



2nd International Conference on Higher Education Advances, HEAd'16, 21-23 June 2016,
València, Spain

Sbateyl.org: A Virtual Space for Effective Language Training

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Abstract

The paper presents an ongoing European cross-institutional project on teaching young language learners whose aim is to develop a web-based in-service teacher education programme with a school-based follow-up component. The main focus of the project is to bring researchers and teachers together to establish an innovative professional procedure blending theory and practice. Based on the strategic partnership between one local university and one primary school from each participant country, the project aims to foster the professional advancement and teaching practices of primary school teachers. The article initially outlines the main theoretical and methodological issues in the field of early foreign language acquisition in order to contextualise the project. Subsequently, it describes the operational phases of the project as well as the research perspectives underlying the creation of specific syllabuses and modules which will be available on the web portal of the project. In the conclusion it suggests ways of developing our research in order to contribute to the building of a European framework for foreign language teacher training.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of HEAd'16

Keywords: web- and school-based project; teacher training; early foreign language acquisition.

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Although the two authors have collaborated in the research and planning of the article, Rita Calabrese is responsible for the writing of sections 1, 3, 4, 4.1 and Katherine E. Russo for sections 2, 4.2, 5.

1. Introduction

Considering the problems and inadequacies of teacher training for young language learners in Europe, the SBATEYL project aims to develop a web-based pre- and in-service teacher education programme with a school-based follow-up component to contribute to the continuous professional development of foreign language teachers of young learners (between the age of 6-12). In this project, we aim to follow an innovative flipped approach. A ten weeks long web-based programme has been designed to help language teachers become familiar with recent research, theory, and approaches concerning teaching foreign languages to young learners. Secondly, based on their own needs, the teachers are personally involved in the project development and have a chance to suggest their practical solutions and classroom activities considering the introduced theory, research, and approaches through collaboration with peer teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers from different countries. Third, teachers implement and test these innovative practices in their own classes under the supervision of the trainers. And finally, the tested and approved classroom practices will be selected and included in the products of the project such as the portal web-site of the in-service education programme and a professional development book including theoretical suggestions and classroom-tested best practices. Most importantly, they will be openly disseminated for use of all pre-service and in-service language teachers of young learners in Europe through an open-access platform. In this in-service education programme, in line with the objectives of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) and Erasmus+ programme, ICT based applications and improvement of intercultural communicative competence in young learners have been given a special emphasis.

2. Motivation

Fighting rising levels of unemployment has become one of the most urgent tasks for European governments. The same risk threatens many adults with low skills. Technologies and language learning are changing the way in which societies operate, and there is a need to ensure the best use of them. Yet this issue has been recently targeted through non-formal learning activities, which aim at enhancing skills and competences, through training and cooperation opportunities. Alongside their ongoing printing of textbooks and student books, language learning professionals have invested in the growth of e-learning and new media. Multimedia platforms have also been institutionalised through online and distance training programmes such as Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). Accordingly, new media have called for a reassessment of EFL teacher training contexts and identities in the age of media convergence. EFL teachers today have more choice about how and where to spend their training time as they use Web 2.0 technologies in their everyday lives in public or private settings, and frequently migrate to non-institutional sources of learning, such as blogs and media sharing platforms (Russo). The latter may be considered as part of their training ecology, that is multiple and overlapping “contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning” (Barron 2006).

The other major issue which has been targeted by the European Commission as part of its investments in cross-national development is the low proficiency in foreign languages. The European Commission, in its report "Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: An action plan 2004-2006" (2003) emphasized the importance and advantages of early learning of one or more foreign languages in the EU member states. Above all, an early start to foreign languages is regarded as a positive factor which impacts on the child's overall language and educational development and engenders a positive attitude towards other cultures. Accordingly, recent curriculum initiatives around the globe have started to introduce foreign languages to children at an earlier age (Nikolova, 2008; Nikilov & Curtain, 2000; Nunan, 2003). Yet it has been found that language teachers are not prepared adequately to teach young learners. Common problems with current practice in Europe are that teachers are educated to teach adults; generalists are teaching language classes and teachers are frequently unaware of the special needs of younger learners (Dendrinos, 2010). Moreover, primary school language classrooms around Europe often lack variation, interesting materials, and multisensorial activities (Lundberg, 2007). The problem might be that training is often ineffective as teachers are likely to reject knowledge and skill requirements when the requirements are imposed or encountered in the context of multiple, contradictory, and overwhelming innovations; and when it is packaged in off-site courses or one off workshops that are alien to the purposes and contexts of their work. As Smylie (1989) has found, teachers rank direct classroom experience as their most important site for learning and are often resistant to

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