

THE PARADOX OF THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LANGUAGES

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Abstract: *The premises of this study have emerged around issues aimed at identifying weaknesses in the training of English teachers in primary school and pre-school education, promoting the idea of training and qualifications in this direction of Romanian preschool and primary school teachers or alternatively, the formation of specialists in the foreign languages teaching and learning at an early age that would combine the theoretical with practical approaches effectively and also at formulating some future directions of curriculum development in accordance with the standards of professional skills in foreign languages that would grant the status of compulsory subject to foreign languages studied in kindergarten and primary school.*

Key words: *foreign language skills, primary school and preschool education, special training.*

1. Introduction

Early English language learning (EFL) is a phenomenon that has been attracting a lot of attention for some time now but also has been creating some key challenges faced in the introduction of it in state and private school systems today. In all this recent rush to teach and learn English at younger ages combined with a relative lack of specific research and experience sharing, EFL in pre-school and primary school education has become more and more widespread globally in both state and private sectors over recent years and decades. Research has shown the added value to later achievements of quality education at this vital pre-primary and primary stage. Equally, there has been an ever-growing demand, especially from parents, to ensure that children leave school with a mastery of English, which is seen as the international language of communication in more and more domains, and a key to social and economic improvement. This is the reason why the state of the English language education at the pre-school and primary school level throughout Europe has been reviewed.

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As mentioned above, English is the most commonly taught foreign language in pre-primary and primary education across the countries summarised in the European Commission (2011) document, second only to languages with regional consequence. An important aspect discussed in the 2011 document is that parental pressure is a key element in the decision to introduce some form of English instruction at pre-primary levels across countries in Europe. Numerous countries report that as a consequence of parental pressure and desire for their children to learn English (viewed as social capital and a means through which their children will have greater opportunities in life), English is being offered at younger ages across pre-primary contexts in Europe. Enever (2004) coined the term 'parentocracy' to identify the significance of this parental pressure through networks or other lobby groups.

A notable challenge, reflected throughout the document and almost all of the 28 countries included in this handbook, relates to the nature of the qualifications for the teachers of English in ECEC settings. Some countries have very clear standards and guidelines concerning the qualifications required by language teachers in school settings. Unfortunately, many do not, where becoming trained as a fully qualified pre-primary and primary teacher is only just beginning to fall under the remit of tertiary-level education settings. In many countries it seems that simply being a native speaker of English is sufficient to qualify an individual to teach young children English in school contexts, despite a lack of teaching qualifications. In other contexts, specialist FL (English) teachers are brought in to supplement (and complement) the expertise of the teaching staff. These difficulties in teacher education and qualifications are compounded by the challenge many countries have in accessing good quality English language teaching materials.

There is a general lack of data in many countries on numerous issues, particularly with respect to the proportion of different types of educational settings, and the numbers of children being educated through English (or on English) (in those countries with a focus on English). The phrase 'no official data available' is ubiquitous throughout the 2011 review. As also noted by Mourao and Lourenco (2015) there is little evidence of agreed processes or shared understanding across countries, no uniformity of approach or established indices of success. Arguably the largest gap in knowledge concerns the nature of the actual teaching provision that is offered across these 28 countries in the 2011 European Commission review.

This study reveals a situation in which some aspects of English teaching to children have developed in a generally positive direction in many contexts since the last British Council report in 2012, although a number of serious problems remain to be solved. On the positive side, there is increased interest at a policy level in defining and setting goals for primary English and the CEFR seems to have been helpful in setting this in motion. However, we have seen that the CEFR is not itself an instrument designed to describe the language performance of children and that modifications will be needed if it is to be fully useful. An additional point is that the assessment of children's language attainments is still a developing field, although work such as that done within the ELLiE project (Enever, 2011) has added much to our understanding. Often it seems that appropriate means of verifying if primary school children actually reach the goals stated in policy documents are yet to be put in place.

2. Objectives

The initial objective of the study crystallized quickly in identifying critical points liable to improvement in the training of pre-school and primary school teachers as English teachers, having in view the malfunction available today, namely language classes do not fall under the norm of schoolteacher, but they can be provided only by a specialized teacher, lacking adequate pedagogical preparation for targeted age groups. Therefore, the approach to this investigation was built around the following issues:

- What are the sources and significance of the new language policy in contemporary society?
- To what extent modern approaches in language pedagogy lead to the development of a European profile in training of language teachers?
- Does current offer of initial and continuing training programs in foreign languages fully meet the needs and requirements of teachers in the Romanian pre-school and primary education?

The examination of these issues may lead to an accurate assessment of the capacity of the current principles representing a good and profitable basis for future initiatives. In this sense, the ultimate goal of this research is promoting the idea of training and qualifications in this direction of Romanian pre-school and primary school teachers or alternatively, the formation of specialists in the foreign languages teaching and learning at an early age that would combine the theoretical with practical approaches effectively and granting the status of compulsory subject to foreign languages studied in kindergarten and primary school. The objectives of this study can be labeled as general-theoretical such as:

- analysis of the reference European documents of language policy regarding early English language learning;
- identifying early EFL teachers' training needs which may constitute a database very important for stakeholders in initial and continuing training of language teachers (philological faculties, Teacher Training Departments, National Curriculum Service etc.), for teachers of foreign languages in pre-school and primary school education and of course for students who want to embrace this career.
- dissemination of concerns and best practices at national and international level, focusing on the benefits of early language learning;
- developing recommendations for designing a new curriculum framework, consistent and coherent, for an initial training program for English language teachers in pre-school and primary school in Romania in order to ensure that future teachers will benefit from an appropriate linguistic and pedagogical training.

The central idea of this paper remains therefore the need to create and implement a new model of English language teachers in pre-school and primary school education, to ensure the quality of teaching English and to determine the status of English as a compulsory subject in kindergarten and primary school.

3. Material and Method

The present study was set up as an investigating effort and took as its starting point some important official European documents on policies of English language teaching to pre-school and primary school in various European countries. To start with, the *ELLiE study (Early Language Learning in Europe)* (Enever, 2011) was a four-year longitudinal

project looking at L2/FL provision at primary-level education. Then, the Eurydice (2012) document *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe* clearly indicated a general trend across European countries to offer some form of foreign language (FL) instruction in early years settings. A clear theme from this document was the trend for European countries to lower the age at which a taught foreign language is introduced. Indeed, between 1994 and 2011 only nine countries in the European Union did not lower the age for compulsory foreign language learning. Many countries begin formally teaching a foreign language (English usually in non-English speaking countries) between the ages of six and nine and some countries formally introduce foreign language instruction at pre-primary level, sometimes as young as three (e.g. the German-speaking community in Belgium where children are taught French and/or Dutch, and *comunidades autonomas* in Spain). However, while the document provided interesting, and often helpful, statistics for FL learning in Europe (which is overwhelmingly English in most countries), it did not really offer much in the way of clear information on EFL and EMI (English medium of instruction) in pre-primary education across Europe.

Another document that is arguably more helpful in trying to ascertain what EFL provision is offered in different European countries is the 2011 policy handbook produced by the European Commission on language learning at pre-primary school level. This document aims to provide summaries of the nature of provision across a range of different European countries and in many respects is an attempt to fill in the significant lack of information available to support EFL through pre-primary settings (Mourao and Lourenco, 2015). Twenty-eight countries (regions) are discussed in terms of language education policy in the early years, the context and organization of language learning in ECEC settings, and particular challenges faced by a given context together with a discussion of the nature of the resources available (with a particular emphasis on human resources. 'National experts' from these countries met to discuss and exchange knowledge and good practice –which led to the guidelines presented in this handbook. These experts advocate that the second or foreign language should primarily be used as a communication tool in activities rather than being taught as a discrete subject. A communicative approach seems to be widely adopted in that the main aim is to use the language in meaningful and useful contexts. Moreover, the focus tends to be more on the developing language awareness and bicultural understanding as much as on actually learning features of English. In reviewing the country summaries linked to this document, there are a number of interesting themes that emerge from the handbook itself and the situation of Romania is one of them.

Last but not least, the British Council report, published in March 2012, on policies of English language teaching to preschool and primary school in various European countries. This report highlighted the failure existing at that time in Romania, a malfunction persisting today as well, namely, English language classes, which fall outside the educator or primary school teacher's norm, which can be provided only by specialized teachers lacking pedagogical and methodical preparation for these age categories or by teachers specialising in primary education, but lacking the required language knowledge and skills.

As to the research methods, the present study was set up as an investigating effort and took as its starting point a report published in March 2012 by the British Council on policies of English language teaching to preschool and primary school in various European countries. This report highlighted the failure existing at that time in Romania, a

malfunction persisting today as well, namely, English language classes, which fall outside the educator or primary school teacher's norm, which can be provided only by specialized teachers lacking pedagogical and methodical preparation for these age categories or by teachers specialising in primary education, but lacking the required language knowledge and skills.

The research conducted highlights the need to deepen the field of research, but also the formulation of realistic mid-term and long-term goals, as unlike countries such as Belgium, Germany and Britain, where the education makers have already initiated detailed investigation projects on the phenomenon of early learning of foreign languages, in our country programs with this specific have occurred generally as a result of external pressure exerted by parents, without a systematic and rigorous control by school authorities.

4. Results

Early L2 learning (mostly English) in Romania has steadily increased in popularity as a consequence of the European Union's policy of multilingualism and educational reform that took place in 2008 requiring children to learn an L2 English at primary level, and, as already seen, parental pressure on policy makers. As mentioned above, the British Council report (2012) highlighted that this parental pressure in particular has led to a number of early years institutions developing an English L2 programme in order to be more competitive, but it suggests this raises a number of challenging questions concerning the quality and conditions of these early language learning programmes: *"Most of the children in (state) kindergarten learn English because parents pay a private teacher. The classes are optional, but all parents are willing to make sure the kids are exposed to English at an early stage in kindergarten. In private kindergartens, English classes are provided as part of the compulsory curriculum. There are some private schools where children speak only English during all programmes, classes, activities"*. While pre-primary education is not compulsory in Romania, it is freely available for all children in the year before they begin formal schooling (as with many other countries in Europe) and covers the age range of three to six years. There are no laws, no programmes or official documents stipulating the content or methodology for early L2 education, despite the proliferation of L2 provision in early educational settings. The 'parentocracy' (Enever, 2004) has meant, however, that L2 learning is rapidly evolving in Romania, despite no critical assessment of the conditions under which children are developing L2 (English) knowledge.

The real problem of early EFL in Romania is the failure existing at that time in Romania, a malfunction persisting today as well, namely, English language classes, which fall outside the educator or primary school teacher's norm, which can be provided only by specialized teachers lacking pedagogical and methodical preparation for these age categories or by teachers specialising in primary education, but lacking the required language knowledge and skills. The report pointed out the major policy changes in the status of EFL at the primary level in the last ten years as there is the problem of continuity, a lack of cohesion between pre-primary and primary level English provision *"Studying English has become essential in primary school in Romania in the last ten years. However, there is a total lack of coherence as far as children's linguistic level is concerned because when they register at Grade 1, students come from different*

kindergartens (some with a good knowledge of English, some with no experience in learning English)."

With reference to English teachers, *"It is impossible to calculate number of teachers! The teachers of English quit the job in a school after one to two years, some are not actually teachers of English but they teach English if the full-time teacher in the school is on maternity/medical/study leave; some teachers are employed in one school, but they collaborate with other schools too and if someone wants to count, they will appear twice or three times in statistics. However, the average is one to two teachers of English in a general school, i.e. 4,700 – 9,400 teachers; but it is just a very vague calculation. In the provinces the teachers of English for primary schools are actually teachers of general education for Grades 1– 4 with some knowledge of education in English language."*

One of the main conclusions the BC report makes is that there has not been a sufficient amount of effort and attention paid to L2 teaching at pre-primary level in Romania, and that the lack of legislation has resulted in a non-systematic approach to how languages are taught at pre-primary level.

Also, a further issue is teacher qualifications, teacher education and pre- and in-service training. This seems to be a challenge for most countries within Europe that are offering English language learning at the pre-primary level and one that emerged from the European Commission's (2011) policy handbook as well.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The study revealed some critical points in the Romanian educational system, more precisely in the preschool and primary school education, but also identified a number of improvement solutions such as outlining a field of professionalism to meet the language needs of contemporary society.

Therefore this investigating research revealed the existence of several critical points system listed below in a random order:

- the lack of professional qualifications, regulated by legislation, aimed at foreign language teachers' activity in pre-school and primary school education;
- a reduced relationship between curriculum content of the initial training of language teachers and educational and formative conditions specific to preschool and primary school cycles;
- the discrepancy between the objectives of initial training program and the training needs of students - future teachers of foreign languages;
- too much learning content in relation to the timeframe allotted to the pedagogical training module;
- the lack of continuity and coordination between initial and continuing training of language teachers;
- too much focus of the training courses focus on issues related to teaching of modern languages in secondary school;
- mostly theoretical orientation courses within pedagogical training module, which means marginalization and even ignoring the real issues and challenges in the classroom;
- the professionalization paradox for preschool and primary school education in terms of language education, in other words foreign languages are taught either by specialist teachers without pedagogical and methodical training for these ages

either by teachers specializing in pre-school education but lacking a solid baggage of knowledge and language skills;

- extremely low number of training sessions in the target language country, although the increasing exchanges of experience and international mobility of language teachers is one of the priorities of European language policies.

In counterweight, the study has identified and formulated a series of improvement solutions, covering:

- initiating legal steps to support the recognition of professional qualifications of foreign language teacher, using the official documents and examples of good European practices;
- implementing professional standards for teachers of foreign languages in primary and pre-school education recognized as relevant criteria for qualification and certification in the field, stipulated as such in the legislative text;
- increasing number of studies and research on early language learning, in order to promote a national language policy in agreement with European recommendations;
- introducing the study of a foreign language as a compulsory subject from the age of 5 years (level II of age, according to the current curriculum available for pre-school education);
- professionalization of teachers, a coherent and progressive approach, in according to methodological and pedagogical language requirements specific to age tranches covered by the new qualification;
- creation of a teaching master's program focusing on initial training appropriate to specialists in the foreign languages teaching from an early age that could combine effective theoretical approaches with the practically-action process - the establishment of the route of initial training through a model agreed upon national level;
- diversification and harmonization of the supply of training programs with new qualification requirements;
- increasing the number of international mobility - training courses and study visits - for language teachers already existing at the Department and also for future graduates of faculties.

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