

**Is “the Younger the Better” the Profile of the Successful English Language
Learner?**



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ABSTRACT

The aspirations of the curriculum of pre-primary and primary schools in Catalonia are too high in relation to the conditions under which an L2 is taught to Young Language Learners (YLLs). Considering this, it is the aim of this paper to explain why the phallacy of “the younger the better” does not apply in Catalan schools as their limited-input situation does not allow students to take advantage of the benefit that starting at an early age has in naturalistic language settings. The paper also attempts to link reality to what should be improved in the early foreign language teaching by means of introducing CLIL so as to introduce extensive exposure to the L2, a reorganization of teachers’ training and an increase in motivation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to question the popular belief of “the younger the better” by characterizing the ideal Young English Foreign Language Learner. This implies destroying the myths around this phallacy as there are lots of efforts put pointlessly on this belief, and not so many attempts to address the learning context, which actually is one of the most important things that should be taken into account when learning an L2. It is popularly believed that the younger one starts to learn a language the better it is, but actually, this is not true in all learning contexts. Early language learning in naturalistic or immersion contexts is inevitably successful but the context under study is that of early foreign language learning in classroom settings and with minimal exposure (i.e. 3 hours per week).

The depiction of the ideal learner in this context will be done through an extensive analysis of different academic articles and books related to this wide topic. The role of the “Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)” will be used to explain how it affects the learning of an L2 in contrast to the acquisition of the L1. It is important to take into account that this paper focuses on Young Language Learners (YLLs) as they are the ones to whom the phallacy is referred to. Consequently, factors related to age will be central in this paper in addition to the role of teaching and how motivation and internal factors of the learner affect the whole process. After this deep analysis, an overview of Catalan state schools will be done in order to show how English is distributed across the curriculum within pre-school and primary courses and at the same time the paper will show the reasons why according to PISA results, the English level of our country is at the queue among other countries in the European Union. In sum, this paper attempts to build bridges related to the existing gap between what is

theoretically thought and what is really applied in our educational system and it will suggest some ideas in order to improve it.

2. AGE AND CONTEXT

2.1 AGE

According to the common belief questioned in this paper, age is determinant in order to achieve a certain level of competence in a FL, but this concept does not work alone as it necessarily has to take into account other factors such as the CPH, ultimate attainment or immersion in the target language, among others. Depending on the combination among these variables age might not be such a determinant factor. Following this idea, Singleton and Ryan (2004) outlined four different positions based on existing literature, which are contrastive but supportive at the same time.

The first position is the one that this paper questions. To exemplify it, authors focus on different points of view. The former is based on the ideas posed by Vollmer (1962) who concluded that time matters and Yamada et al. (1980) who affirmed that the older the learner is, the lower the score is in the different tests. Another point of view is that of immigrants acquiring an L2 in a naturalistic way where one sees that the earlier a child enters in the country and immerses into it, the more successful the acquisition will be. Many studies such as Seliger et al. (1975) or Kessler and Ildar (1979), among others, got to the following conclusions: the older one gets immersed in the FL, the slower the progress is and the non-native like pronunciation becomes. By contrast, the younger one gets immersed, the more native-like pronunciation the learner gets and the more successful progress he or she makes.

But this happens in a naturalistic input situation and it does not apply to the type of context studied in this paper.

The second corresponds to “the older, the better” position, which refers to the fact that older L2 learners are more successful than younger ones under explicit instruction, the one applied in our educational system. Studies of short duration such as Asher and Price (1967) proved that adults got better results than YLLs at every level of linguistic complexity. Moreover, Donoghue (1965) added that there is a faster rate of L2 acquisition among older learners in addition to the better results and Justman and Nass (1956) showed that pupils who started at a younger age had no long-term advantage over late starters who, according to Bland and Keislar (1966), at their beginning needed much more time to acquire the concepts. The project of the University of the Basque Country (Garcia Mayo, 2003) and the BAF project (Muñoz, 2006) confirmed in detail all these findings from several years before. The latter, adds that older beginners outperform the younger ones in written tests and also in story-telling and general interaction. These two approaches show a contradiction between what we are doing and what reality is and this coincides with the criticism in this paper. The following words by Singleton and Ryan (2004) illustrate this: “one can cite the disappointing message emerging from evaluations of L2 programmes in primary schools around Europe” (p.81). Following all these studies, the theory of the CPH, which defends that L2 learning is at its highest point before puberty and it decreases after it is not clear in all contexts and this is demonstrated in studies such as Birdsong (1992), Ioup et al. (1994) or White and Genesee (1996) which prove that adults might reach almost native-like proficiency in all levels in the target language.

The third position taken into account is that of “the younger, the better in some respects” and it starts explaining three key concepts. The first one defends that the degree of efficiency of phonology is age-related, the second one says that YLLs are more efficient at communicative skills and that old learners are more efficient in the academic domain, and the third point distinguishes between the acquirability of bio programmed aspects – which are for life- and the acquirability of non-bio programmed aspects – which decrease as age increases-. All the studies used in this section (e.g. Fathman, 1975a; Harley, 1986; Snow & Hoefenagel-Höhle, 1979) try to separate phonology from the other skills involved in the learning process, such as grammar or morphology and although they seem to agree on the fact that adults have access to UG, it is not clear which cognitive areas of the learning process are considered biologically endowed and which ones are not.

“The younger, the better in the long run” corresponds to the forth position. It is based on Krashen et al.’s (1979) who made a distinction between long and short term attainment. The other assumptions that they came across with are that when morphology and syntax are tested adults get better results. Nevertheless, when the acquisition process is done under a naturalistic input situation then early starters achieve higher scores in a long-term run, overtaking the initial advantage of adults. On the other hand, when acquisition is done under explicit teaching conditions the attainment is considered eventual and according to Oller and Nagato (1974), older beginners assimilate the same as younger beginners but in less time. However, if we compare with immersion students, in order to get the same exposure to the target language the time needed would be extremely longer.

Finally, the authors remark some general points. It is true that the older one is the more conscious the learning process is, but under an explicit context a conscious learning process is

equally needed at all ages, which is why De Keyser (2000) defends that maturational constraints only apply under implicit learning contexts, so the educational system studied in this paper might be considered as a failure, as far as language learning is concerned. As it has been explained, adults can reach native-like levels in some areas, but not in all of them and it is also true that starting at a very young age is not a guarantee of success as many YLLs have an extremely limited level of English. In addition, it is important to take into account that YLLs and post-pubertal learners acquire a language following similar mechanisms and being similarly affected by cross-linguistic effects. If different results occur, they can be explained by means of cognitive differences.

2.2 AGE AND CONTEXT

The process of depicting Young Language Learners involves a deep study on the context as depending on the type of exposure to the foreign language they receive (i.e. immersion or instruction), results vary noticeably. De Keyser (2000) touches on this idea by testing Bley-Vroman's (1988) called the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis which explains why adults use the L1 knowledge and the general abstract problem-solving capacities in order to fill, in an indirect and imperfect way, the gap left by the lack of the innate capacity. The subjects used were 57 native speakers of Hungarian, 32 male and 25 female, who had emigrated to the United States, at least 34 years before, and who did not have any previous knowledge of English before emigrating. After studying them by means of three tests, he could prove that Bley Vroman's Fundamental Difference Hypothesis was true as no adult was able to reach a native level of an L2 and although there was an attempt to use their problem solving capacities, it was not a guarantee of success. Moreover, he could answer Harley and Hart's (1997) problem by exposing that aptitude is a predictor of ultimate attainment in L2,

even after decades of exposure to the language in non-tutored contexts. Similarly to Singleton and Ryan (2004), he also affirms that the CPH affects implicit L2 learning, as between early childhood and puberty humans lose this innate capacity. Consequently, adults, who are more successful at explicit learning contexts, can rely on their problem-solving abilities as a great help in order to achieve a high level of the L2. It is important to take into account that implicit learning means a full immersion program and not a few hours of teaching.

The study used in Muñoz (2011) is related to the BAF project related to the effects of starting age of learning in a typical instructed learning context, but with some variations. The first research question is related to the possible advantage that early-starters may have over late starters; and the second one works with the input measures and how they affect language proficiency. The subjects of the study were 162 undergraduate students from an English degree in a Spanish University, 141 female and 21 male, who had more than ten years of instruction and whose age was thirty or less at the testing moment. It is important to take into account that they were divided into two groups: the ones that started English instruction before eleven years old and the ones who started later. They had to complete a standardized general proficiency test, a lexical reception test and a phonetic identification test. The results proved that in both groups, there is no correlation between starting age and proficiency level in any of the tests. This means that the benefits that age has on naturalistic language settings, do not affect limited-input language settings, such as the one under consideration in this paper.

3. YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL PROFILE

According to Drew and Hasselgren (2008) YLLs are “learners from five years, up to around 12/13 years, which seem to reflect the lower and upper limits of primary school education” (p.1). At this age, they are growing up, they are becoming literate and their age makes them vulnerable. However, they are willing to discover and learn new things, and learning a new language is received with enthusiasm. The fact that they are developing their L1 distinguishes them from adults as the learning strategies and the knowledge of an L2 function differently. They need to feel that the L2 is not too difficult for them and that they are good at it, otherwise their sense of failure might be detrimental and they might drop a task if it is too difficult. As in an explicit teaching context they need much more than using the FL because children need to understand it and reinforcement is needed by means of gestures, examples or illustrations, a special *caretaker speech* is required. It is mainly shaped with the idea of comprehensible input which includes: slower rate of speech, marked pronunciation, simple sentences, repetition and rephrasing, visual stimuli by means of gestures, main use of concrete referents and scaffolding (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2009).

Not only is language important, but also the content of the class which has to be worthwhile, interesting and not grammatically sequenced as the use of metalanguage does not start developing until they are eight. Therefore early YLLs cannot follow rules or a linguistic analysis. Their need and capacity for play, fantasy and fun has to be fulfilled with different activities as they have short attention spans which require the use of a rich variety of activities in order not to fall into routine and monotony, otherwise their motivation might be highly affected. Moreover, according to Swain (1985), apart from all the input that students receive in class, it is also important to let them have the opportunity to produce comprehensible

output, as they need to gain confidence and to reduce dependency. Furthermore, correcting them at the very same moment should not be done because corrections affect the accuracy of the message and the vulnerability of the learners' emotional state as they are very sensitive to praise, criticism and approval. There is a high need of approval among children because they need to feel loved and liked, thus they want to please teachers, so they might try tasks in order to please them. Parents and family are also very important because their assistance, attention and comprehension are a basic need for children's development. Another factor that affects their self-esteem is the kind of experiences that they experience at school with other children and with the environment in the class.

According to Curtain and Dahlberg, in order to achieve L2 proficiency students need to have the opportunity to formulate communicative interaction taking into account the following elements: input – which depends on quality and quantity- and attributes – which depend on age, L1 literacy, cognitive abilities, personality, motivation, etc.- and they represent what each child puts into the acquisition process depending on them and on their social environment. Some concepts are crucial for the development such as the idea that stages mark the process of second language acquisition or that the more time used for instruction the better the results will be. It is in this part where one of the main problems of this paper arises as time is what our YLLs do not have. Curtain and Dahlberg, (2009), according to Met and Rhodes (1990), considered “the identified time spent in language instruction and intensity of that instruction as the two most critical factors in rate and amount of language acquisition” (p.6). Moreover, cognitive characteristics play a big role in the acquisition process as they need to be fully developed. In other words, YLLs start to develop reading and writing between the age of five and seven and their L1 oral abilities are well-

developed, but in the L2 there is a general lack of knowledge. Reading skills depend on the L1 as they are starting to develop language literacy understanding and skills.

When studying the brain and how it stores language, it is necessary to understand that the brain organizes information according to schematic maps due to a process called ‘patterning’. This patterning will be achieved successfully if the language is taught in a holistic way, if it motivates them and if the activities done appeal to their emotions as according to Jensen (2005, cited in Curtain and Dahlberg, 2009) “emotions drive attention, create meaning, and have their own memory pathways” (p.77). Memory is very important in a non-naturalistic context as children do not have natural learning abilities, thus they rely on memory-based processes mainly based on repetition. It is also important to understand that as Smith (1994) said, language has to do with social interaction and consequently if students see its use, they will add meaning-based experiences. However, every YLL follows a different path and the interaction using the L2 might arrive after a silent period, which some children go through, or immediately as some other have a strong need for social interaction.

According to Curtain and Dahlberg (2009), learners can be classified according to two criteria. The former characterizes them as visual, auditory or kinaesthetic and the latter as holistic or linear. As it has been mentioned above, each student is a world apart from others and what may work for one, does not work for another one. For example, some students have enough information when listening attentively, but others do not feel sure until they see a word written. Another important classification is that of the *multiple intelligences* which encompasses eight different classifications: Linguistic, Logical- Mathematical, Spatial, Bodily-Kinaesthetic, Musical, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Naturalist. Each student cognitively promotes ones more than others and these individual differences have to be taken

into account, although, traditionally, the first two are the only ones treated in our system, but it is important to design units around a thematic centre as in this way all this individual differences might meet together, which is actually not done in English teaching in Spain.

To sum up, this deep characterization of our YLLs is crucial for the development of this paper as cognitive, emotional and environmental factors that affect them should be taken into account when introducing an L2 in YLL. Nevertheless, it seems that the Department of Education in our government does not take into account some of the features outlined in this section and this might be the cause of the non-successful learning of English as an L2 in our state school, which is the following section in this paper.

4. SCHOOL CONTEXT

4.1 CATALAN SCHOOL

The present paper is based on Catalonia's educational system and, therefore the characteristics of the Catalan school will be depicted in order to understand the present situation within the English learning process. As the subjects of the study are YLLs, there are two educational stretches that will be taken into account: pre-school, ruled by the "*Decret 181/2008, de 9 de setembre, pel qual s'estableix l'ordenació dels ensenyaments del segon cicle de l'educació infantil*" (DOGC, 2008), and primary school ruled by the "*Decret 142/2007, de 26 de juny, pel qual s'estableix l'ordenació dels ensenyaments de l'educació primària*" (DOGC, 2007).

Pre-school education encompasses children from the age of three until the age of five. This stage contributes to the emotional and affective, physical and motor, social and cognitive development of the children. There has to be team work between schools and families, providing children with an environment of confidence where they feel loved and with possibilities to learn. These capacities are developed according to capacities distributed in areas consisting of discovery of the self and the others, discovery of the environment and communication and languages. Focusing on language, children are put in a context of immersion in which the language used is Catalan. However, the law considers the possibility of introducing orally a foreign language – which is mainly English- in the last year of this period. It is necessary to bear in mind that it is not compulsory and when it is applied it consists of a few hours and is essentially explicit. In the cases it is introduced, it is important to understand that there is not a formal curriculum of FL at this stage, so it is the teacher who decides what to do according to the idea of teaching the language as something useful and integrated with the topics taught in other areas of the learning process. According to the curriculum the teaching of the FL has to try to provide an immersion linguistic context within the class, but this is contradictory with what immersion means as children may receive one or two hours of English instruction a week, therefore this cannot be considered immersion.

The second stretch taken into account is Primary education which is divided in stages— initial, medium, superior-, of two years each and which encompasses children from the age of six until the age of twelve. In this stretch a FL, which again is mainly English, is considered in the curriculum as a compulsory subject, but according to the age it is applied differently. At the initial stage – from six to eight years of age-, 70 hours per year are devoted to the learning of a FL. With this short exposure to the FL children are expected to develop listening and speaking skills. They are still learning how to read and write in the L1 so the L2 is introduced

lightly, but the purpose of introducing the FL orally is that of trying to make them understand that it is a useful language, by means of communication purposes within the class: with teachers and also with classmates. In other words, “their language learning should be closely integrated with real, meaningful communication” (Vallbona, forthcoming). They are asked to produce simple structures mainly related to their routine in class or to repeat songs and rhymes in order to internalize the vocabulary and the pronunciation, in order to fulfil the requirements of the curriculum. At the medium and superior stages they should gradually develop not only oral skills, but also reading and writing. The medium stage includes 105 hours of instruction per year and it encompasses children from the age of eight to ten years old, and the superior stage, which involves children of ten to twelve years old, includes 135 hours of instruction per year. At these stages they improve the oral skills introduced in the initial stage and they start to develop the writing and the reading skills which require training by means of guided work in class and the use of technologies.

The Curriculum of Primary Education¹ in Catalonia remarks the importance of the methodology that has to be used along the learning process. It explains that the FL has to be introduced and taught following an integrated model, not an isolated one, where children can understand and feel the usefulness of the target language and therefore, their interest to learn might be awakened. Moreover, the activities used in class have to promote the use of their imagination so that they are able to interact in all possible situations and consequently, it will improve their self-confidence and their motivation when learning a FL. This has to be achieved by promoting the four skills mentioned above within integrated activities. For example, the use of familiar situations where children can feel comfortable when using them in oral skills, the use of texts according to their level where they can understand and take

¹ <http://www.xtec.cat/web/curriculum/primaria/curriculum>

general and specific ideas of the text that can be used in other areas or the production of short and simple texts which involve creating a structure, using the proper grammar and the proper spelling of the words. Spelling is a handicap for our students as they are used to writing what they listen to and English does not work with one-to-one graph-sound correspondence. Leaving this aside, if integrated activities are done pupils should be able to understand that what they are learning is meaningful, and they may see themselves capable of interacting with the target language. However, this does not occur in reality.

To sum up, there are four skills that have to be fulfilled within a few hours of teaching in an explicit way taking into account pupils' motivation and willingness to learn both of which rule the learning process. Nonetheless, the aspirations within both curriculums – pre-primary and primary- are too high considering the hours of exposure to the FL and the learning context students have. In addition to the learning process, teachers are also crucial and problematic in our educational system, which is why they are dealt with in the following section.

4.2 TEACHERS

Teachers are central in the learning process as according to Nikolov and Mihlajevic (2011) “they are not only the main sources of input and motivation, but they are also responsible for what happens in classrooms” (p.106). Consequently, their job is not only about transmitting knowledge but according to DOGC and to Pinter (2006), teachers also take into account children's emotional, affective, intellectual, motor and relationship needs in addition to how to encourage fun and variety within the activities done in class. Moreover, they have to supply a wide range of activities which adjust to their needs and also to the differences of the pupils within a class group showing that it is an easy process and treating

them equally. This is very important for the learning process but what is crucial for the learning of a FL is that “primary English teachers need to have adequate proficiency in the language to provide comprehensible input and natural exposure to the target language” (Pinter, 2006:41), and this could also be applied to pre-primary teachers.

Nikolov and Djigunovic (2011) describe two kinds of teachers: the generalists and the language specialists. Generalists of pre-primary and primary do not tend to have proficiency levels in the FL or it might be the case that they do not even have a minimum knowledge of a FL, but in contrast they can teach what is held in the curriculum without any kind of problem as well as managing with the pupils. According to the preceding educational law ruling university studies, language specialists should be proficient in the L2 apart from being fully capable to teach without any difficulty what is held in the curriculum. However, this does not correspond to reality as although their level of a FL is better than the one simple generalists have, they are far from being proficient. For example, English specialists tend to reach B2 level, which is not enough in terms of proficiency and according to Drew and Hasselgren (2008), this lack of knowledge causes insecurity and lack of confidence among them, and in addition the input pupils receive is highly limited and this insecurity affects profoundly their way of teaching. In addition to the generalist teachers, the Spanish educational system allows philologists to teach in Primary contexts, which actually is not done, and what occurs then is that they have a native-like proficiency level, but they lack the knowledge of other subjects in the curriculum and general teaching methodologies. Consequently, there has to be a change on the way of instructing teachers, otherwise the weak points will never improve and our YLLs will always be affected by our handicapped teachers as well as the negative effects these have on our pupil’s motivation and learning process.

5. HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF OUR YLLS

The age factor, the teachers, the setting, the exposure or motivation, among others, affect the learning process of our YLLs directly as it has been depicted in the previous sections of the paper. The way they are combined, applied and implemented in our education system directly affects the quality of the acquisition process and the amount of language acquired. Therefore, the level of English of our students is highly and directly affected by the incorrect application of these factors, which need to be improved and to be set up as a coordinated group of factors. This wrong implementation makes our YLLs have a low level of English in comparison to the rest of Europe. Next section aims to build bridges between what we have now and what we should have in order to improve this situation.

5.1 EXPOSURE AND CLASSROOM SETTING

In Catalan state schools the time devoted to English learning is the one determined by the government, which does not normally exceed three hours a week and which is exclusively based on the English language and its rules being applied in a context of an average of 25 students per class. First of all, it should be taken into account that the ratio of students per class should diminish because a class with 25 students with different levels of English makes the process even slower than it is. Thus students should be divided into groups of fewer students and according to their level, otherwise the ones who can evolve faster and have to wait for others might become demotivated.

Moving back to hours of exposure and the minimal input situation, it is clear that the type of programme used nowadays limits the capacity of our YLLs to acquire a language. In other words, the theory of the younger the better is true but only in cases of intensive

exposure or immersion. Therefore, hours of L2 learning should increase within school hours. In order to take advantage of this innate capacity exposure needs to increase but not only in the amount of hours but also in the intensity of exposure because as Singleton and Ryan (2004) say “the amount of instruction is the most important predictor of L2 learning success” (p.201). Given that the amount of time devoted to EFL is constrained by the government it seems that using CLIL alongside EFL classes might be a possible solution (Johnston, 2009a). Therefore core subjects such as history, science or maths, among others, should be taught in English. In addition to this it is important to take into account that YLLs need comprehensible input, which has to be meaningful and authentic in order to provide students the opportunity of using the language for communicative purposes other than grammatical or vocabulary issues. In addition, according to Kasper and Rose (2002) the domains of use and the functions of language of general communication must be covered. CLIL may be implemented in various forms depending on the context and the school where it is implemented. It may cover an hour of a subject, a whole curricular area or even 50% of the schooling time as in bilingual schools.

5.2 CLIL

Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an educational approach in which content subjects are taught using a second language, which in the case of Catalonia is generally English. This approach gives the opportunity to link the knowledge learners have of each subject with English. According to Pinter (2006) there are two grounded reasons to implement it: the first one is that as CLIL is a content based programme it keeps the holistic learning they follow, and the second one is that everything they learn can be explained in the

L1 as well as in the L2 and therefore it is a way of reinforcing the knowledge they have of the content subject.

According to Pérez-Vidal (2009), CLIL has linguistic benefits, educational and pedagogical benefits and social benefits. The first benefits are related to the increase of hours of exposure to the L2 which will lead to the stimulation of the communicative competence as the L2 is used with this purpose and not with an end itself. The second one shows that this approach requires a different speed along the learning process which implies that teachers make efforts in order to be understood and students make efforts in order to follow the lessons properly. These two factors have a positive impact on motivation and on the importance the L2 has in their lives as it becomes the tool to communicate with others. The social benefits which are the third on the list refer to the broadening of the mind of the students because learning in another language implies having a European perspective showing respect to other cultures and languages. This programme will make other European cultures closer and students will feel European as they will be able to understand and to be understood wherever they go.

5.3 TEACHERS

Teachers are the engine of the L2 acquisition process as they are the rulers in the classroom scene and what is most important they are the main source of input and motivation. It is necessary to understand that YLLs rely completely on the teacher and having a good teacher makes them love the L2.

As a source of knowledge, teachers should be trained in a different way, because as it has been explained above neither the generalist teachers nor the language specialist fulfil the

requirements for applying CLIL and therefore there is a “need for a new methodology and for teachers to be adequately trained in it” (Halbach, 2009: 25). This holistic way of learning demands three main “musts”: the first one is a proficient English knowledge, the second one a high knowledge of all the subjects, in order to teach with a high level of confidence and with the capacity to adapt to the different situations existing, and the third one, which our teachers already have, consists in knowing the special needs of their learners such as providing a safe and encouraging environment, fun or variety, among others.

The first requirement could be solved by extending CLIL into university degrees in order to make future teachers learn in the same way their students will. Therefore learning through an L2 might become a common practice, and at the same time this intensive exposure might help them mastering the L2 at an almost native proficiency level which is a must in order to “provide comprehensible input and natural exposure to the target language” (Pinter, 2006: 41). The second requirement points the need for teachers to be proficient in order to use the language with enough confidence so as to increase the quality of the contents explained in class and to be able to explain it in different ways so as to be understood. This problem should be sorted out by means of new training programmes different from the ones that nowadays exist, as it has been demonstrated they do not fulfil teachers’ needs or they do not make them feel confident enough with what they actually know.

Another crucial point to be taken into account is the ability teachers should have to select and adapt materials in addition to the wide range of linguistic sources that may help in the content-based processing and output production. There are lots of existing materials that are completely unknown by them and the ones they use might be old-fashioned, useless or pointless in order to apply them in the type of learning YLLs need. They are really important

because they form the physical input children have, thus they first have to be located, and then adapted to the circumstances in which they are going to be used as all the groups are different and the circumstances in which they are going to be used may vary, too. Finally, it is important to understand that teachers are a source of motivation as well, which will be dealt with in the next section.

5.4 MOTIVATION

Early Language Learning has a clear advantage on YLLs intrinsic motivation because if they enjoy the activities done in class, the environment is comfortable and they like the teacher they will enjoy the learning process. By contrast, extrinsic factors do not apply at this early stage of their lives because they do not think about English as a future goal until the age of 11 or 12. Nonetheless, this initial advantage on motivation falls after a short period of time due to the poor conditions in which they are taught: large groups, few lessons per week or unqualified teachers.

Teachers are the main source of motivation and according to Dörnyei (2001) there are four stages that teachers should follow in order to increase it. The first one consists in creating a pleasant and supportive environment in the classroom in order to create motivational conditions for learning. This means that the teacher should have an appropriate behaviour and the learning group needs to be drawn together with appropriate group norms. The second one implies introducing basic motivational techniques as showing positive attitudes towards the learning process, using relevant materials for YLLs in order to make them feel successful and talking about values but keeping on realistic beliefs and increasing the expectations of success by reinforcing the values and attitudes related to the L2. The third one consists in maintaining and protecting students' motivation by means of activities presented in a motivating way

which have to stimulate self-esteem, self-confidence and co-operation among learners at the same time that their good social image is kept. The forth and the last one is very important because children are afraid of feedback and the teacher has the responsibility of turning it into a positive experience. This means that feedback has to provide motivation and satisfaction towards the student in a way that their grades are seen as a reward.

If these steps are followed motivation remains high and it probably prevents YLLs from suffering from anxiety because their self-confidence is maintained at high levels and as they grow up the self-linguistic competence increases. In addition, according to Singleton (2003), opposed to what happens with adult L2 learning, starting at an early age implies that learners have not developed their cultural identity completely and consequently, it is not a resistance factor towards learning which means that it does not shutter motivation. Consequently, if they enjoy the learning process and they feel comfortable with the L2 they will end up loving the language as well as the culture and the sense of respect towards other cultures and towards their self-culture will increase.

What is proposed in this paper is an attempt to connect the phallacy of “the younger, the better” with the possibilities that our educational system has. Therefore, foreign language education at all levels, from pre-school to university degrees, needs to be content-based, so as to introduce intensive exposure, and in this way YLLs and teachers will have to learn the foreign language implicitly with other subjects. Consequently, YLLs will be able to take advantage of their cognitive possibilities, which at the same time will make the phallacy possible. This new system based on the implementation of CLIL implies that teacher training needs to be completely different. They must have a proficient level of the L2 in a way that they feel confident enough to use it. In addition, it is important to train teachers with updated

resources and techniques which make them feel confident enough to choose and to create adequate, useful and motivating materials that enhance students' possibilities. Finally, it is important to keep students' and teachers' motivation high because motivation is the fuel of the engine of a successful learning process.

6. CONCLUSION

The phallacy of “the younger, the better” has been deeply examined in this paper because the situation of English in the Catalan educational system shows that although English is introduced at early stages of this system as a way of following the phallacy, it does not work. Therefore the aim of this paper has been to describe the present situation and try to build bridges and possible solutions in order to make “the younger, the better” a possible goal and not an ideal system which cannot be reached within the present situation.

In conclusion, if the hours of exposure and the groups are adjusted to YLLs' needs in order to apply CLIL successfully, the implications it might have on teachers and motivation will drastically change the Catalan education system. Therefore, “the younger, the better” will only be successful if there are deep changes, such as the ones in this proposal, otherwise, an early start will never be a guarantee of success.

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