

Exploring pre-service teachers' views on introducing EFL in early childhood teacher education

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ABSTRACT: Early childhood research and policy recommendations indicate that foreign languages should not be taught separately from other areas, but integrated within existing classroom practice. On such accounts, priority attention is given to the development of learner motivation and stimulation of positive attitudes towards language learning. The collaborative efforts of all early years' teachers are fundamental to such approaches. This article presents a study exploring pre-service teachers' perspectives on the implementation of English as a foreign language in pre-primary settings. The study was carried out within the context of a compulsory module at a Catalan university which embeds foreign language teacher training within its early childhood education degree programme. A mixed-method design using questionnaires and a series of focus groups was applied to explore participants' views on introducing EFL in the early years. Findings highlight the need for strategic action within teacher education programmes to empower future teachers to promote collaborative practice focused on the primary goal of developing positive attitudes to language learning.

Key words: Early childhood education, English as a foreign language, collaborative practice, schoolification of pre-primary education, pre-service teachers.

Explorando los puntos de vista de los maestros en formación sobre la introducción del inglés como lengua extranjera en la formación del profesorado de educación infantil

RESUMEN: Las investigaciones sobre la educación infantil y las recomendaciones políticas indican que las lenguas extranjeras (LE) no deberían enseñarse de manera separada de otras áreas, sino que deberían integrarse en la práctica existente del aula. De este modo, se presta atención al desarrollo de la motivación del alumno y se estimulan las actitudes positivas hacia el aprendizaje de idiomas. La colaboración de los educadores en la etapa de la educación infantil es fundamental para tales enfoques. Este estudio se llevó a cabo en el contexto de un módulo obligatorio en una universidad catalana que integra la formación del profesorado de LE dentro del programa de grado de educación infantil. Se aplicó un diseño de método mixto utilizando cuestionarios y grupos focales para explorar los puntos de vista de los maestros en formación sobre la introducción del inglés como LE en la infancia. Los resultados revelan la necesidad de una práctica docente colaborativa y ponen de manifiesto la necesidad de una acción estratégica en los programas de formación docente para capacitar a los futuros educadores para desarrollar prácticas colaborativas centradas en promover actitudes positivas hacia el aprendizaje de idiomas.

Palabras clave: Educación infantil, inglés como lengua extranjera, prácticas colaborativas, "escuelización" de la educación preescolar, maestros en formación

1. INTRODUCTION

Although still not compulsory in most EU countries, the introduction of English as a foreign language (EFL, hereinafter) in early childhood has become common practice in pre-primary school settings across many non-English speaking countries. In the EU, this tendency has been attributed to EU policy developments linking foreign language learning with favourable attitudes to other languages and cultural diversity (Cortina-Perez & Andúgar, 2021), as well as increasing social and parental pressures that associate English language competence with success in today's globalised world (Rokita-Jaskow & Ellis, 2019; Zhou & Lee, 2016).

1.1. EFL in early childhood teacher education

Reviews of practice across the globe (Mourão & Lourenço, 2015; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Waddington et al., 2018) have highlighted the need to develop a skilled workforce not only to meet the growing demand for EFL in early childhood education and care (ECEC from hereinafter), but to ensure quality provision and age-appropriate practice. Turning their attention to the important sphere of pre-service teacher education, researchers in Spain report on the lack of training in EFL in pre-primary programmes and call on universities to develop suitable itineraries to develop both the linguistic and didactic competences of future teachers (Andúgar et al., 2019). The tendency to employ specialist language teachers with limited training in ECEC has been identified across different geographical settings (Flores & Corcoll, 2008; Cerná, 2015; Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2018), prompting researchers to foreground and question the current dichotomy which sets 'the teacher of English' and 'the educator of children' apart (Mourão & Ellis, 2020).

Reinforcing this division in pre-primary school settings has serious implications since EFL specialist teachers without training in ECEC may be inadequately prepared to meet the demands of this stage of education and to integrate language learning within the existing projects of the centre (Siqués & Vila, 2014). Moreover, this division underpins and perpetuates the English-as-a-subject based frameworks which are dominant within primary and secondary school curriculums (Waddington, In Press). Transferring such practice into ECEC contravenes current guidelines and recommendations by separating EFL from other areas instead of integrating it and contextualising it within existing classroom practice, as advocated strongly in the early years curriculum of the Catalan context (Departament d'Educació, 2016), in which this study has been developed.

A report from the OECD (2017) examining the transition from early years to primary education, raised concerns over the increased "schoolification" of early childhood settings - when ECEC settings adopt practices that are usually more related to primary school - highlighting the importance of implementing age- and child- appropriate pedagogical practices to contribute effectively and ethically to children's overall development. Referring specifically to EFL, researchers highlight the fact that it is not only important to know the child and their process of language acquisition, but it is also paramount to be trained in early childhood teaching so that EFL is embedded in the child's reality (Flores & Corcoll, 2008; Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021). As these authors outline, one of the main problems that specialist language teachers encounter when they enter pre-primary classrooms is their

lack of awareness of the needs and capabilities of 3-5 year-old children and of the global approach required in early childhood education. In view of this, Taylor (2005) considers that, bearing in mind the characteristics of 4 and 5 year-olds, language itself might not be the best starting point for planning classroom dynamics. Instead, a more holistic approach that takes into consideration the general educational needs of the child seems more adequate. Waddington et al. (2018) suggest that children can only benefit from exposure to more than one language simultaneously if teaching professionals ensure that the environment in which the languages are introduced is appropriate and if language interaction happens in a natural way. In summary, EFL provision should be designed in accordance with child development, with meaningful learning experiences that go beyond a standardized content applicable to all children. The children's prior experiences and their context should be taken into account in order to boost positive attitudes towards language learning among young learners (Waddington, In Press).

1.2. Developing a collaborative approach

The concerns reported above have led scholars to question current tendencies and to push forward work aiming to establish ideal profiles for foreign language teachers in ECEC settings (Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021). Building on these important advances, the study presented in this paper aims to contribute to these debates by looking at the issue through a collective lens, since collaboration is fundamental when trying to explore a more holistic approach to EFL introduction in pre-primary settings. As Flores and Corcoll (2008) suggest, coordination among teachers should not be limited to the team of teachers merely exchanging information on which topics will be covered, so that the specialist language teachers can design English sessions or activities around those topics. Instead, coordination should imply developing joint projects that integrate all learning activities in order to achieve common objectives, with a shared methodology adjusted to the features of the pre-primary cycle. Furthermore, if one of the main objectives of early foreign language learning is to promote positive attitudes to other languages and cultures (European Commission, 2003; European Commission, 2011), all early-years teachers can work together collaboratively to achieve this objective. Moreover, stronger connections can be made between children's learning contexts and the foreign language when there is effective collaboration between early childhood educators (ECE from hereinafter) and EFL specialist teachers (Mourão & Robinson, 2016; Mourão, 2021; Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021).

1.3. A collaborative proposal

Our study has been conducted within the context of a compulsory module of the 2nd Year of the Early Childhood Degree Programme which includes foreign language teacher training within the generalist programme (Universitat de Girona, 2022). In terms of its organisational framework, the module is structured in four blocks of content, as we can see in Table 1. The module is delivered by university teachers from different disciplinary areas (pedagogy, social sciences, language education) who provide students with an introduction to the main objectives of the second stage of the pre-primary curriculum (3-6 years) and to key theory and practice in this field. The introduction of EFL at pre-primary level is

integrated in general teaching practice in Block 4. In terms of language of instruction, 75% of the module is delivered in Catalan (L1) and 25% in English. This methodology has been designed to respond to the growing need for suitable itineraries to develop the linguistic and didactic competences of all future teachers (Andúgar et al., 2019).

Table 1. *Content structure of the module DCACE incorporating ELT into generalist teacher education*

Block	Key Content	Timing
1 (Catalan)	The early years curriculum in Catalonia: key principles and areas. Implementing the curriculum in early years settings: holistic and integrated approaches.	Sep-Oct
2 (Catalan)	Designing a teaching intervention in preschool (key development areas, learning objectives, age-appropriate methodologies, etc.).	Nov-Dec
3 (Catalan)	Incorporating key issues in teaching interventions from the perspective of social studies (e.g. integrated learning, identity and otherness, families).	Jan-Feb
4 (English)	Incorporating foreign language (English) learning in existing projects.	March-April
Completion of group work & preparation of final tasks (presentations, portfolio submission, peer review activity).		May-June

Focusing on the specific content provided in Block 4 (Appendix 1, Table 1), this is structured around driving questions, with each session reflecting on a particular issue: from the first session's *why* (setting the context and raising debates about curricular goals), to the question of *how*, when students are asked to select EFL learning activities that address all ECEC needs. By the end of the sessions, students have had the chance to explore and reflect on *who* will introduce the activities (either the ECE practitioner or the EFL specialist teacher), *what* to teach (content), and *how* to design authentic and age-appropriate learning activities.

In addition, students work in linguistically heterogeneous groups to design teaching proposals which embed EFL activities in existing curricular projects. They are guided throughout the process by their assigned tutors, as indicated in the Appendix (Table 2).

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

This article presents a study exploring generalist pre-service teachers' perspectives on the introduction of English as a foreign language in pre-primary settings. Participants' perspectives are key to assessing the potential for incorporating collaborative foreign language itineraries in general education programs as well as to improving professional practice. While considerable research has been carried out on pre-service and in-service EFL teachers' beliefs in secondary and university settings (Copland et al., 2014), the perspective of pre-primary teachers has been generally overlooked (Reynolds et al, 2021). Research into pre-service teacher education for ECEC is key in order to gain further insight into the beliefs and attitudes of future professionals (Fukkink et al, 2019). In their recent case study in Macau, Reynolds et al (2021) explored pre-service pre-primary EFL teachers' beliefs about teaching English to very young learners. Results of their study showed that while most participants mentioned beliefs about classroom practice, EFL learners and learning, and pedagogical knowledge, very few referred to beliefs about self, learning to teach, or the teacher education program.

Our study builds on these findings by concentrating specifically on how pre-service teachers view their own roles in relation to introducing English in pre-primary settings, and their views concerning teacher profiles.

With these aims in mind, two research questions (RQ) are set:

1. What are pre-service teachers' views concerning the teacher profiles needed to teach EFL at pre-primary level?
2. How do pre-service teachers perceive their own roles in relation to introducing EFL at pre-primary level?

2.1. Participants

The current paper is part of a larger ongoing study which has been conducted over consecutive years. During the academic year 2021-22, 94 students enrolled on the compulsory module DCACE were administered pre- and post- intervention questionnaires. Out of this cohort, 20 students were invited to participate in focus groups. A purposeful sampling method was applied to obtain a representative sample of students. In the first instance, one of the researchers had already built a solid rapport with some groups of students as their portfolio supervisor (see Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix 1 for information on the module methodology) which facilitated the selection process. In the second instance, specific criteria were taken into account to ensure representativeness according to: study programme enrolled on; minor programme enrolled on; English language competence reported; and gender. To this end, participants were selected both from the University dual bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education / Primary-School Education (with higher academic access requirements) and the Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. From these two different programmes, students were enrolled on different minor itineraries reflecting their interest in different areas of specialisation.

Participants in the focus groups included nineteen females and one male, a ratio which reflects the gender imbalance in the teaching profession (Eurostat, 2022). In pre-intervention questionnaires, students had reported linguistic competences ranging from A2 to C1 according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), with B2 and B1 being the most commonly reported levels (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Linguistic competences in English*

Cefr level	Frequency in %
A1	5
A2	3
B1	41
B2	44
C1	6
C2	1

All participants shared the same L1 (Catalan) and their mean age was 20.5. An Informed Consent Form was used to provide them with clear information prior to the focus groups.

2.2. Data collection method and materials

The fieldwork reported in this study took place over a period of one academic year, coinciding with the beginning and the completion of the academic course 2021-22. It used online pre- and post- intervention questionnaires, as well as a series of 5 focus groups to obtain in-depth qualitative data. Participants were administered an online pre- intervention questionnaire before the beginning of the English block of the module and an online post-intervention questionnaire following module completion. Both questionnaires were administered in L1 and included the two main closed questions specified below, among other questions:

Who should be responsible for introducing EFL at pre-primary level?

Do you think you could contribute toward the task of introducing EFL at pre-primary level?

The main purpose of the questionnaires was to obtain an overview of participants' perspectives on (i) teacher profiles (ii) own roles in relation to introducing EFL at pre-primary level. Questionnaires also allowed us to detect any potential shift in participants' responses after completion of the module. A series of focus groups were conducted after completion of the module to explore participants views in more depth. The two main questions from questionnaires (indicated above) were used to initiate discussions, and a flexible approach was taken to ensure that discussions were sufficiently developed and that participants had the time to express their views at length.

Although the language of instruction during the module was English, all focus groups were conducted in Catalan (L1) to make sure that participants understood every question and expressed their views in a natural way for the researcher to be able to gather as much information as possible. Every focus group lasted between 20-30 minutes, and was recorded, transcribed and translated into English for subsequent analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

In first instance, data obtained from questionnaires was analysed and organised according to the research questions. Secondly, regarding qualitative data obtained from focus groups, we adopted a thematic analysis approach for collecting and analysing focus groups in social science research based on Maguire and Delahunt (2017). With this approach, we were able to become familiar with the data by re-reading the transcripts and condensing raw data into codes (inductive approach). As a result, a list of codes organised in different categories was defined (see Appendix, Table 3), and the resulting data was organised according to the research questions established in Section 2.

Thereafter, the subsequent data was analysed triangulating it from the quantitative and qualitative approaches used (Turner & Turner, 2009). Findings are presented in line with the two research questions. Quotations from participants have been anonymised, with all names coded in accordance with the focus group number and the participant: i.e. participant 1 from focus group 1 was FG1_P1.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis were divided into two categories, according to the focus of our research questions. The first category revolves around aspects related to teacher profiles. It comprises data regarding participants' perceptions on roles, as well as other themes mentioned by participants: time of exposure to EFL, natural language learning process, relationship of trust, and qualifications. Collaboration between roles has also been included, as it emerged from the series of focus groups.

The second category examined aspects related to participants' perceptions of their own roles in relation to introducing EFL at pre-primary level. It included aspects related to insecurity, the need for more training and the implementation of meaningful activities in EFL.

3.1. Teacher profiles

Regarding the question aimed at exploring participants' perspectives on teacher profiles, results from pre-intervention questionnaires (Figure 1) reveal that the EFL specialist teacher profile is the most selected option among participants (47.9%), while the ECE profile appears to come in second place (28.7%), and the native speaker profile is selected by 23.4%.

The tendency to select the EFL specialist teacher option is coherent with the usual practice they have observed during their internships in local schools, where EFL specialist teachers with no specific ECEC qualifications tend to be responsible for introducing EFL at pre-primary level (Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021; Flores & Corcoll, 2008). Interestingly, the ECE profile and native speakers profile are close in terms of participants' preferences. As reported in previous studies, the belief that the 'ideal native speaker' is the most suitable profile still holds some weight among this population (Waddington, 2021).

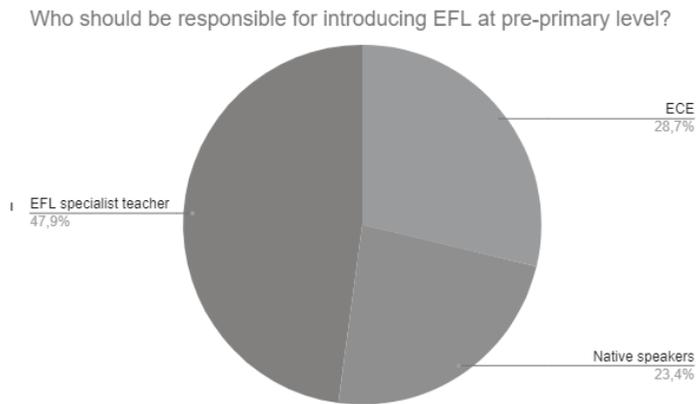


Figure 1. Teacher profile results in pre-intervention questionnaires expressed in %

When taking a closer look at the results from the post-intervention phase, we find evidence that participants have re-evaluated their perspectives on teacher profiles. As suggested in Figure 2, while responses still reflect preferences for a clear division of roles and responsibilities, the EFL specialist teacher profile is now ranked as the second option (40%), while the ECE practitioner profile is ranked in first place (52%). The percentage of participants opting for a native speaker profile has dropped from 23.4% to 7.4%.

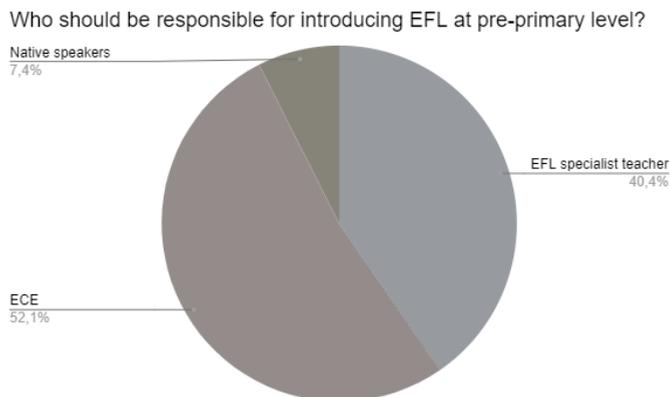


Figure 2. Teacher profile results in post-intervention questionnaires expressed in %

3.1.1. *Natural and ongoing language learning process*

Complementing these results with qualitative focus group sessions conducted after module completion, findings suggest that 13 participants (65% of focus group participants) perceived the ECE teacher profile as the most suitable person to be responsible for introducing EFL at pre-primary level. As participant FG1_P4 said, “the idea of the ECE is like... the best when teaching from a globalised approach”. Participants considered that ECE practitioners are more likely to introduce EFL in a more natural way than is customary in classes which have a designated EFL tutor and a designated time. As perceived by participant FG5_P1: “I think that the ECE practitioner should introduce EFL, so that children don’t need to change their mindset and think ‘oh, now the (EFL) specialist comes’, so it’s English time”. Reinforcing this idea, “in order to introduce it (EFL) naturally and spontaneously, I think that it should be the ECE practitioner to introduce it, because it is the ECE who can do it at any time” says FG3_P3, unlike the EFL specialist teacher, who “only comes once a week”, as FG2_P2 says. These observations are in line with previous studies (Robinson et al., 2015) suggesting that on-and-off exposure to EFL teaching for this age group runs the risk of it being dissociated from other pre-primary learning. Demonstrating their awareness of these risks, participants who express a preference for the ECE profile refer explicitly to the fact that they can provide children with more exposure to the EFL “introducing English day by day and smoothly” (FG4_P1). Referring to the need for “frequency” and “continuity”, their views align with previous studies pointing to the limitations of space and time experienced by EFL specialist teachers, “which do not contribute to respect the holistic framework of the pre-primary stage” (Flores & Corcoll, 2008, p. 3). By contrast, and as several participants highlighted, “introducing English day by day” (FG4_P1) allows for English to be integrated into existing classroom routines and practices, in line with recommendations for effective and age-appropriate practice (Robinson et al., 2015).

3.1.2. *Relationship of trust*

Trust is perceived as a positive value by 5 participants (25%) when referring to the ECE practitioner’s established relationship with children: “[ECE practitioners] know their children and their learning process, because, in the end, they are the ones who know these infants the best” (FG1_P2). This perception, shared by some participants, emphasises the relationship of trust established between children and the ECE practitioner, since “the ECE practitioner is always with them [children]” (FG4_P1). The existence of a learning environment encouraging trust and interaction is key for child development, as indicated by Flores & Corcoll (2008) who provide an illustrative example of an effective classroom interaction based on mutual trust between ECE teachers and children, which promotes natural and meaningful English language use.

3.1.3. *Self-confidence*

Three participants (15%) who seem to advocate for the ECE practitioner profile appeared reluctant to take a stand in the first instance, since they perceived self-confidence as a main barrier, as explained by FG1_P2: “I believe that the ECE should be responsible for

EFL introduction, but this would be difficult because you cannot make sure that all ECEs have this level of self-confidence or the self-assuredness to do it". During focus groups, the issue of self-confidence clearly emerges in the second question addressed to participants, which refers to participants' perception of their own roles in relation to introducing EFL at pre-primary level. The issues of self-confidence perceived by some participants are related to beliefs of self, which may be derived from pre-service teachers' past social experiences, educational backgrounds, and relationships with others (Reynolds et al, 2021). The notion of self-confidence may also pertain to L2 learning, implying that some communicative situations might entail more confidence than others (MacIntyre et al., 1998) for these participants.

3.1.4. EFL Specialist teacher profile better qualified

The previously discussed theme on self-confidence generated further discussions regarding qualifications. While positive perceptions of ECE profiles predominate, we also detected six participants (30%) whose perceptions lead them to advocate for the EFL specialist teacher profile. In this case, participants consider the EFL specialist teacher profile better qualified for the responsibility of introducing EFL in class: "I consider that many times we [future ECE practitioners] could not do it. In other words, not everyone has this level to be able to do it" (FG1_P1). This observation regarding a minimum level is attuned with the European Commission (2011) recommendations which stress the need for staff working with children at pre-primary level to be suitably qualified. Participant FG3_P1 points out: "I believe there should be a specialist [teacher] in EFL. Clearly, because I mostly speak from my own experience, English time means songs, colours, animals... But there is no one really speaking to the infants". In this sense, this comment may implicitly suggest that ECE practitioners' lack of language competence in English means that they will be unable to develop meaningful activities in EFL. Participant FG5_P3 also refers to the required training to become an EFL teacher: "Well, if there are minors as optional subjects (like the one we have here) this must be for a reason; but it is true that it is not only about the level of English, but about teaching resources, because in the end we all end up doing the same". While this perception places certain importance on training and qualifications, it also stresses the relevance of the pedagogical background needed, beyond the required linguistic abilities. Enhanced language skills combined with solid early childhood education seem to be more appropriate for the smooth implementation of EFL in the classroom, as proposed by Alexiou (2020).

Further to the ECE or specialist profile, one participant maintains the view that native speakers would be the most convenient profile, as illustrated in the following example: "I believe that children would learn the most with a native speaker, someone born in the country. They can provide children with the correct pronunciation. To me this [profile] would be the best" (FG1_P3). This comment is met with approval by other members of the focus group, with participant FG1_P4 saying "yes, specialist teachers and native, the complete profile". These insights can suggest ideas of "authenticity" which can have a disempowering effect among ECE practitioners, as reported by Waddington (2021), thus suggesting inauthenticity when the professional responsible for introducing EFL in pre-primary is a non-native-speakers. These perceptions as practitioners introducing EFL can lead to feelings of inadequacy, thus affecting their growth as professionals (Bernat, 2008).

3.1.5. Collaboration approach between profiles

Interestingly, and without any guided script by the moderator, the theme of collaboration between roles emerges from 8 participants' responses (40%) during the series of focus groups. As participants said: "Even if the specialist teacher could ensure the language teaching part, I believe that maybe the specialist teacher could act as a "support" for the tutor, so that the tutor would be the main one [introducing EFL] because the tutor is the person who knows the children best" (FG5_P3). Again, elements of trust previously discussed are present here. Moreover, participants refer to collaboration in terms of "support" between ECE practitioners and EFL specialist teachers, as advocated by participants FG1_P4 and FG1_P2:

I would consider that in each school at least there should be a support group of teachers who would help others to be able to introduce English. In this way, then, we could get all the ECE to have more or less the same level, and until they did feel safe a specialist teacher would go there and help them.

In this sense, the collaborative approach advocated by some participants is suggestive of different teaching profiles' ability to work together to ensure that the EFL is integrated into their joint practices to benefit children and the learning process (Mourão, 2019). Moreover, participants' perceptions could also be aligned with Flores & Corcoll's (2008) arguments suggesting that the introduction of EFL at pre-primary level should be a school project involving the whole teaching community, as illustrated by participant FG5_P3: "well, there is ongoing teacher training at school level about different issues, right? Maybe there should be this kind of training [introduction of EFL] in those schools introducing EFL".

While participants were only asked about their perceptions regarding teacher profiles in relation to the introduction of EFL at pre-primary level, it is relevant the fact that respondents raised forms of collaborative practices for a more integrated approach to EFL. As Mourão & Robinson (2016) state in their study reporting on the collaboration of teachers (ECE practitioners and EFL specialist teachers) in Portugal, collaboration is key to promoting teaching/learning conditions for learners and teachers, although depending on the context "the way in which early language learning projects tend to be organized does not facilitate this kind of practice" (p. 254).

3.2. Own roles

Regarding the question aimed at exploring participants' views on their own roles in relation to introducing EFL at pre-primary level, responses in Figure 3 suggest that less than half of participants (48.9%) perceive that they could undertake the responsibility of introducing EFL in class. In second place, participants who are not sure (Maybe) represent 45.7%, and, finally, a minority (5.3%) respond that they will probably not be able to undertake such a responsibility. Nobody answered 'definitely not', which was one of the options given both in the pre- and post- questionnaires. The answers reflect a considerable level of uncertainty if we take responses comprising 'maybe' and 'probably not' into account, which amount to 51% of the total number of respondents.

Despite the resulting level of uncertainty, the number of positive responses might suggest that participants may feel confident enough or they might not have really reflected in depth on the complexity of the task of introducing EFL in class. Participants were administered these pre-questionnaires before the beginning of the module sessions, and therefore before the training was provided.

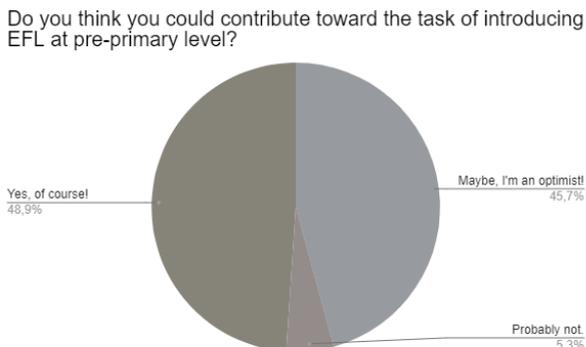


Figure 3. *Perceived role in pre- intervention questionnaires expressed in %*

When analysing the results from the post-intervention phase in Figure 4, the increase in the number of participants answering positively to the question marks a shift. The percentage of participants answering affirmatively (52.1%) represents a slight increase of 3.2% in contrast to the pre-intervention phase. Interestingly, ‘probably not’ responses show a slight decrease in percentage (from 5.3% to 2.1%). While some variation in the pre- and post- results can be noted, the narrow shift might also occur as questionnaires present some limitations which may be linked to the limited options for responses given or to a certain degree of carelessness by the respondents (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). The richness of data obtained from the focus groups sessions can provide further insights into participants’ views.

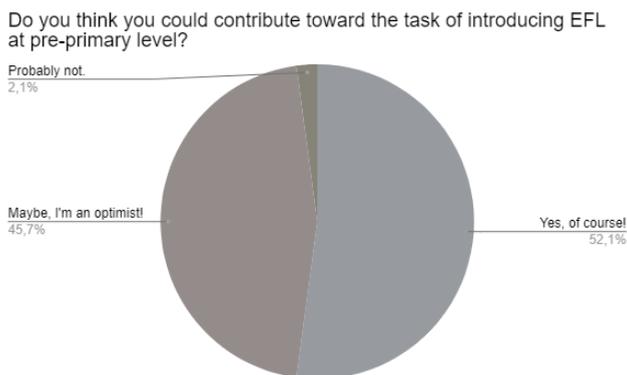


Figure 4. *Perceived role in pre- intervention questionnaires expressed in %*

When asked to elaborate in the focus groups, 15 participants (75%) share positive attitudes towards contributing to the task of introducing EFL at pre-primary level, as enthusiastically reported by participant FG4_P1: “I think I would love so much to do it, I know I should refresh my English, and I should make the effort, to basically get ready, but I definitely see myself doing it”. In contrast, 5 participants (25%) did not feel ready for such an endeavor, as illustrated by the following participant (FG1_P3): “I personally have the level C1 in English and I would not feel ready, no matter how much competent in English you are, you need more training”. As discussed further in sub-section 3.2.3, the need for further training is a common perception shared by different participants, both for those who perceive that they could introduce EFL and those who preclude the possibility: “I don’t see it. It is true that I have acquired some resources so far, but there are many moments that I don’t know what to draw on. Therefore, I don’t know, I think there is still some way to go for me, I need more training”. (FG5_P3).

3.2.2. Insecurities

Fourteen participants (70%) referred to insecurities if they were to take on the role, as illustrated by the following participant:

I think I would feel rather insecure if they asked me. I don’t know if I would react like “yes! Let’s do it!”. But I think I would be able to do it. It is true that all this insecurity stuff would be a bit present, therefore it would be a good idea to have some teaching support. (FG1_P2).

Insecurities are one of the recurring themes in our analysis in relation to participants’ perceived role when introducing EFL at pre-primary stage. However, the results suggest that the insecurities expressed by some participants are initial reservations which are left behind as they elaborate on their perceptions: “I believe it would be hard for me at the beginning... I mean, if someone asked me to do it, it would be a burden; but once I got used to the idea I would say ‘Ok’ and I would organise myself” (FG2_P2). Or as suggested by participant FG3_P1: “Honestly, no. I mean, yes! I think I would try and I would do my absolute best”. While acknowledging the fact that participants feel challenged with the potential task of introducing EFL in the classroom, to a certain extent, the above-mentioned responses are illustrative of positive and flexible attitudes towards teacher profiles, and highlight how participants can rethink their own roles while diminishing the dichotomy between teacher of English and educator of children (Mourão & Ellis, 2020). While explicitly referring to insecurities, some of the above-mentioned examples can be suggestive of an implicit degree of motivation, which prompts participants to decide on a given course of action (Dörnyei, 2001), thus contributing to their efforts to constantly improve themselves and their ability to introduce EFL effectively in pre-primary settings.

Reflecting further on the positive attitudes expressed, some participants express a marked transition after revealing initial reservations. The following extract illustrates the change in perspectives following completion of the module:

If I had been asked this question at the beginning of the course, I would have clearly replied: ‘no, I don’t see myself ready’. But after all that we have learned and seen, and taking into account that it is not really about level, but rather about the resources, which have to be encouraged so that children can learn.... my answer is yes. (FG5_P2).

3.2.3. *Communication and meaningful activities*

Developing these ideas further, four participants (20%) place emphasis on the relevance of effective communication and meaningful activities as the priority. “What is important is to be able to communicate with children, to be able to share contents and activities with children. I believe I would be able to do it”, participant FG2_P4 affirms. These perceptions seem to contrast with some of the views shared when participants were asked about teacher profiles, as described in Section 3.1. In that case, language competence in English was perceived as a barrier by some of them. “The resources have to be motivating for children, beyond the usual content on colors or days of the week”, suggests participant FG5_P2, placing importance on developing meaningful activities. Participant FG3_P3 clearly expresses “I believe I would make the effort and would try to create fresh content”. As students on the module, participants had had the chance to reflect on and co-create activities and materials aimed at introducing EFL in class; they also had firsthand contact with pre-school settings through their internships at schools. Their comments are therefore suggestive of a willingness to continue designing meaningful activities adapted to each context, as participants had been doing throughout the module.

3.2.4. *Further training*

Eleven participants (55%) perceive that they would need further training to be able to introduce EFL in ECE. Some participants link this specifically to the need to build self-confidence: “I feel myself able to do this, but I know I would face some difficulties, because I know I have to study more, to improve my English. I mean: I need to improve to feel more confident and reassured that I am doing it well, and that I am teaching them as they deserve” (FG4_P3). Alluding to the module completed in English, participant FG4_P1 suggests: “Maybe I would extend the training. For instance, all those sessions we did on ‘where’, and ‘when’, maybe we should extend all that content”. “We should have more training, or extend the module, because it was short and it all went very fast”, adds FG4_P4. The perceptions reported here reinforce the idea that developing professionals equipped with skills and pedagogical training is key to providing valuable learning opportunities in early childhood settings (Waddington, In Press).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER LINES OF STUDY

This study examined pre-service teachers’ views on the teacher profiles needed to introduce EFL at pre-primary level, as well as their perceived own roles, before and after the completion of a compulsory foreign language itinerary within a generalist ECEC degree

programme in a university in Catalonia (Spain). Findings reveal that a preference for the ECE profile emerges after the teaching intervention, and that future professionals view collaborative approaches between ECE practitioners and EFL specialists as the key to enhancing the teaching and introduction of EFL at pre-primary level. These results suggest that a foreign language itinerary within a generalist programme, such as the one presented in this study, can contribute to pre-service teachers' positive self-perceptions towards their own roles, shifting the emphasis from an exclusive focus on L2 competence, to holistic teaching practice.

Collaborative approaches between ECE practitioners and EFL specialist teachers can offer integrated practice benefiting young children in the classroom. In this regard, findings are in line with previous work stressing cooperation between EFL teachers and pre-primary teachers as key for the implementation of effective training programmes (Alexiou, 2020; Mourão & Ferrerinha, 2016; Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021).

Following these results, and taking into account the recommendations of other studies and findings (Mourão & Ferrerinha, 2016; Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021), we consider it would be appropriate to develop collaborative approaches in modules on early language learning in pre-service courses for generalist pre-primary professionals and language teachers. Such modules could be designed with the aim of covering topics related to language learning approaches and methodologies for children, L2 introduction and child development, with an emphasis on collaborative methodologies involving both pre-primary ECE practitioners and EFL specialist teachers.

Finally, although there is a body of research dedicated to in-service teachers at pre-primary level, there seems to be a gap in the literature concerning pre-service teachers' perspectives on the introduction of EFL in ECEC (Fukkink et al., 2019), which we have aimed to bridge within this paper, despite the limitations of our study. While the conclusions drawn from this present study cannot be generalised, the unique views of participants may provide insight into the relevant aspects of the issues discussed and should be used accordingly as a basis for further research.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. *Embedding ELT within early years education (Waddington, In Press)*

BLOCK 4: Introducing ELT within an integrated early years approach			
Session (90" class)	Content	Focus*	Portfolio tasks
1	Foreign languages in the early years: the European context & the Catalan Curriculum. Key objectives & principles	Why?	4.1 (Pedagogical justification)
2	Programming a teaching intervention in preschool (key development areas, learning objectives, age-appropriate methodologies, etc.).	Who?	4.1
3	Contextualising English learning activities within the preschool day	When?	
4	Incorporating English learning activities into existing projects/teaching units	What?	4.3 (design of English language learning activities to include in group project...)
5	Selecting learning activities at preschool (addressing all educational needs)	How?	4.3 (...following same format as previous blocks)
6**	Oral presentation of teaching proposals + Peer Assessment Activity	-	4.2 Peer feedback activity (observing & completing a rubric highlighting strengths, potential difficulties, etc. of other groups' proposals)
7**	Peer feedback on proposals. Review of Block + Resolution of doubts / guidance on final tasks.	-	4.2 Peer feedback activity (giving and receiving feedback on proposals). Writing a summary/reflection on feedback received & modifications to proposals for portfolios

*Driving questions help structure the content and maintain the focus of each session.
 **These sessions take place after the break for 2-week school placement / Development of group projects.

Table 2. *Students' individual and group work in the module (Waddington, In Press)*

STUDENT TASKS (Group work with some individually assessed components)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elaboration of a group portfolio including set tasks from each block. • Design of a teaching intervention organised around a topic of the students' choice (beginning in block 2 and culminating at the end of block 4) • Oral presentation to describe & illustrate the teaching intervention designed • Final individual task carrying out a written review of another group's proposal 	
TUTORING / SUPERVISION OF STUDENT WORK (tutorials in L1)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students divided into project groups (4/5 students) and assigned a tutorial professor (1 of the 4 teachers of the different blocks). • Group tutorials provided after each block to check progress/ completion of portfolio tasks and resolve doubts • Portfolios & Individual Task (peer review) assessed by assigned professor. • Final group tutorial to provide feedback on tasks and guidance for future work/practice 	

Table 3. *List of Codes and Frequency*

	PARAPHRASE	CODE	FREQUENCY
<i>About teacher profiles</i>			
ECE Practitioner	Preferred profile perceived	ECEPROF	13
	Time of exposure to EFL	EXPO	10
	Natural language learning process	NATU	10
	Relationship of trust	TRUST	5
	Self-confidence level	SELFCONF	3
EFL Specialist Teacher	Preferred profile perceived	SPE	6
	Better qualification (linguistic abilities)	QUALIF	6
Native speaker	Best language knowledge provided	NATI	1
Collaboration	EFL teacher as a support	COLLAB	8
<i>About pre-service teachers' perceived own role</i>			
	Insecurity	INSEC	14
	Further training required	TRAIN	11
	Meaningful activities and resources	RESO	3
	Effective communication	COMM	1
	Contribute	CON	15
	Not contribute	NOTCON	5

1. Pre- and post-intervention questionnaires

1. Please report your linguistic competences in English in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

[A1 / A2 / B1 / B2 / C1 / C2]

2. Who should be responsible for introducing EFL at pre-primary level?

[ECE / EFL specialist teacher / native teacher]

3. Do you think you could contribute toward the task of introducing EFL at pre-primary level?

[Yes, of course / Maybe, I'm an optimist! / Probably not / Definitely not]

Guiding questions for the focus group sessions

1. In your view, who should be responsible for the introduction of EFL in class?

2. Do you think you will be able to contribute towards the task of introducing English in the preschool classroom?