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An exploratory study on English teachers’ opinions in multicultural preschools

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Abstract

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

[...] an adequate curriculum for the early years is one that educates both through and for diversity. It is one that takes into account the children’s needs, interests and linguistic repertoires, which educates their hearts and their minds in a holistic manner, and develops their global and intercultural awareness. (Lourenço & Mourao, 2015, p.135)

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

1.1. A Multilingual context: Ceuta & Melilla.

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

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