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Some pedagogy tools for early communication in a foreign language (3–5 years old)

Emergent awareness is being given to young language learners' research, following a global trend to introduce second or foreign languages at earlier stages of the curriculum. In Europe, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is becoming a trend and widespread practice of immersion education. In opposition, at a National context – Portugal, is still a country far away from this practice. The introduction of a second language in state Kindergartens is foreseen in official documentation from Ministry of Education since 1997. The Portuguese Government and the Ministry of Education have already given some steps forward when deciding to introduce a foreign language (English) in state Primary schools (2005). Moreover it is a decisive criterion from parents when deciding the Kindergarten their children are going to.

Within this research, our research question was to discover how can very young language learners' potential and communication skills be enhanced most effectively? Therefore this paper describes the research project outcomes of classroom investigation and small-scale ethnographic research in a Northeast Portuguese kindergarten setting; children aged 3 to 5 years old in the process of learning a foreign language (English). The types of data used were lesson audio recording, transcription, content analysis, document analysis.

The used approach was within a cross-curricular scope, materials and strategies were carefully selected, interconnecting L1 contents through the L2. Very young language learners were followed throughout a school year. They have had English lessons once a week for a period of 45 minutes. Unlike other European countries, given the fact that a bilingual approach in Kindergarten is not possible at the moment, at least children should be exposed to quality foreign language programmes.

Throughout the year it was possible to verify that there were high levels of involvement achieved, the sharing of their learning with their peers in Kindergarten and with their families at home, the willingness and ability of picking up a foreign accent very naturally, and to learn the language of the Other, creating an awareness of different languages and different cultures. All these emphasize the building in of intercultural communication. Later in life children will need to communicate with other languages and other cultures. Therefore a suitable approach for foreign languages might be a starting point in creating an interest for foreign languages and cultures in the long life course. Early foreign language exposure, is a major contribution to the learners' whole learning processes, skills development, impacting in the landscape of consciousness and emotion, especially at an age where children are laying the foundations for later in life in a globalized world.

This is an extremely crucial area of research and practice and careful must be taken when approaching very young language learners because these young children will be the next generation of citizens within a multi-cultural and plurilingual Europe.

Keywords: Early years (3 – 5 years old), involvement, cross-curricular approach, communication, pedagogy, foreign language programme.