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Teaching English as a foreign language to very young learners

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Trabajo Fin de Grado

Especialidad: Grado en Educación Infantil

Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Very Young Learners

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Abstract:

My project revolves around my experience as a student teacher. It is based on a case study in a Spanish classroom with three-four year olds, where the main aim is to discover which strategies are best when it comes to learning a foreign language. I have also wanted to investigate, by using a questionnaire, which are the main aspects of the language they retain better and if they use it in a family context.

In my Bachelor of Arts dissertation I want highlight the advantages and importance of learning English at a very early age.

Key words: First Language, English as a Foreign Language, young learners, Second Language, Teaching.

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1. Introduction

My project is based on how students are taught English at school from a very early age. I am going to do a case study of how students in a Spanish classroom, at the age of three, are being taught English.

It is greatly important to describe the activities, material needed, the method the English teacher uses, the aims she has chosen, and finally the way she is going to evaluate how much the students have learnt over the year.

Klein (1986) says that language is the medium through which the child acquires the different values of a society: cultural, moral, and religious among others. Adults sometimes have greater difficulty as they may try to preserve their identity, making it harder to learn a second language. This does not happen with children, as they do not fear the loss of their social identity.

The sooner English is taught, the more easily children will acquire phonetic ability, equivalent to that of native speakers. This early beginning in a foreign language has shown consistently good results. A foreign language is introduced in schools to students as young as three, as it is very beneficial for children to start learning another language at such an early stage. As Krashen, Long & Scarcella (1979) say “older is faster, but younger is better” (p. 573).

English is spoken worldwide. It is considered to be, perhaps, the world’s most important language and is used as first tongue in many continents and countries. It is also a second or foreign language for many others. For this reason, Spanish children have to learn English in order to communicate internationally.

When in a classroom we must plan the learning process very well, especially when it comes to teaching a foreign language. It is important to make sure we are using the correct material, technology and methodology. An aspect that many teachers may not achieve is to be critical with ourselves. It is only by being self critical that we can improve and enrich our capacity as teachers.

We must not think that a foreign language is only learnt in a classroom. There are many ways to learn and be taught English. In this project I will mention other ways it is possible to do so.

I am not only, with this case study, going to observe what and how the students learn, but also how the English teacher applies her knowledge to the class. It is fascinating, from my point of view, to watch the stages young students go through while

learning a language, starting from the very basic and escalating step by step to the more complex aspects.

2. Justification

I have chosen to base my project on teaching English as a foreign language, because I have grown up in an English speaking home while living in a Spanish community. So, for this reason, I am bilingual and have a great interest in how people learn another language apart from their native tongue.

It is also particularly fascinating for me, as a trainee teacher, to observe the learning process children go through while assimilating a foreign language. It is also of interest to me to observe how they learn in a non-educational context; such as in their home, while playing with friends or in their daily routines.

It is only in recent years that, in this country, children are being taught English from a very early age. For teachers as well it is a relatively new experience to have students as young as three years old. As stated in MacDonald's (1981) *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary*, the minds of infants are a tabula rasa, "a smoothed or blank tablet: minds not yet influenced by outside impressions and experiences."

By starting at an early age to learn a foreign language, it becomes a formative influence in their lives. If well taught it confers many advantages and will benefit these children in the future.

For children learning from an early age it is very important to use the correct methodology. Among the most rewarding are those that are based on activities such as singing and playing. These come so naturally to children that they find learning in this way to be pleasurable and easy. Even teachers can also enjoy their own participation while making it fun and interesting.

In the Spanish system, English is compulsory from the age of six. Though teachers think it is a good idea to start earlier, when in Infant Education. As it is stated in the BOE, Teachers should encourage the contact with the English language in the second cycle of infant education making a bigger effort in the last year, before going into Primary (Royal Decree 1630/2006, 29th December).

3. Objectives and hypothesis

With this project I have set myself a number of goals that I would like to have achieved when the case study is completed.

Main objectives:

- Describe how English is taught as a foreign language in a Spanish infant education classroom.
- Use a questionnaire to ascertain their exposure and use of English outside the classroom.

Specific objectives:

- Investigate whether what they are taught in school is used within the family context. Initially I believe that the children do use some English at home.
- Discover which vocabulary is predominant if used outside the school context.

As for the initial hypothesis, I think that young students may use English in a familiar context when addressing colours.

4. Theoretical framework

Before explaining the case study I would like to address some of the aspects I think are most important, and therefore stating why I think English in Infant Education is so necessary.

4.1. Curriculum

There are three areas in Infant Education: self awareness, familiarity with our surroundings and lastly, the 3rd area, which I am to focus on, is language, communication and representation. The document to which I shall refer is order ECI/3960/2007. It states the objectives, contents and skills children must acquire when in Infant Education.

The aims found in the curriculum of infant education are tackled in the subsequent lines. Article 4 (p. 1017) says an important objective is to develop communicative skills in different languages and ways of expression. Another objective states:

Understanding what other children and adults are trying to communicate, familiarizing themselves with the rules of interaction exchange and confidently exhibiting good communication skills in their own language as well as in foreign languages. *Ibid.*: p. 1028).

Aim number 8 says “to begin to use a foreign language orally within the context of classroom activities and demonstrate interest and enjoyment while participating in these exchanges” (*Ibid.*: p.1028).

For children in second cycle (between the age of three to six) there are contents of verbal language which are related to listening, speaking and interaction. (*Ibid.*: p.1028)

They should “[s]how an interest in participating orally in a foreign language when doing routines and in normal classroom interactions. Value English as a communicative instrument.” (*Ibid.*: p.1028-1029).

It is also important to “[u]nderstand the overall idea of oral texts in a foreign language when speaking about normal classroom situations. Positive attitude towards the language” (*Ibid.*: p. 1029).

The last content is “[l]istening, overall comprehension, memorization and reciting songs, stories, poems or rhymes in a foreign language” (*Ibid.*: p. 1029).

It states under block number two, which talks about utilization of new technologies, that when children are in the second cycle of Infant Education, the “[u]se of audiovisual material, communication technologies along with new research are used to familiarize children with a foreign language” is essential . (*Ibid.*: p. 1029).

It is in the second stage of Infant Education that one can then begin to deepen the English teaching, as mentioned in the present law of education, the Order states: “In the second cycle of infant education they will begin to use a foreign language with interactive activities within the routine of a classroom situation” (*Ibid.*: p. 1017).¹

4.2. Key concepts

To facilitate the reading of the my Bachelor of Art dissertation and have a better understanding of some concepts I should begin by defining the words that are important to completely comprehend the text.

¹ Contents and objectives of the Curriculum are my translation.

The first concept that I will describe is first language or L1, which is a person's native language. Klein (1986, p.4) states that "[f]irst language acquisition occurs when the learner – usually a child – has been without a language so far and now acquires one".)

The next concept that I will define is that of a second language or L2 for which there are two definitions. The first states that L2 "[i]s one being acquired in an environment in which the language is spoken natively. For example, a Spaniard acquiring English in England" Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p. 6). The other is "[a] non-native language officially recognized and adopted in a multilingual country as a means of public communication" (Collins Dictionary: online).

Another important category to mention is that of a foreign language. Klein (1986) believes it is utilized when a language is learnt in a place where it is not spoken in routine situations. The learner usually acquires the foreign language through instruction.

Lastly, there is the critical period which is "[t]he hypothesis that the first few years of life are the crucial time for individuals to acquire a first language and that after a certain age (approximately 5-years) language learning is more and more difficult". (*The Online Dictionary of language Terminology*: online).

4.3. Importance of English

The importance of English is manifold. It is one of the most spoken languages in the world, therefore of great interest and usefulness for non-native speakers. Crystal (1985) claims that it is estimated that English is spoken natively by 325 million of the world's 4.7 billion and it is an official second language for 1.4 billion additional people.

Given the primacy of the USA as the world's most powerful nation, it has become the language of business, science and politics. Scientists would be at a loss if they could not read the findings and reports of original research as this too is frequently in English. While in politics its importance cannot be underestimated. In Spain, some politicians cannot communicate with others in English with fluency. This is an anomaly these days in Europe and is indicative of the poor language skills of an older generation. Things are changing rapidly in Spain and the importance and necessity of giving Spanish children a good foundation in English is obvious.

There are social and economic benefits to coming into contact with a foreign language and culture. Socially it facilitates a greater understanding and acceptance between nations as different nationalities are interacting increasingly more. This communication between countries can lead to increased economic benefits related to the importation and exportation of products.

However, due to today's economic crisis, especially in Spain, emigration to other foreign countries is increasing. For Spanish citizens, the probability of finding work abroad is better if an individual is able to speak the language and communicate with others correctly - another good reason to learn English.

All of these prior factors have made it necessary to increase the number of bilingual schools in Spain. In these educational institutions students are taught different subjects through two languages. It is a great way to introduce a new language to children and in the long term it helps them to acquire it as early as possible.

Even before the LOE (2006), when the LOGSE was implemented, English was already taught in schools. The reason being that teachers believed in the usefulness and benefits that acquiring a new language entailed. There are also many books that discuss methods and ways of teaching a language that prove beneficial to the English teaching process. Some of these books were published prior to 2006 (Mur, 1998 or Klein, 1986). It is not only in schools that English has become an important feature but it is a prerequisite for a University education. It is now necessary to sit an exam and attain a certain level of any language to get a degree. This means that anyone who wants to achieve a higher level of education must learn a foreign language.

4.4. Why teachers should receive a good education in English?

A primary capacity that a teacher needs is good communication skills. All teachers should have ease with words, an ability to make students understand concepts by explaining clearly, be reassuring and have a lot of patience. They should be positive and encouraging especially when teaching a foreign language as much repetition and practice is often needed.

A specialized language teacher should have an impeccable command of the English language. This involves dominating aspects of the language, such as phonology, syntax, morphology, lexis, semantics, pragmatics and discourse, among others. In the case of teaching young children, this needs to be allied to knowledge of the

developmental stages and capacities of the students. The teaching has to adapt to different age groups.

Having a variety of approaches while being flexible in their use is vital. This demands that they be creative and involved, and fundamentally enjoy their work with children. By doing this, the mix of approaches will ensure that learning is fresh and effective.

Another skill teacher's must dominate is pronunciation. It is of fundamental importance. If got right at this stage, before reading and writing skills are developed, the benefits are immense. This of course, demands that the teacher's pronunciation and accent are as accurate as possible, which may be challenging for teachers who have not immersed themselves in an environment where the language is spoken.

In my opinion it does not matter if a teacher is native or not, but the pronunciation should always be correct. They can refine this by using audio-visual material.

There is much controversy about who acquires a second or foreign language first, whether it is adults or children. Pinker (1995) believes that "[m]ost adults never master a foreign language especially the phonology, giving rise to what we call a "foreign accent" (p.140). However, others, such as Hatch (1983) think otherwise. While Krashen *et al.* (1979) state that adults develop the syntactic and morphological aspect of language faster than children. For this reason, it is correct to say that the first to acquire a second or foreign language, whether adults or children, is very ambiguous. Nevertheless, it is commonly thought that children pick up a new language with more ease than adults.

4.5. How children learn English

Before children are born, practically all their neurons are already formed. If we consider the babbling of a child or a baby's cry to express needs or feelings, language development starts from the very beginning, when a child is born (Kainz, 1959).

Pinker (1995) believes that long distance connections are not complete until the child is nine months old. Synapses continue to develop, especially from nine months to two years old. At the age of one, children are able to understand and produce some words. At twelve months old, the child begins to emit sequences that usually contain two syllables. Adults may confuse these sounds with a word. Some months after,

Lenneberg (1967) postulates that children begin to understand the connection between the word and the object, saying only one word to refer to a whole sentence. This is called a holophrase. For example, they will say “ball” instead of “Dad, give me the ball, please”. At eighteen months vocabulary increases rapidly (one word every two waking hours), and primitive syntax begins, connecting two words. According to Pinker (1995), when the child is nearly three, language blooms into fluent grammatical conversation, developing enormously their communicative skills.

The authors previously mentioned believe that language is assimilated in a more natural manner by children. All languages are easier to learn from an early age, as the younger you are, the less difficulty you have. This is due to children’s greater brain elasticity. This elasticity is lost in time, and it becomes increasingly harder to learn at an older age. This makes them more capable of learning in a quicker and easier fashion. Chomsky (1998) firmly believes that children have a “black box” or LAD (Language Acquisition Device) in their brain, that helps them learn words and structures of a foreign language without any conscious effort whatsoever, whereas adults do not possess this capacity.

In contrast, Klein (1986) says children learn depending on their experiences and the language that surrounds them. A newborn has got the capacity to acquire any human language. A Spanish, for instance, child inevitably will learn Spanish, the same as the French child will learn French.

When a child grows up in a context where two or more different languages are spoken and there is a clear input of each of them, this child will grow up to be multilingual. Hyashizaki (2004) affirms that when a child learns a new language it increases the density of grey matter in the left inferior parietal cortex.

This plasticity is also referred to by Lenneberg (1967) as he believes that the critical period for learning a first language is between two years of age until puberty. It is possible to learn a second language after this age, though the brain works in a different way than when children are at a young age. It is obvious that children also master pronunciation of a foreign language much better and quicker than adults. This too is due to the elasticity of the brain. Adults can achieve a very good pronunciation, though making a much higher effort. Another aspect of language is intonation. Leaver, Ehrman & Shekhtman (2005) argue that intonation of our native tongue influences greatly in the foreign language. So much so, that it is one of the earliest features that babies pick up on.

For Terraze, Petitto, Sanders & Bever (1979) it is clear that the capacity of learning a language is part of the human psyche, as chimpanzees, who are genetically similar to us, have also been spoken to in the same way as to human children, but they have not managed to learn to speak.

Before the 1990's, it was thought that children inherited the ability to acquire linguistic knowledge and the rules that exist in a language, they just had to find out by themselves when to use them appropriately Chomsky (1957). Another author who partly agrees with Chomsky is Pinker (1994). He believes that children have an innate capacity for acquiring and using a language. He states that children have wired into their brain basic organization of grammar.

It is a challenge teaching a new language to children of such a young age, but in the opinion of experts it is when they are most likely to benefit from the integration of the different aspects of foreign language such as lexicon, phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse, among others. Having said this, all children do not learn at the same pace. Some have more trouble learning than others as individual abilities vary. Teachers must pay attention to each child before continuing with new material. They must always go back to what they have been taught previously as a way of revising.

Some authors may think it is not worth starting teaching a new language to very young children, as they are not able to learn as much as an adolescent due to the immaturity of the child's brain. On the other hand, Chomsky (1969) believes that after adolescence, language development is scarce, though many structures are learnt in a later stage. This means that a language is not completely acquired as a child.

However, this does not mean it is not beneficial. On the contrary, if we start teaching them and getting them involved, it will make children more sensitive to the language, they will have a better comprehension, oral skill, pronunciation and, all in all, it gives them confidence that they will be able to face a new language in the future.

At the practical level of teaching a language, motivation is a massive factor in the acquisition of a language. Children tend to learn much faster when they have an interest in the material they are being taught. Alonso Tapia (1998) states that there are two types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic. The first one occurs when a person does well for the love of learning and the enjoyment of the task. These children try to improve their skills and accomplish their aims. The second type is extrinsic. This happens when a child does well to achieve an outcome. The child may want a prize, social recognition, positive feedback, to win, etcetera. Basically, this type of motivation

comes from outside of the individual. Here the role of the teacher is hugely important. The teacher's enthusiasm is not passed unnoticed by the children, making them believe it is fun, significant and worthwhile.

Alonso Tapia (1998) believes that teachers have the power to influence students consciously or unconsciously having, therefore a positive or negative effect on their learning process. For this reason I think teachers should always be impartial, not demonstrating preferences for some students over others and always trying to see the progress children make, instead of the failure.

Apart for being impartial, Mur (1998) believes claims that it is absolutely necessary to take into consideration the child's abilities, difficulties, interests, previous knowledge etc. The teacher should be flexible and attend to their individual needs. As Pinker (1995) mentions "[t]here are great individual differences, which depend on effort, attitudes, amount of exposure, quality of teaching and plain talent" (p.140). The task of the teacher is highly complex and challenging, requiring great ability if it is to be done well.

4.6. Methodology to teach a foreign language in Infant Education

When we speak of methodology, we refer to the methods we choose to use. Often each teacher has their own way of teaching, this would be their personal methodology.

We ought to let the children be participants in the learning process. Sometimes it is more fruitful to let them discover things by themselves. When this is done, the teacher must always be there to guide them towards the right approach.

An important strategy teachers can use is the communicative approach, even with young students. Hymes (1972) firmly believes that language teaching should be based on the ability to communicate in the target language. This means that communication should be meaningful. With three-four year olds we could use questions such as "What is your name?" or "How old are you?" for them to ask each other in class, so as to gather personal information about their classmates. We should not only use the communicative approach, but teachers should also put into practice the total physical response (TPR), developed by Dr. Asher (2011), who states that children respond to simple commands, in other words; speech and action.

4.6.1. Teaching techniques and resources

It is useful for teachers to know and put into practice some basic strategies that may help them with the learning process of their students. First of all, it is important to mention that repetition of previous material is key to the process of memorization. It is a vital aspect of learning and the best way to assimilate concepts and structures. Children of a very young age have not developed efficient memory strategies yet. Szpotowicz (2005) believes it is necessary to involve them emotionally, physically and mentally to motivate them to learn English. Hence, repetition is crucial to learning and memorizing vocabulary. It is a very important aspect when teaching a language to any individual, but even more so when the learner is a child.

Another possible strategy is to introduce a competitive element to the learning process. I would like to expand on the positive reinforcement previously mentioned. One can use prizes to motivate children, or making it into a game or a competition. For Aqsha, Yunus & Amin (2010) the most important concern when teaching a foreign language is to spark students' interest and motivation for the acquisition process.

They can win material prizes, such as sweets or toys, and non-material ones like a "high fives" or tell them what a good job they have done. These types of competitive games usually have very good results. Though we must always watch out for children who are not great at languages if we use competitive activities as a method when teaching.

It is vital to make teaching interesting and fun for students. The methodological resources Mur (1998) uses are mainly through games, drama, songs, flashcards, photographs, stories and also the mascot of the class. By making it enjoyable, this reinforces Artigal's idea (1996) when he declares that a language is learnt when we are sufficiently exposed to it while having a positive attitude to it.

I think it is worth expanding on these methodological resources that Mur (1998) mentions. Firstly, songs are used in young student's classroom practically every day. Children love to listen to someone singing and they also love joining in. It is a way to relax them when they come in from the playground, to help them learn concepts, or even to quieten them down in the classroom. When the teacher sings in English, it catches their attention while, at the same time, they are learning many inherent aspects of the language. Especially in Infant Education songs must be short, easy and rhythmic. If they are then accompanied by gestures and mimicry it provides a deeper

understanding of the song's meaning. Non-verbal language can be very helpful for children to comprehend the content of a song.

Experimental evidence was obtained by Ludke, Ferreira & Overy (2014) to prove how a foreign language is better assimilated when singing, even in adults. For this experiment sixty adults were assigned to listen and repeat one of either of the following three: speaking, rhythmic speaking or singing. By the end of the experiment it was clear that the adults who were sung to recalled more than the other individuals.

Poetry, rhymes and word play are also be used as teaching aids. These should be age appropriate, short and rhythmic. Even if students do not fully comprehend the content, they will enjoy the sound of it.

Besides, theatre is used frequently in young student's classrooms, or to put on a show for the parents. The sentences must be simple, of only just a couple of words each. We must think about many factors that are involved, such as nerves, conflicts, their parents may be there, and the fact that they are just kids.

Storytelling is another wonderful way of introducing a foreign language. They do not know how to read yet, but they enjoy being read to. It is good as they internalize pronunciation, structures, intonation, and phrases.

Artigal (1996) insists that stories must be simple, but intriguing for the students, who take on different roles as does the teacher. After acting the play three or four times, there should be plenty of related activities such as songs, games and drawings about the topic.

As Mur (1998) states, visual aids such as picturebooks and flashcards are helpful for very young students to learn a new language. It is especially useful for teaching vocabulary and simple phrases.

Most of this material can be found on the Internet. Dettori and Lupi (2010) state that Information Communication Technology or ICT tools have been used in the teaching and learning process of a foreign language from the beginning of their use in education in the 70s. This tool can be very enriching if used correctly. It is possible to find an infinite amount of information on the net, from audio-visual material to different types of exercises. However, it is the teacher's job to choose the right ones to apply in her English lesson.

Using the various approaches previously described, we get the children completely involved in a foreign language. At this age much is unconsciously assimilated that pertains to the deeper structure of a language. Apart from obvious

gains, such as vocabulary, more subtle ones such as rhythms and cadences of speech, pronunciation and grammatical forms are integrated effortlessly from the beginning.

4.7. Evaluation

Evaluation is necessary in all stages of the children's education. It is a way of recognizing if the children have reached the aims the teacher has set out for them previously. Assessment ought to be global and continuous and formative in Infant Education, as well as open and flexible.

There could be a first evaluation in which the teacher should consider various aspects, such as the area where the student lives, information provided by the family and direct observation of the child. In this first evaluation, the results will provide valuable information about the children's knowledge. The results may offer the teacher a starting point as how to begin the lessons.

It is possible to do another evaluation half way through the theme as to see if the students are learning and internalizing what is being taught. In this case, the teacher has the opportunity to change the methodology of the learning process if thought necessary. Lastly, there can also be a final evaluation in which the teacher asks questions about what the children have learnt from start to finish. At the end of each theme, Mur (1998) thinks the teacher should evaluate to see if the student has reached the goals intended in English.

This last type of evaluation is the most common of the three. Although it is important not to forget the other two. Evaluation provides feed-back for the teacher, as it shows if the contents are understood and if the degree of difficulty is adequate.

Evaluation may be done by asking questions about the topic or through observing their daily work such as their activity books. Another possibility is to write down the progress each child has made during the week. Stickers (positive and negative ones) could be utilized depending on how they have done each day, as to obtain information for the final evaluation

Even children "evaluate" themselves according to Muñoz (2013), as they are able to compare academically their results to those of their classmates from approximately the beginning of primary education. By the end of primary they are aware that learning a language entails a higher degree of complexity. It changes from being fun and interesting to becoming a challenge.

In my opinion, I feel that sometimes we underestimate how much a child actually knows. Part of the problem with teaching a foreign language is that it is sometimes taught negatively. In other words, teachers highlight what students do not know instead of what they do know. It is not only what children say or do in the classroom that counts, as even an evaluation cannot demonstrate with accuracy their ability or entire knowledge of English. The learning process is very important and should be taken into account more, not only the results. It is, therefore, difficult to know how much they have really learnt. They do not fail to amaze me how quickly they learn.

The confidence and lack of inhibition of the teacher, as well as the enjoyment obtained through good teaching at an early stage provides the foundation of future foreign language skills.

5. Methodology

Context

The school where I am doing my teacher training is the educational institution called “Juan XXIII-Cartuja”, located in the northern part of Granada. It is a charitable foundation which is both legal and autonomous as recognized by the prevailing legislation. It is a state-subsidised school of catholic denomination. The institution’s religious objective is that of the Catholic Church itself which aims to respect the freedom of all the students, teachers and families.

Due to its location it falls within a suburban social context. It should also be pointed out that a large number of the students of the school are of foreign extraction and are of generally low socio-economic status.

Participants

In the classroom there are twenty-five students of the ages between three to four years old. This means, it is their first year attending school. Out of the total twenty five there are seventeen boys, and eight girls. Children are seated around pentagonal-shaped tables in two groups, one containing thirteen children, and the other twelve.

Data collection methods

I have been collecting the information about how English is taught in a Spanish classroom for a period of four months, since I started the teacher training. I have

gathered this data by writing a diary where I have described the procedures used throughout the duration of the English language class. I have also described the methodology used by the teacher and an outline of all the activities used.

In order to observe if the children use the English they learn at school, in a family context I have designed a questionnaire for the parents to fill in. The questions relate to the different English material they are taught in class, such as vocabulary, songs and short sentences. (See appendix 1).

Research design

This investigation is a qualitative, descriptive case study of the state of learning of English in an infant school in Granada, Spain. The qualitative approach was chosen for this investigation, as the main aim throughout was to attempt to describe the richness and complexity of the data gathered rather than its classification and quantification for statistical analysis. A case study for a specific infant school setting was chosen for sufficient in-depth and manageable data to be collected. Merriam (2001) states that case studies “describe a single bounded system with a finite amount of data to be collected.” This chosen research design permitted the development of the research within the real-life setting of the classroom and school environment (what it has come to be known as *classroom ethnography*).

6. Analysis

In “Juan XXIII” there are two English classes per week of one hour each. Relatively speaking this is not much time at all for such an important subject. For this reason it is vital for the teacher to make these classes fun for children, for it to be a positive experience, enriching their learning process.

The teacher is of Spanish nationality, she is young and has been working as an English teacher for six years, although she has not specialized in English. She speaks mostly in Spanish, except for some songs, simple commands, sentences and vocabulary that has already been taught. She has a set routine that she and the children do in every English class.

At the beginning they all rest their heads on the table and sing a song called “Go to sleep” where there are parts in English and parts in Spanish and the numbers from one to three. Then a child is picked out and stands in front of the class with “Tommy”, the pet tiger, and greets the children. He/ she says, with the help of the teacher, “Hello”,

“Good morning”, “How are you?”, “What is your name?”, “Give me a kiss”. The rest of the class answer these questions and at the end they say the “magic words” to the child who is standing up, which are “sit down, please”.

After the song and greeting, the teacher revises vocabulary through thirty five flashcards. The number of flashcards increases every so often and they show vocabulary related to body parts, clothes, classroom objects, colours, and numbers. At the beginning of each class, there is new vocabulary to be introduced, four or five new words that the children will learn that are related to the content of the theme being taught.

As the students have been sitting down long enough, there is usually a practical activity. It may be doing a choreography for a new song, imitating a recently learnt animal or a game suggested by the teacher. The aim of the activity is to reinforce what she has been explaining. Towards the end of the class, the teacher explains which pages of their English book they should do, normally two, and they do it individually. This is the usual routine for the English class, although it does not mean that there is not flexibility to change and modify the course of the class if needed.

The teacher thinks it is vital for her young students to be exposed to native English speakers accents, therefore she uses new technologies such as CD’s, DVD’s and the Internet to look for songs, rhymes and short stories.

In the past four months I have noticed an improvement in the children’s English. Apart from the two curriculum English classes a week, I revised this subject each day with the students. This has had a positive effect on their learning process as their exposure to the language has been greater than normal. The amount of vocabulary is increased regularly, and the children can identify most flashcards. I have observed that some of the shyest students are the ones who best remember what has been taught.

It is interesting to see how they sometimes mix up English and Spanish words when speaking in their native language, especially with colours. I believe that they think it is possible to say “rojo” and “red” in their native language and that both are correct. Even if this is amusing, we must make sure that they comprehend that they are two different languages. When they are colouring I have heard a students singing a song that we had previously listened to in English class and even asking an agitated child to “sit down, please!”.

Occasionally, in order to motivate the children in a healthy and competitive atmosphere, the teacher brings in some sweets. She hands them out to the children who

first say the correct word from the flashcards being used in that class. Of course the use of prizes - in this case sweets - should only be used sporadically as an incentive to learning.

I enjoy watching and being part of this process of teaching a foreign language although sometimes frustrating, it is also very rewarding. To fulfil my curiosity as to whether the children used English at home I designed a questionnaire that I gave the parents. It contained six questions. There are three possible answers for them: yes, sometimes and no. Out of the twenty-five sheets I gave the parents, I received fourteen. For this reason, the results do not reflect accurately the use of English of all the children in their homes.

The first question of the questionnaire is: "Have they said the colours in English in a familiar context?". The reason for asking this question is because it is one of the first contents that are taught to an individual who is learning a foreign language. There were eleven positive answers, two "sometimes" and one "no".

The second question is: "Have they used vocabulary related to clothes in the family context?" Out of the fourteen answers there were two "yes", three "sometimes" and nine "no".

The third questions I asked is: "Have they used a short sentence in English?" the result is ten "yes", two "sometimes" and two "no".

The fourth question is: "Have they sung an English song, or part of a song in a familiar context?" Eleven do, one sometimes and two do not.

The fifth question is: "Do they watch cartoons in English?" The answer is that six children do, four sometimes and four do not.

The last question is if they have an anecdote of interest related to English, just two parents wrote about their experience. One child seems confused when saying the colours in Spanish, saying them in English instead. To which the teacher has recommended helping him learn the colours in Spanish properly. Another parent wrote that the child sometimes uses English words when explaining what happened that day in school.

These results from the questionnaire reveal that very young children do, and can, learn a foreign language quite quickly. We have taken into account the fact that they have only two hours a week of official English classes from the beginning of the academic year although I have also been reinforcing the English language throughout the week with the consent of the teacher. After seeing the results of the questionnaire,

we can reinforce certain aspects of the language that children may find more difficult, in this case clothes.

All in all, it has demonstrated that children are capable of learning a foreign language, even if they have not yet completely mastered their first.

7. Discussion and Results

I have mentioned how children go through the process of learning a foreign language. How it is a slow and challenging, requiring much patience on the part of the teacher. Students at the age of three are still very young; therefore their brains have not yet been developed enough for them to be proficient in some aspects of language learning. On the other hand, children of this age have abilities that benefit them in other aspects of assimilating a foreign language.

I have been able to observe how the three-year-old students of “Juan XXIII” have started their first year of learning English. Each child has different abilities and qualities, they do not all learn in the same way. Nevertheless they all mostly respond to positive reinforcement and encouragement. The satisfaction they gain in learning something new is observable. Judging by the relatively high level of English language use in the home, this would seem to be corroborated in the sample taken. If they were to receive similar encouragement and positive reinforcement at home, there would be a visible improvement in the children’s learning.

As the teacher says, the different methodologies used in a classroom can be crucial for their learning process. It has been proven that children need much repetition, visual aids, fun and interesting activities to make learning significant, and with learning a new language it should be no different. Therefore through songs, rhymes, games, stories, theatre among others, it is possible to improve decisively the language skills of each individual. Most of the strategies have been put into practice in the classroom where I have been doing my teacher training. Sometimes activities must be modified depending on many different aspects related to the timetable, the children, celebrations or an unexpected situation. This is where the teachers can prove their capacity of being flexible and innovative turning whatever event to their advantage.

I have mostly observed that children need short and interesting activities when learning English. If the duration of the each individual activity is more than approximately fifteen minutes children start getting bored and lose attention. When

classes are well organized the potential of the children is maximized, leading to a better assimilation of the language

8. Conclusion

In recent years, educational institutions are doing their best to improve the teaching of foreign languages, especially English. Parents are also demanding a higher level of teaching from the teacher.

I chose to do a case study about how children go through the process of learning a foreign language at just the age of three. I enjoy trying to understand how their minds work while going through the different learning stages, and secondly because I would like to be able to teach English to children myself one day.

When I started this case study, I set myself a number of objectives. I was aware that this project may or may not have positive results. Firstly, I have outlined the routine the English teacher goes through in the “Juan XXIII” school of Cartuja. My second objective was to design a questionnaire where I asked the parents questions related to how the children used or practised their English in a family situation. Without knowing the results, I believed that children would use English in a family context when addressing the colours. However, they also use simple sentences and songs they had learnt in class. This means that my initial hypothesis was incorrect.

The questionnaire revealed that indeed, children have learnt quite a lot of English during their first school year. This demonstrates that repetition is one of the methods that has a big impact on their learning, along with singing. Children respond better to songs than any other form of language learning as it helps students assimilate a foreign language in a fun and easy way. Overall, the evidence for children repeating what they have learned is encouraging and if we can find other ways to motivate them to continue with this process, enlisting the co-operation of the parents in this respect, it could be very fruitful.

I think two hours of English a week is insufficient if a higher level of the language is desired. It is necessary to gradually increase the amount of English used in a class so that finally the class is conducted almost entirely in English. If taught in this way, students will perfect their pronunciation, accent and intonation, which are the main problems amongst older students.

Another important factor I believe is that teachers should receive more specialized language training. It is vital for a teacher to have a correct use of grammar and good oral skills, the latter being very difficult to achieve if taught incorrectly from the beginning. For this reason I think that professional training in all aspects for a language teacher should be improved.

I am pleased and surprised by the responses to the questionnaire and by my experience at “Juan XXIII”. This case study along with the questionnaire has let us in on how children learn a foreign language and which aspects of the language they actually use. A similar project could be done more regularly, as a type of evaluation, to observe if children are assimilating English properly. If the results are negative, the teacher has the opportunity to reinforce the aspects that they have more difficulty with. If teachers could involve the parents in their children’s education and encourage them to repeat what they have learnt at school would set up a new dynamic in their learning process.

I firmly believe that with good tuition Spanish children have the capacity to achieve English language skills on a par with any other European country. An increased emphasis on foreign language teaching will better prepare them in this essential modern day skill.

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Legal documents

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- Royal Decree 3960/2007, 19th December, published in BOE, number 5.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

	SI	A VECES	NO
¿Han dicho los colores en inglés? (red, blue, white, orange, green, pink, yellow...)			
¿Han utilizado vocabulario sobre la vestimenta en casa? (T-Shirt, jacket, trousers, dress, jumper, shoes, socks, hat, scarf...)			
¿Han dicho alguna vez una frase en inglés? (“Hello”, “Good morning”, “How are you?”, “What’s your name?”, “sit down, please” etc)			
¿Cantan canciones o parte de una canción en inglés que se le ha enseñado en el colegio?			
¿Ven los dibujos animados en inglés?			
¿Tiene alguna anécdota, relativo al inglés, que quiera contar? ¿Cuál/es? (Escriba debajo)			