

Preface

Special Issue ‘Researching foreign languages at Pre-primary Education’

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This special issue, *Researching Foreign Languages at Pre-primary Education*, has been conceived to raise awareness on the importance of early foreign language education, a research field which has been traditionally undeveloped (Mourao, 2019; Schwartz, 2022), but which has gained ground since the democratization of early childhood education and the promotion of plurilingual policies worldwide (Schwartz, 2022). Even though this early introduction of foreign languages, mainly English, is widespread in most countries (European Commission, 2011; Mourao, 2015), its implementation is heterogeneous which makes it more difficult to consolidate the area of study. Needless to say, Early Childhood Education is one of the outstanding education stages for the overall development of human beings (Council of Europe, 2019; Schwartz, 2022; UNESCO, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), and thus, careful reflection on its practices either introducing new languages or numbering, as well as rigorous scientific research, is key for the successful implementation of innovative programmes. Moreover, the introduction of a foreign language in this process means, in most cases, the introduction of an unfamiliar element, in which the child feels alien to the context and culture that this language represents. Consequently, it is necessary to be especially sensitive to the multiple interconnected factors and various agents that contribute to the child’s well-being.

For this special issue a variety of original articles on the subject matter have been considered in terms of their relevance, new trends and approaches, and innovative research studies in early language acquisition. All of them place the child as active foreign language learners. The volume includes 10 articles covering several key issues such as parental involvement, pre-service and in-service teacher perceptions on early language learning, collaborative approaches in teacher education, learning environments and teacher knowledge base on foreign language education.

Teresa Fleta opens the issue by bringing a wise overview on how the learning environment of preschool classrooms- what she terms ‘classroom ecosystems’- shapes the additional language learning process and enhances the quality of their teaching. In the second article, Joana Rokita outlines the evolution of research directions in language teaching methodology to very young learners over the last three decades by considering Polish research in pre-primary education against the backdrop of three major trends in applied linguistics, namely the language acquisition approach, the pedagogical approach and the ecological approach.

Beatriz Cortina-Pérez, Ana Andúgar and Silvia Corral analyze the teacher knowledge base (TKB) currently offered by higher education institutions to pre-service, foreign language,

early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers in various contexts such as Spain by means of a documentary research method using both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

In the next article, Jiapei Xia and Xuesong Gao report on an exploratory study examining parental involvement in preschool-level English language learners' use of smartphone apps in a Chinese context, and tries to shed light on the challenges that Chinese parents experienced, and how they responded to their children's mobile-assisted language learning.

José Luis-Estrada Chichón conducts an exploratory research study which aims to determine the degree and type of parental involvement in a Spanish province, considering three elements of analysis: Learning at home, Parenting and Communicating.

Thomai Alexiou, Efthymia Penderi and Marianthi Serafeim present extensive findings regarding the new educational reform of introducing the English language in Greek preschools by means of the EAN Project, which aims to develop the appropriate pedagogical and methodological framework for English language teachers and preschool teachers for the introduction on English in the context of the study.

In the next proposal, Silva Bratoz and Anita Sila bring the results of a qualitative study conducted in three kindergarten groups to evaluate the DivCon model (Diversity in Context) in Slovenia, and analyze pre-school children's responses to the different dimensions of the model and the ways they perceive different languages and cultures.

On their part, Esther Nieto Moreno de Diezmas and Ana Alarcón Utrera depict elective bilingualism in Spanish monolingual families, a topic which is gaining momentum in Spain, and analyze family language practices in terms of language beliefs, language management and their emotional implications.

In their study, María Tabuenca Cuevas and Javier Molina stress the need for specific research into developing awareness of literary genres that can be used in the EFL classes to promote literacy. For this purpose, an online questionnaire combining both qualitative and quantitative questions was used to examine pre-service teachers' reading habits and the specific knowledge of texts and authors in general for use in the EFL pre-primary classroom.

Alexandra Bos-Solé and Julie Waddington close this interesting array of studies by presenting a mixed-method study using questionnaires and a series of focus groups to explore pre-service teachers' perspectives on the implementation of English as a foreign language in pre-primary settings.

Finally, a book review on the PETal approach (Play, Education, Toys and Languages) by Elena Gómez-Parra has been included to portray a comprehensive vision of Preschool Teacher Education in the European context.

In sum, this special issue covers a wide range of topics which account for some of the challenges in the area of early foreign language acquisition and learning, considering multiple perspectives of the different agents involved. Apart from the topicality of the subject and the quality of the contributions, we believe that one of the great successes of this monograph is the attention that each of the authors has taken to give foreign language education in early childhood the relevance it deserves without leaving behind the care that early learners need at this vital stage of their growth. We hope this collection of research articles might contribute to the development of this emerging area, bring discussion on the topics, and offer some future lines of research.

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