studies were chosen through a purposive sampling of Spanish universities (N=106 for Primary and 99 for Pre-primary degrees).

3.3. Data analysis

Given the mixed nature of the research, both quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out on the data obtained. Firstly, the data from the questionnaire were entered into the SPSS programme to carry out a descriptive and inferential study of the data, calculating means, modes, standard deviation and percentages of the different response options for each item. The mean per dimension analysed was calculated and the interrelation of independent variables such as the type of school, being a bilingual, teachers' qualifications, or their certified language level, were analysed with a factor analysis.

In the second phase, the data obtained were qualitative and were analysed in the Nvivo programme through the deductive and inductive design of a coding system to organise the information extracted from the study guides.

4. MAIN RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

The LexEI project began with the clear objective of trying to solve a real problem detected by the teachers themselves, who had to face teaching for which they had not been trained. We decided, therefore, to give a voice first and foremost to the teachers who are responsible for this teaching in order to start from their needs towards the search for possible solutions. Some preliminary conclusions can be drawn:

- The main profile of teachers who are responsible for introducing foreign languages in pre-primary education is the specialist foreign language teacher who has not had any training in pre-primary education.
- Teachers require training in the language itself, at least up to a C1 level, in psycholinguistic aspects of children from 3 to 6, mainly in relation to the socio-affective dimension. Besides, an in-depth study of the didactic strategies of foreign language teaching at an early age will enable them to manage the pre-primary classroom and promote rich language learning experiences.
- It has been detected that Spanish universities do not fully meet these expectations, although we have found some good examples that should be taken as models for other HEIs.
- It seems that Early Childhood Education degrees include a more comprehensive model to become an FL teacher at Early Childhood Education. However, we consider this proposal to be utopian for the time being in the Spanish context as not many ECE teachers have the necessary FL proficiency, and, therefore, we propose a new profile: the foreign language teacher specialised in Early Childhood Education who is trained on the basis of a foreign language specialisation and who includes in-depth theoretical and practical knowledge of the Early Childhood Education classroom.

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