Early English Language Learning: Exploring Pedagogical Practices in a Pre-Primary EFL Class in Catalonia through Systematic Observation

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Context

Catalonia is a bilingual autonomous region of Spain, with Catalan and Spanish as the two official languages. Early childhood education, which spans kindergarten (0 to 3 years of age) and pre-primary education (3 to 6 years of age), is not obligatory, yet it is considered a key educational stage (Decree 21/2023 of 7 February 2023). Its aim is to support children in developing skills that will enable them to establish healthy affective relationships with themselves and others, know and interpret the environment, and acquire learning strategies and a degree of autonomy to be part of a multicultural society. The Education Act 12/2009 reinforces the status of Catalan as the vehicular language in education, with Spanish being introduced as a curricular subject in primary education and makes a commitment to the promotion of multilingualism in schools, through the introduction of at least a third language. According to the 21/2023 Decree, when the socio-linguistic context of the school allows it, children can have a first contact with the oral use of a foreign language, especially in the last year of pre-primary education. Nonetheless, very often, foreign languages, in particular English, are introduced as early as kindergarten, through age-appropriate language learning activities (e.g. games, songs, storytelling, arts and crafts) scheduled into in the school curriculum and for periods of time ranging from low to high exposure, depending on resources and the focus of individual institutional projects.

English in pre-primary education is taught either by a primary school teacher specialised in teaching a foreign language (FL) or by a (pre-)primary teacher with a B2 level in English and/or a CLIL certification. Higher education institutions in Catalonia offer a specialisation in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in the final year of the degree in primary education and, in some cases, a bilingual primary education pre-service programme with practicum periods abroad.

Introduction

For many children learning a FL, the teacher is the main source and model of the target language and plays a vital role in providing them with the necessary opportunities for language learning. In their classes, teachers need to establish and maintain patterns of communication which support the key psycholinguistic processes in early FL learning and implement developmentally appropriate instructional practices which enable children to use the language more and more autonomously (Garton & Copland, 2019; Rokita-Jaśkow & Ellis, 2019; Schwartz, 2022). Therefore, from the perspective of teacher education and research, it is necessary to scrutinise what goes on in FL classrooms to understand how teachers can foster optimal language learning environments in limited exposure contexts.

In this study, we aim to analyse the extent to which classroom practices support the early stages of FL learning in pre-primary EFL instruction at a Catalan school. In particular, we explore different dimensions of the teaching-learning process regarding the characteristics of the tasks and activities used, the comprehensibility of the input, the support of learner output, the provision of corrective feedback, and the degree to which these dimensions are

developed via the pedagogical practices used throughout a didactic sequence led by a specialist teacher of English.

Early language learning at school: The role of the teacher's input

Current approaches to early second or additional language learning (L2) (1) education are rooted in cognitive-interactionist theories which state that language is best learnt through interaction in meaningful communicative situations and with systematic support which enables the child to gain confidence in using the target language (García-Mayo, 2018; Mourão, 2019a). Positive L2 learning outcomes are a result of children having opportunities to negotiate for comprehensible input, receive feedback, and modify their output in the context of classroom practice.

Within this framework, the teacher's input has been explored as a predicting variable for L2 learning outcomes in early language education, given that at this stage the teacher is the main provider of comprehensible input and has the responsibility of engaging children in meaningful classroom interaction for maximal language output (Prošic-Santovac & Savić, 2022). In classroom settings, the teacher's input and children's L2 development are tightly linked, with a complex interplay between the amount of input provided, its quality and the context of instruction. Working with 101 Spanish-speaking children enrolled in transitional bilingual education kindergarten classrooms (2) in the US, Gámez (2015) showed that both the amount and the quality of the English language used by the teacher in the classroom were significant predictors of the children's L2 skills. Children's gains in oral skills were significantly affected by the quality of the teacher's input, namely its lexical diversity and the structural complexity. With regard to quantity, exposure to a high ratio of teacher-to-

student talk was found to bring about smaller gains in L2 proficiency, meaning that there is an optimal amount of teacher talk which triggers L2 learning, and that it needs to be balanced by opportunities for student contributions to the talk time. The role of the teacher's input can be interpreted from the perspective of Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, which stresses that learning occurs within interaction with more experienced interlocutors who scaffold children to bridge the gap between their current capacity and what the task demands.

Along the same line, Sun and Verspoor (2022) found that early Mandarin L2 learners in Singapore childcare centres and kindergartens obtained significantly higher L2 vocabulary outcomes when exposed to lengthier teacher utterances in the classroom. For the authors, the syntactic length of teachers' utterances needs to fall into the children's zone of proximal development to maximize their language learning. Moreover, teachers' qualifications (i.e. experience, degree, and Mandarin proficiency) were related to teachers' input quality as teachers who had more years of practice appeared to feel more at ease about interacting with children and providing them with a sufficient amount of input in a meaningful context.

In low exposure settings, teacher input in early FL education has received considerably less attention, even though FL programmes start earlier and earlier across Europe. In a study of the development of German kindergarten children's receptive grammar and lexical knowledge in EFL, Weitz et al. (2010) identified no significant differences in terms of teacher L2 input intensity - the children who had more opportunities to access L2 input did not perform better than the children with fewer opportunities. However, the quality of the teacher's input, established by means of systematic observation of classroom practices, was

positively and significantly correlated with the children's receptive grammar knowledge. Exposure to rich sentence structure through the teacher's verbal input and cognitively stimulating tasks appears to be indispensable for early morphosyntactic development, and it is a better predictor of L2 growth than the amount of input children are exposed to. Working with pre-primary children in low-exposure early English instruction in Portugal, Mourão (2019b) reported on teacher-led interaction during circle time, with routines, songs and game-like activities using resources like flashcards. She argues this is supportive of L2 learning on account of the "routinized, repeated interaction" (p. 40), which facilitates children's understanding and prompted meaningful, child-initiated L2 output during subsequent child-initiated free play with these resources.

In the light of the available research, we can conclude that in early L2 education, particularly in contexts of limited exposure to the target language, the quality of the teacher's input, namely its lexical, morphosyntactic and pragmatic features, plays a determinant role in children's language learning outcomes. However, developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education require a gradual shift from teacher-led instruction to more child-directed activities which connect L2 learning with the rest of the learning processes taking place at this stage and support the holistic development of the child (Mourão, 2019a; 2019b). As such, we need to explore the characteristics of the activities or tasks which form "the matrix of language learning opportunities" (Kersten, 2021, p. 28) in early L2 classrooms. Recent classroom-based observational studies have documented some of these instructional practices with children in low exposure contexts. Their findings are summarised in the following section.

Language-conducive practices in pre-primary FL classrooms

In a situation of instructed FL learning, teachers need to consider the cognitive, affective and social characteristics of the learners, which are age-related but also depend on the context of instruction (Muñoz, 2007). According to Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2023), the most challenging aspect of working with preschool children is turning L2 input into age-appropriate tasks which "tune in" to the learners' needs at the early developmental stages.

Based on classroom observation over the course of one school year in a private pre-primary Portuguese school, Mourão and Robinson (2016) reported that early FL learning was supported both through formal, teacher-led practices with an English teacher and through informal, child-initiated activities that took place in the English learning area which was set up in the classroom and where the children could freely interact with the materials used during the English sessions under the supervision of the homeroom teacher. The more formal EFL activities consisted of routines, stories, songs and game-like activities, oftentimes with flashcards and realia, which supported children's comprehension and use of the target language as well as the development of their cognitive skills. The collaboration between the English teacher and the homeroom teacher further expanded the children's language learning opportunities as they interacted with the objects and materials they associated with English in an informal way, outside of their English sessions, thus integrating English in their general learning activities. Mourão (2018) further explored the children's play and peer interaction practices in this English language area, revealing that the children replicated teacher-led activities with the help of the different resources available in this space, recycling lexis and formulaic language structures introduced in the

English session but also using the target language creatively in play through expert/novice interaction. This more informal scenario seems to empower children as users of the target language and fosters age-appropriate FL pedagogies in pre-primary education.

In the study reported in this chapter, we set out to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1. What pedagogical practices are used for EFL teaching and learning in a pre-primary class in a Catalan school?

RQ2. To what extent are age-appropriate scaffolding techniques provided to learners in the early stages of FL development to foster (language) learning?

Methodology

The data was collected in a semi-private school in a medium-size town in Catalonia, Spain, where families have ~~of~~a middle to high socio-economic status. The school board and all the participating families gave informed consent before taking part in the study. The school offers pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education with Catalan as a vehicular language. Spanish language is taught as a second language for three to four hours a week from Grade 1 in primary education. English is offered from pre-primary with daily 30-minute sessions over three years. In primary education it is then taught for three and a half hours a week from Grade 1, with one-hour CLIL Science lessons twice weekly in English.

English in pre-primary is approached orally through play, songs and storytelling. The participants in the study presented here were a group of bilingual L1 Catalan/Spanish

children in their last year of pre-primary education, aged 4 to 5 years old (N= 25) who had been exposed to daily 30-minute English sessions for the previous two school years. The teacher was a primary teacher with an EFL teaching specialisation and a C1 level of English according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages. There is usually no collaboration between the English teacher and the homeroom teacher and English is taught independently from the other content areas in pre-primary.

Our corpus consists of five videorecorded 25-minute weekly sessions (125 minutes) taught by the same teacher as part of one learning unit, called *Get dressed my friend!* (see Table 5.1). The unit had been designed by the teacher on the topic of clothes, a topic children are familiar with and can relate to in their daily lives. The unit took place towards the end of autumn and lasted for five weeks. Though the sessions were scheduled for 30 minutes, they were equivalent to 25 minutes of actual class time.

Each week had a different methodological focus to reinforce oral comprehension and production of a set of lexical items and expressions. The teacher used storytelling, songs and rhymes with associated movement, games, dressing-up activities and a worksheet activity (colouring, cutting and pasting), all related to clothes items and their colours. These activities have been shown to be age-appropriate pedagogic resources for early FL education. Storytelling provides children with exposure to comprehensible input as well as opportunities for language use, through language recycling and interaction with the teacher (Fleta, 2019). Songs develop children's pronunciation skills, whereas rhyme and rhythm facilitate the retention of key vocabulary, especially if children actively reproduce the songs (Coyle & Gómez Garcia, 2014). Finally, play is “the child's natural medium of learning in

pre-primary education" (European Commission, 2011, p. 14) and, as such, meaningful, authentic and spontaneous opportunities for language learning can be generated using game-like activities with a balance of adult-led and child-initiated play (Mourão, 2014).

The content of the unit was planned around vocabulary on clothing items, colours, numbers from 1 to 10 and language chunks such as "What is this?", "It's a …", "What are you wearing?", "I'm wearing…", "What colour is …?", "It's…" and "Put on…" or "Take off…", which fostered the learning and consolidation of the target language. The learning objectives of the unit were mainly language-related and included using and understanding different expressions related to clothes vocabulary, singing songs and saying rhymes in English, reinforcing and learning new clothes-related vocabulary, identifying and using numbers from 1 to 10 and reviewing and using colour words.

Table 5.1 Content of the unit and learning objectives

Unit 3: Get dressed my friend!
Content of the unit: - Vocabulary: pyjamas, jacket, shoes, smock, socks, sunglasses, sandals, boots, shirt, dress, jeans, trousers, t-shirt, hat, gloves - Colours: blue, red, yellow, green, pink, brown, black, orange, white and purple - Numbers: from 1 to 10 - Language: What is this? This is…; What are you wearing? I'm wearing…; What colour is...? It's…; Put on / Take off
Objectives: - To understand and use clothes words and associated expressions - To sing songs and say rhymes in English - To identify and use numbers from 1 to 10 - To identify and use colours (blue, red, yellow, green, orange, brown, black, white, pink and purple)

Week 1: Story - *Froggy gets dressed* (London,1994), realia (clothes) and flashcards
Week 2: Song - 'Let's get dressed' (Kiboomers - Kid's Music Channel, 2017) and realia (clothes)
Week 3: Games - Realia (clothes) and flashcards
Week 4: Worksheet - Worksheet, crayons, scissors and glue
Week 5: Closure - Flashcards and realia (clothes)

One of the five sessions per week was video recorded and subsequently analysed by means of the Teacher Input Observation Scheme (TIOS) (Kersten, 2019), which is a quantitative observation instrument that operationalises L2 teaching within a cognitive-interactionist framework. Even though TIOS is not specifically designed for pre-primary L2 instruction, it was based on the *Input Quality Observation Scheme* (IQOS) which was designed and validated in pre-primary settings (Weitz, et al., 2010). The TIOS instrument consists of a series of low and high inference categories or observation domains informed by second language acquisition (SLA) research, namely verbal and non-verbal input, output, noticing, corrective feedback or scaffolding, among others.

Following TIOS, teacher-generated input and classroom practices were scrutinised for the degree of support to comprehension by means of verbal and non-verbal input (12 and 5 items, respectively), support to comprehensible output (i.e., promoting and reacting to learners' production) (11 items), the provision of content and language corrective feedback (14 items) and the cognitive stimulation of the learners by means of tasks and activities (13 items). The instrument also includes observation domains related to class interaction (i.e., individual, pair, group or plenary) and the extent to which the different language skills (i.e.,

reading, writing, listening and speaking) are used. Some of the items in these domains were not applicable in our pre-primary EFL classroom on account of the developmental stage of the children and were hence left unrated.

All items within each observation domain were rated from 0 (not present at all) to 5 (present to a very high degree). All ratings refer to the amount of use of the practice described in the item where it could have possibly been used. For example, when rating the item about the use of comprehension checks, a 5 would mean a very high use in all contexts where these could possibly be used, not necessarily throughout the session. The instrument provides a set of guidelines for raters. Once all the items were rated, the total possible score in each domain was calculated by multiplying the number of used items by 5. Percentages were calculated for each domain by multiplying the score obtained in that domain by 100 and dividing the result by the total possible score in each domain. Two researchers acted as raters and used percentage agreement as an interrater reliability measure.

Results and Discussion

Our analysis of the videorecorded pre-primary EFL sessions revealed that class interaction was mainly plenary, which equates to circle time in pre-primary education, and present in all weeks. There were some instances of group work in Week 2 (songs) and Week 3 (games), and individual work, particularly in Week 4, which was devoted to worksheets and colouring activities. As expected in a pre-primary context, there was no reading or writing in the sessions, which were focused on enhancing the children's listening and speaking skills through playful and meaningful repetition and short answers.

The teacher scored very high in all the domains of TIOS, with scores ranging from 60% to 100% in all observation domains and in all the sessions observed. The highest scores were obtained regarding the quality of her verbal input and, particularly, non-verbal input, and the lowest scores were obtained for the provision of corrective feedback. Support for children's comprehensible output also obtained very high scores and moderately high scores were obtained for the extent to which the teacher offered cognitively stimulating tasks and activities, as Table 5.2 illustrates.

Table 5.2. Percentages obtained in each observation domain in TIOS.

	Class arrangement	**Focus**	**Cognitively stimulating Tasks**	**Verbal input**	**Non-verbal input**	**Output**	**Corrective feedback**
Week 1 Story	Plenary	Listening Speaking	75%	78%	88.5%	74%	62%
Week 2 Songs	Plenary Group work	Listening Speaking	78.5%	75.5%	90%	88.5%	60.35%
Week 3 Games	Plenary Group work	Listening Speaking	76.5%	79.5%	100%	80.5%	75.78%
Week 4 Worksheets-Activities	Individual work Plenary	Listening Speaking	60%	80%	100%	85.5%	68%
Week 5	Plenary	Listening	74.5%	77.5%	100%	94%	75.5%

Closure		Speaking					

Cognitively stimulating tasks

According to TIOS, tasks are considered cognitively stimulating for students if they focus on meaningful content goals, if they are clearly explained and modelled, if they are based on children's previous knowledge, actively included all children at all times, and if they used authentic materials. The highest scores within this observation domain were reached in the way the teacher explained and modelled the tasks, gesturing and performing every action that the children had to carry out during the activity and hence prompting the children to make meaningful associations and understand what they had to do. The following cameo describes how the teacher did this:

Cameo: The songs session in week 2

Before playing the song and to refresh the children's memory of clothes vocabulary, the teacher used a puppet to ask a child "What's the weather like?", while pointing to the clouds outside through the window and repeating the question twice. The child responded, "Cold" and the teacher repeated, "Cold, it's cold" while wrapping and moving her arms around herself and clenching her teeth, and the child nodded. Then the teacher asked the whole group what they usually wear when it is cold and she brought clothing items from a bag and asked, "So, if it's cold, do we wear sandals?" as she took them out. When the children answered "Yes" or "No", she recast "Yes we do!" or "No we don't!" and placed the sandals aside. After repeating this with different clothing items she invited some children to do the same she did while she was asking the question.

This cameo shows gesturing, modelling and performing actions, which the teacher did consistently in all activities and interactions with the children. Within this category, the use of authentic materials should also be highlighted as well as the presence of meaningful content task objectives, such as deciding which piece of clothing would be appropriate for winter or summer, as the cameo above illustrates.

However, not all tasks included the participation of all children in the same way, particularly ~~. Particularly in activities which involved the joint participation of all the children during~~ circle time activities, during which inevitably some of the twenty-five 4 to 5 year olds were ~~, where the teacher did not make use of long enough wait time to allow all children to process her questions and thus be able to attempt an answer. Twenty-five 4 to 5-year-olds cannot be involved to the same extent in a circle time activity, as one single teacher inevitably leads to some children being~~ unable to process the teacher's instructions or fully participate in the task ~~and thus will not be cognitively challenged~~. The presence of cognitively stimulating tasks was also less observable in Week 4, during the worksheet activities which ~~. These~~ consisted of cutting, pasting and colouring clothes items and ~~these activities~~ were neither contextualised nor did they have a clear meaningful purpose.

Comentat [SM1]: Consider removing this.
Below you refer to cognitive involvement. And later you refer to wait time more specifically. I think it is enough.

Comentat [AV1R2]: Thank you for the suggestion. We have shortened the paragraph and eliminated the redundancy. But we would like to keep the reference to the circle time and the worksheet-based activities as they tend to be a "staple" in EFL classes in pre-primary education and should be approached more carefully by practitioners.

Going back to our research questions, regarding the nature of the pedagogical practices, the observed pre-primary EFL sessions were structured around activities that are familiar to the children, namely singing songs, telling stories, crafting and playing, creating a "safe space" for positive encounters with the new language. From a psycholinguistic standpoint, the activities carried out during the most sessions supported the early stages of L2 learning. They captured and held most children's attention, activated their prior knowledge of the

world and the target language, channelled the information through different senses and created a supporting environment for learning and language use. Activities with these characteristics are considered supportive of L2 intake, strong cognitive involvement, and knowledge construction (Kersten, 2021).

The topic of clothes and how to dress in different seasons and on different occasions is aligned with the general pre-primary curriculum and contributes to the children's development as individuals, not only as L2 learners. Yet, this continuity of learning was not made explicit to the children as no formal collaboration existed between the English teacher and the children's homeroom teacher. The English sessions were a distinct moment in the children's weekly timetable, and the English teacher was alone with the children during this time in their regular classroom. Collaboration between the specialist and the generalist teachers is essential to achieve an integrated approach to FL learning in the pre-primary education curriculum (European Commission, 2011) and the only way to ensure that the child is truly at the centre of early FL instruction (Mourão, 2019a; 2019b).

Verbal and non-verbal input

In relation to supporting children's comprehension using verbal input, the use of rich, varied, generally adapted and repetitive input is key to the presence of high scores in this observation domain of TIOS. This input was clearly articulated and was produced at a very adequate speed, emphasising key words particularly through intonation. Nonetheless, the teacher's input did not show a frequent use of pauses or waiting time, which would have been particularly helpful considering the large number of children in the class and the different cognitive needs to process instructions. We did not observe a frequent use of

comprehension checking strategies either, which, again would have given time for all children to respond the teachers' questions or explanations. Input was not adapted to children with different needs either, and the use of verbal routines to open and close the sessions was only moderate, all of which could be due to the limited duration of the sessions (i.e., 25 minutes), which hardly allowed for more than one or two activities per session. The following extracts illustrate how the teacher's repetitive use of key lexical items or expressions fosters children's comprehension and result in their attempts at production. In excerpt 1(3), the teacher recasts a child's response and repeats the word in an emphatic way (line 3), which the child later takes up and uses (line 5) while the teacher repeats it again in line 6.

Excerpt 1

1	T:	Then, I've got this! What is it? ((puts on the hat))
2	C1:	Head!
3	T:	A hat! Good. A hat!
4	T:	Oh, another one! ((puts on another hat))
5	C1:	A hat!
6	T:	A hat! Another one!

As for the use of non-verbal input to support children's comprehension, it was the observation domain which achieved the highest scores in TIOS. The teacher clearly and systematically used gestures and facial as well as body language in a very effective manner to support the message she wanted to convey. She also made repeated use of authentic materials and real objects (i.e., pieces of clothing), visual support (i.e., flashcards, videos, PowerPoint slides, pictures) and only occasionally some written support in capital letters. Excerpt 2 below shows the use of gestures to scaffold the children's comprehension and production:

Excerpt 2

1 T: Raise your hand, yeah? ((gestures raising hand)) Mmm, C1! ((holding a scarf))
2 C1: *Vestit!* [trans: dress]
3 T: Sure? Look! Look, it goes here ((puts scarf around the neck)). What is it?
4 C1: A boots!
5 T: Boots? ((touching her feet while making a puzzled face))
6 C2: Orange, uff
7 T: An orange …? ((gestures eating a pretend orange))
8 C2: Scarf!
9 T: Scarf! Scarf! Good! An orange scarf! ((touching and moving the scarf again))

Turning to our research questions, the teacher analysed in this study systematically used the FL, both for instruction and classroom management purposes, and even for personal matters which spontaneously arose in class. She was also very careful when adapting speech patterns by emphasising key words, strategically using intonation as well as slowing down during complex strings of speech. This was observed to be conducive of L2 uptake among the children (Excerpt 1), in line with findings from studies on teacher input quality and language learning outcomes in early FL education (Weitz, et al., 2010).

This sustained and strategic use of the target language is related to the teacher's high proficiency level in English, which together with her degree as a primary school teacher with an EFL teaching specialisation results in a combination of pedagogical and language knowledge that she displayed comfortably throughout the sessions (Sun & Verspoor, 2022). In a minimal exposure context like Catalonia, this immersive contact with the target language, albeit for the limited duration of the class, is crucial for L2 learning yet it also requires careful scaffolding for children to be able to make the most of it. However, our observations revealed that the children were not always able to follow the teacher's talk and some of them were overwhelmed by the input given exclusively in English and, as a result,

did not engage with the activities proposed on all occasions. An example was when the teacher asked the children to make a circle or a line, and they did not move or went in the opposite direction.

Following Gámez (2015), the optimal amount of teacher talk in the early stages of L2 education is also a matter of teacher "silence", creating spaces for children to take the floor or simply providing them with time to process the input. In this study, the teacher did not provide long enough waiting time periods during the teacher-led interactions, neither did she check for comprehension systematically. This could be related to the fact that she had no specific training in EFL teaching for pre-primary and might not have been aware of the necessity of such age-appropriate scaffolding strategies.

Support of children's output

The observed teacher's support for the children's output also yielded high scores, particularly in relation to her constant encouragement of the children's use of the FL as well as the her acknowledgement that children might use their L1 and gestures to compensate for their lack of linguistic resources. We should also highlight the observed repeated provision and reinforcement of key words that children repeated throughout the sessions, the appreciation of their attempts to use the target language and the teacher's frequent prompts for children to self-correct during interaction.

Nevertheless, waiting time periods were not observed, thus giving children little space to try out language and/or prepare L2 production. The highest score within this observation

domain was obtained in Week 5, when children had been working on the same topic and vocabulary for five weeks. It was a consolidation week where children were seen to generally produce many more attempts to utter FL key words and produce language and the teacher was seen to provide much more support and acknowledgement to such attempts to produce output. Excerpt 3 exemplifies instances of provision of key words to support the children's output:

Excerpt 3

1	T:	((holding a cap))
2	C4:	Brown
3	T:	Brown (pause)?
4	C4:	Brown hat!
5	T:	Well, in fact is not a hat. It's a cap!
6	C4:	Cap!
7	T:	A brown cap. Good!

Here, in line 3, the teacher repeats C4's response and pauses, prompting the child to come up with the clothing word, to which C4 answers "Brown hat". The teacher acknowledges the child's response but suggests another word is more appropriate giving the word for the child to repeat in line 5. The child repeats it in line 6 and finally the teacher repeats the whole phrase to confirm and praises the child.

Except 4 is an example of not enough waiting time for children to produce FL output:

Excerpt 4

1	T:	Look! What's this? ((holding gloves))
2	C5:	*Guants!* [Trans: gloves]
3	T	*Guants* is in Catalan but in English? Gloves!
4	C5:	Gloves
5	T	Gloves! Good.

Here, the child answers the teacher's question in Catalan (line 2). The teacher points out the child's use of the L1 and immediately provides the translation into English, showing no waiting time for the children to think and produce the FL word. The child then repeats the word in English, which the teacher repeats emphatically and praises.

Excerpt 5 exemplifies the teacher's implicit acknowledgement that the children use their L1:

Excerpt 5

1 T: So what did you do on Halloween?
2 C6: *Jo vaig anar a casa de C1* [Trans: I went to C1's place]
3 T: Oh wow! C1 came to your house and you didn't say this to me? Why couldn't I come? Oh, and what about me?
4 C6: *També vam anar a fer truco o trato* [Trans: we also went trick or treating]
5 T: *Truco o trato!* [Trans: trick or treat], trick or treat! I love it!
6 C7: *Jo també!* [Trans: Me too!]
7 T: You too?
8 C7: *Jo també!* [Trans: Me too!]

Here, C6 and C7 reply to the teacher's questions in Catalan (lines 2, 4 and 6) and the teacher naturally provides a direct translation in her response, without interrupting communication, thus bridging the children's language gaps and keeping the conversation going.

In relation to our research questions, we can state that the pedagogical practices observed in the five sessions provided numerous opportunities for the children to imitate and, eventually, try to produce the target language, at word and phrase level, in highly scaffolded interactions with the teacher. The children's output was prompted by means of display questions (e.g. "What's this?"), modelled lexical items and phrases and affective strategies to support language use (e.g. praising target language use, occasional L1 props

and puppets as interlocutors). The teacher's acknowledgement that the learners might have to use the L1 to compensate for lack of L2 resources further encouraged them to participate in class. Output stretches learners' L2 competence (Swain, 2005) and the teacher was particularly keen on getting the children to engage in interaction with her.

Nonetheless, all the L2 production activities were teacher-led and almost no attempts at creating opportunities for child-initiated or child-led L2 use were visible during the sessions. On occasions, the teacher used referential questions, which made reference to children's lives outside the class (e.g. what they wear in winter, at parties, what they did at the weekend, etc.). As we can see in Excerpt 6, the teacher asks about the children's Halloween weekend and asks questions, which the children respond to systematically in their L1 or nod, as is evident in lines 4 and 6:

Excerpt 6

1	T:	Did you go to trick or treat this weekend? Did you do trick or treat? *Truco o trato* [trans: trick or treat], did you do it?
2	C11:	*Jo!* [trans: me!] ((raising his hand))
3	T:	Yes, you did? Were you wearing a costume ((while touching her clothes))?
4	C11:	*Esqueleto!* [Trans: skeleton]
5	T:	Were you a skeleton?
6	C11:	((nods))

We believe this has to do with the communicative approach to language teaching adopted by this teacher which generated numerous attempts at casual interaction with the children, particularly at the beginning of the sessions. Yet, in the context of the sessions observed, these types of questions did not stimulate the children's participation in the FL most likely on account of their limited language and world knowledge.

Once again, the lack of specific training in pre-primary EFL might account for the teacher's use of interactional strategies not entirely attuned to the children's age. As other observational studies in pre-primary settings have revealed, child-initiated FL use is favoured by a mix of structured, teacher-led instruction and free, child-led practice and play (Mourao, 2018). Having access to the materials of the English class beyond class time, for instance under the supervision of the homeroom teacher, and in a less structured manner could generate additional opportunities for age-appropriate FL learning.

Corrective feedback

The last observation domain is the provision of language corrective feedback, which obtained the lowest scores in our study. As expected, explicit metalinguistic feedback is almost non-existent, but we did observe repetitions and recasts as output-prompting and input-providing corrective feedback strategies. We also found instances of using gestures to signal the need to self-correct as well as elicitation of reformulations and clarification requests (i.e., "How do you say this in English?"; "Excuse me?"). Excerpt 7 illustrates the use of repetition and recasts:

Excerpt 7

1	T:	Look! I love this! ((holding a dress)), what's this?
2	C8:	A t-shirt!
3	T:	A t-shirt? Sure?
4	C8:	A jumper!
5	T:	A jumper?
6	C9:	No!
7	T:	It's a bit long. What is it?
8	C8:	*Vestit*! [Trans: dress]
9	T:	In English, good, it's a dress!
10	C8:	Dress!
11	T:	A dress!

In Excerpt 7, the teacher repeats C8's attempts in lines 3 and 5 using a questioning intonation, indicating that the answer is not quite right and prompting the correct word. In line 9, the teacher recasts the child's Catalan answer by providing the English version of the word.

Excerpt 8 shows how the teacher uses hand gestures to point out that the order of the adjective and the noun should be reversed, thus prompting the child to reformulate his answer:

Excerpt 8

1	T:	((holding a t-shirt))
2	C10:	T-shirt black!
3	T:	((moves fingers to indicate the change the word order))
4	C10:	Black t-shirt!
5	T:	Black t-shirt! Good!

Returning to our research questions, the sessions observed included corrective practices, not meant to raise children's awareness of rules but rather to consolidate the lexis and phrases introduced in the sessions. The teacher mostly prompted the children to correct themselves by means of repetition with rising intonation and gestures, a strategy which enhances learners' noticing by getting them to engage with corrective feedback in a productive way (Lyster, 2004). Nonetheless, while prompting seemed to be effective with some of the children, one may wonder whether it might have put unnecessary pressure on others. Moreover, the enactment of the word order rule for adjectives and nouns in Excerpt 8 is reminiscent of rule-based FL teaching, possibly on account of the teacher's primary EFL training background.

Conclusion

Our exploration of the pedagogical practices employed in an EFL didactic sequence implemented with pre-primary children in Catalonia sheds light into how teachers of English support FL learning at these early stages of education. In our context, the EFL sessions observed provided numerous opportunities to understand and produce the target language through meaningful and engaging tasks and exposure to abundant and high quality L2 input. These opportunities are related to the psycholinguistic processes that support early FL language learning and which must be activated through instruction in limited exposure contexts like Catalonia.

Yet, early childhood education needs to approach FL learning in an integrated way, incorporating the FL into the general curriculum to support children's development as a whole not only as language learners. From this perspective, the pedagogical practices observed in our context cannot be considered fully age-appropriate in that they remain teacher-led and disconnected from the learning activities taking place before and after the English sessions. We have identified at least two types of barriers that need to be overcome to achieve this integrated approach to FL teaching and learning in the Catalan context: institutional barriers regarding the planning of FL sessions as separate instances in the children's timetable, and pedagogical barriers stemming from a long-established divide between specialist and generalist teachers, which makes collaboration difficult to envisage.

Educational stakeholders should not only provide specific teacher training programmes to cater for the needs of FL teaching and learning in early educational stages, which are idiosyncratic and need to be acknowledged as such, but also ensure that these programmes

are strategically embedded into generalist pre-service teacher education curricula to shift beliefs about "atomised" FL teaching in the early years. In this way, we can increase future teachers' awareness of the need to work collaboratively, irrespective of their specialist or generalist status, to develop holistic learning environments in pre-primary education (Waddington, 2022).

Moreover, classroom observation could be given a more prominent role in pre-service teacher training programmes as it nurtures practitioners' reflective skills and their potential to transform and improve their classroom practices (O'Leary, 2014). Observation could be part of reflective cycles in which pre-service teachers analyse own and peer classroom practices with the help of research-informed observation schemes, identify both strengths and areas of improvement and subsequently attempt to incorporate new strategies into their teaching. This systematic reflection fuels life-long teacher education and is vital for quality education provision at all ages.

Our study comes with several shortcomings. The data was collected from one teacher, in one school and over a limited period and, while this is common practice in observational classroom-based studies, more evidence needs to be collected from other teachers, in other types of pre-primary schools and over a longer period to bolster the validity of the claims made here. Moreover, while TIOS operationalises the quality of pedagogical practices in relation to SLA theories, it falls short of accounting for those practices which are specific to pre-primary education, such as children's free play, the classroom setup and teacher collaboration, among others. Future research needs to envisage the elaboration of specific

observation schemes for pre-primary education that can truly gauge the specificities of language education at this stage.

Notes:

(1) If not indicated otherwise, in this chapter we use the label L2 to refer to additional language learning, irrespective of the type of exposure
(2) In transitional bilingual education kindergarten classrooms, children's L1 (i.e., Spanish) is the primary language spoken whereas the L2 (i.e., English) is introduced for 30-45 minutes daily.
(3) Transcription key: T - teacher; C - child; *italic* - Catalan word; ((double brackets)) - physical action; [square brackets] - translation

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