

# English as a Second Language in a Maltese early years setting

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the learning experiences of a cohort of children acquiring English as a second language within a Maltese kindergarten setting. In this qualitative case study, data was collected through classroom observations, interviews with practitioners and questionnaires completed by parents. This case study provides insights into factors which impacted on language learning for this particular cohort of children. Results indicate that formally structured and adult-led language activities were organized daily with minimal opportunities for children's active engagement through interactions with adults and peers or child-centred activities. In conclusion, recommendations are made to address policy and practice appropriate for second language learning in early years.

## **Introduction**

Internationally, acquiring English as a second or foreign language from an early age has gained importance. Within the European Union the number of young English learners has increased significantly in recent years. Promoting early second/foreign language learning and teaching, the provision of teaching in several languages, increasing awareness of the benefits of teaching languages at an early age and encouraging measures to prepare teachers to work in the field of early language learning form the basis of several policies and actions

within the EU (Eurydice, 2008).

Introducing very young children to languages other than their mother tongue has several advantages. It contributes to fostering multiculturalism that would enable greater understanding, respect and openness to Europe's cultural wealth. It potentially provides children a head start by being a useful resource for further achievement. Learning languages at a young age further offers support to the much-debated argument that a language is learnt more easily and quickly when children are young rather than as they grow older. Thus, the issue of second language acquisition (SLA) is becoming progressively more relevant on a global level, particularly for the field of early childhood education (Murphy, 2014; Murphy and Evangelou, 2016).

Education in Malta is compulsory for five to sixteen-year-olds. Non-compulsory kindergarten provision for three to five year olds is widely available and accessible. There is 100% attendance at kindergarten settings for four-year-olds. In the Maltese contexts, successful SLA of English is associated with several advantages including access to information, communication with people abroad, academic achievement and improving one's opportunities in the labour market. Higher education cannot be accessed unless individuals achieve competence in both Maltese and English. Although both are official languages, research suggests that the majority of children acquire Maltese as a native language at home and then familiarize themselves and start acquiring English later on, generally when they enter kindergarten or school (Camilleri, 1995; Falzon, Pisani and Cauchi, 2012).

The aim of the current study was to examine how four-year-old children were introduced to English as a second language in a Maltese kindergarten setting. The research sought to document the pedagogy and choice of activities presented by practitioners in order to facilitate SLA and to reflect on the extent to which the activities were conducive to positive and appropriate learning experiences.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study was set within the socio-cultural theory of children's learning and development (Lantolf, 2000). Socio-cultural theory recognizes the child as an active participant in the learning process and acknowledges that the child's capacities are influenced by the culture of the environment in which he/she develops.

Socio-cultural theory considers language as an important mediation tool in

the development of higher mental processes of learners, thus enabling the developing communicative and cognitive functions to move from the inter-psychological to the intra-psychological plane (Vygotsky, 1987). This requires the active engagement of children in social interactions with peers and adults (Lantolf, 2000). Children have agency and intentions which enable them to learn and construct their understandings through interaction with the environment. Moreover, the socio-cultural perspective of language development acknowledges the relationship between the development of language and thought which are tightly interwoven (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

The opportunity to use language as a means of making sense of experiences with others is a crucial step in learning to use language meaningfully, appropriately and effectively. It enables the child to internalize the language and to carry it into further performance (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The value of imitation is emphasized in children's language learning: internalization through imitation is not a matter of just miming and copying but entails an active and frequently creative, reasoning process (Lantolf, 2000). Thus activities involving role-play and pretend play are important for young children's development. Play is a particularly important activity in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of development. Through play, children create a zone of proximal development in collaboration with others, in which they perform beyond their current abilities since they have the support of others (Vygotsky, 1987).

## Methodology

### Participants

The study was conducted in a school which admits children from kindergarten through secondary school. The participants in this study included two preschool practitioners and forty-one parents of children aged between 3 years 9 months and 4 years 9 months. Within the school, English is introduced at kindergarten, and subsequently used as a language of instruction for most school subjects. Enrolment in the kindergarten is decided by ballot, preventing bias in the selection process. This ensures that children attending the school have different academic abilities and vary in their linguistic and socio-economic background.

### Data collection

A qualitative case study design was adopted allowing for the study of a complex phenomenon within its context. Data were collected through 40 hours of observations conducted over three weeks. Anecdotal notes and running records

were kept to document the observations. The data from the observations were supported by a semi-structured interview conducted with each of the two practitioners in order to gain their insights about introducing young learners to a second language. Quantitative information collected through a parent questionnaire contributed to a holistic understanding of the topic.

### **Ethical considerations**

Permission was sought and obtained from the school authorities and informed consent gained from the practitioners and parents ensuring voluntary participation. The identity of the institution or the participants was never disclosed and where necessary, pseudonyms were used.

### **Results and discussion**

From the observations conducted during the study, it was evident that most communication and activities organized in the kindergarten were done through English. The morning routine, watching drama, storytelling, instructions which accompanied craft, number, dance and movement activities, were almost exclusively conducted in English. Such exposure augured well for children's receptive skills as they were immersed in an English-speaking environment with the possibility of establishing firm foundations. Quantity and quality of exposure to the second language are very important for the process of SLA (De Houwer, 2011; Tabors, 2008).

However, closer analysis of the range and nature of the activities conducted within the setting indicated that practitioners adhered to a fixed timetable with formal, structured activities resembling primary school tasks. There was little flexibility or time for practitioners to adapt to children's individual needs or interests and no opportunity to engage in child-initiated activities. Despite daily crafts and free play, staple activities included tasks associated to recognition, sounds and names of letters and recognition and value of numbers.

Since most kindergarten settings in Malta are physically situated within schools, it is not surprising that kindergarten is perceived by practitioners and parents to be an extension of the primary school where numeracy and literacy skills are emphasized (Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment, 2006).

In the setting under study, English was the official language for the school's activities. Children were expected to be sufficiently competent with the language by the time they started compulsory education. Parents' responses to the questionnaire indicated that the majority of children who attended the setting

were not native speakers of English and thus practitioners and children were under pressure since there were high expectations about children's achievements during the one year spent at this kindergarten setting. Children needed to be prepared for the first year of compulsory school where they were expected to start reading and writing in English as well as follow subject knowledge taught through English. Practitioners thus took on the role of instructors rather than facilitators without engaging children or giving importance to contextualised learning opportunities.

The teacher-directed approach evidence in this school is in contrast to more recent pedagogical approaches to second language learning. Recommended practices by experts such as Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren (2011) do not include the teaching of skills through highly-structured activities but rather through developmentally appropriate practice which is holistic, individually-focused and developmentally-interactionist. Activities offered to children at kindergarten should grow out of teacher observation and informal assessment of each child, providing for his/her physical, emotional, social and cognitive development (Kostelnik et al., 2011). Practitioners should view the process of learning as one which is highly interactive, therefore acknowledging children's agency and intentions in order to construct their understandings (Kostelnik et al., 2011; Lantolf, 2000). This is in line with the socio-cultural framework which maintains that learning, cognition and language develop through social interactions. For children acquiring a second language, such development requires the provision of a suitable environment for the necessary interactions which facilitates learners' initial attempts at using the second language (Tabors, 2008).

The focus of language activities was on the English alphabet through phonics. Practitioners gave explanations and instructions primarily about how to pronounce the words containing specific letters and how to write them down. Children repeated letter names and sounds orally and then recorded the letters in workbooks. Research suggests that second language learners benefit from this kind of focused stimulation on particular language features (Tabors, 2008). There are benefits from explicit teaching of the components of literacy, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and writing (Goldenberg, 2008). However, considering the age of the children it is doubtful that such formally-structured activities would lead to positive and appropriate language gains. The children quickly lost attention and concentration during the activity, became fidgety, and were clearly disengaged and bored. Although effective English language development requires explicit teaching of features of English, it also

requires ample, meaningful opportunities to use English (Goldenberg, 2008; Goldenberg et al. 2013).

Practitioners explained that curricular demands and time constraints prevented certain activities and hindered appropriate pedagogy. They also expressed their belief that second language is learnt through exposure via listening. This may explain why they did not set up more opportunities for language use, interaction and communication, promoting exploration and free expression.

In order to help children get beyond non-verbal communication techniques and actually use the language, Tabors (2008) recommends that practitioners should set up and use communicative opportunities to help children expand and extend their language skills. Classroom observations indicated that the practitioners did not expand the conversation with children. On the contrary, children were frequently asked to respond to closed-questions that required one-word, correct answers rather than open-ended questions that required expression of their opinions or thoughts.

Classroom observations clearly indicated that both practitioners made adjustments in the way they communicated with the children in order to facilitate understanding and support SLA. They often tried to simplify the language they were using, combining it with a lot of repetition as well as gesticulation and body language. They also provided visual support in the form of pictures, charts or props. All these strategies are identified as very beneficial for young children's acquisition of second language in terms of setting up a low-demand situation, conveying the meaning of words and helping understanding (Tabors, 2008).

Play was attributed some recognition in this setting and free play was very important for the children mainly because it was the only time children could act on their own initiative, make their choices and determine what went on. Free play presented a crucial opportunity for children to express themselves, socialize and practice using language in real life communication. This is as significant for SLA as it is for the overall development of children. In this context, it is laudable that the kindergarten provided free play activities daily.

Unfortunately, play and learning were not integrated in the kindergarten. Completing letter or number activities was clearly seen as serious work in contrast to free play where children could relax and play. The practitioners did not recognize the possibilities to use play as a learning opportunity or to discover knowledge. Thus, whilst learning activities were formally-structured and adult-controlled, play was totally unstructured, free from practitioners' supervision or engagement and not organized to incorporate learning. There was no attempt

at integrating play and learning: when it was time for letter or number activities the children were working, and when it was time for free play the children could relax and play. As practitioner A explained, “a fun activity and then we write, and then something more fun, where they can stand up”. The lack of interest expressed by practitioners in the children’s activities in free play may convey a message that children’s interests and ideas generated in play are not valued by the adults.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The central issue that emerged from this study is that children lacked the opportunities for language use, active engagement in a variety of interesting and challenging activities and meaningful interactions. This could potentially have a negative effect on their language acquisition as well as their cognitive development (Genesee, 2016). This is especially significant considering the age of the children (DeKeyser and Larson-Hall, 2005). Kindergarten practices and pedagogy need to be adjusted to provide for appropriate early years experiences and better facilitation of SLA of English.

The education of the practitioners is of crucial importance for the quality of early years experiences in general and second language learning in particular. Practitioners need to be provided with appropriate pre-service professional training as well as opportunities for continuous professional development. In light of the complex language situation in Malta and the high status of English, pre-service and in-service training should offer courses specifically related to bilingualism and the acquisition, learning and teaching of a second language for young learners. Training should not only enable practitioners to gain insights into theoretical and pedagogical knowledge but also to translate this into effective practice. Similarly, it would appear critical to have management staff who are informed about appropriate early years practice in order to offer suitable support to the practitioners.

Current SLA pedagogical thinking advises that pedagogical practice in early years needs to cater for a holistic approach to children’s learning and development through a child-centred pedagogy based on children’s interests and individual needs (Kostelnik et al., 2011; Lantolf, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Tabors, 2008). Formal learning activities should be replaced with interesting, engaging learning opportunities that are playful and fun and at the same time provide opportunities to expand children’s cognitive and language abilities and knowledge. The results of this study call for a reappraisal of current practice and

consideration of the process of learning in young children. Children's agency and ability to construct their understandings through interactions should be emphasized. This would in turn facilitate the process of SLA as well as mediate cognitive development and thinking, since as stated earlier, speaking and thinking are seen as tightly interwoven (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In addition to planning and delivering appropriate learning opportunities, reflection and critical analysis of pedagogical practices could be nurtured. Reflection and analysis are important for ongoing planning, taking into consideration children's interests and reactions in order to offer the best approach to facilitating exposure to the second language as well as quality early years experiences.

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