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Sbateyl.org: A Virtual Space for Effective Language Training

Rita Calabrese^a, Katherine E. Russo^{b*}

^a Author of section 1, 3, 4, 4.1. Università degli Studi di Salerno, Via Giovanni Paolo II, 132, Fisciano (SA) 84084, Italy

^b Author of section 2, 4.2. Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Via Duomo 219, Naples 80138, Italy

Abstract

The paper presents an ongoing European cross-institutional project on teaching young language learners whose aim is to develop a web-based in-service teacher education programme with a school-based follow-up component. The main focus of the project is to bring researchers and teachers together to establish an innovative professional procedure blending theory and practice. Based on the strategic partnership between one local university and one primary school from each participant country, the project aims to foster the professional advancement and teaching practices of primary school teachers. The article initially outlines the main theoretical and methodological issues in the field of early foreign language acquisition in order to contextualise the project. Subsequently, it describes the operational phases of the project as well as the research perspectives underlying the creation of specific syllabuses and modules which will be available on the web portal of the project. In the conclusion it suggests ways of developing our research in order to contribute to the building of a European framework for foreign language teacher training.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39 3287573397; fax: +39 089964215.

E-mail address: rcalabrese@unisa.it

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1. Introduction

Considering the problems and inadequacies of teacher training for young language learners in Europe, the SBATEYL project aims to develop a web-based pre- and in-service teacher education programme with a school-based follow-up component to contribute to the continuous professional development of foreign language teachers of young learners (between the age of 6-12). In this project, we aim to follow an innovative flipped approach. A ten weeks long web-based programme has been designed to help language teachers become familiar with recent research, theory, and approaches concerning teaching foreign languages to young learners. Secondly, based on their own needs, the teachers are personally involved in the project development and have a chance to suggest their practical solutions and classroom activities considering the introduced theory, research, and approaches through collaboration with peer teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers from different countries. Third, teachers implement and test these innovative practices in their own classes under the supervision of the trainers. And finally, the tested and approved classroom practices will be selected and included in the products of the project such as the portal web-site of the in-service education programme and a professional development book including theoretical suggestions and classroom-tested best practices. Most importantly, they will be openly disseminated for use of all pre-service and in-service language teachers of young learners in Europe through an open-access platform. In this in-service education programme, in line with the objectives of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) and Erasmus+ programme, ICT based applications and improvement of intercultural communicative competence in young learners have been given a special emphasis.

2. Motivation

Fighting rising levels of unemployment has become one of the most urgent tasks for European governments. The same risk threatens many adults with low skills. Technologies and language learning are changing the way in which societies operate, and there is a need to ensure the best use of them. Yet this issue has been recently targeted through non-formal learning activities, which aim at enhancing skills and competences, through training and cooperation opportunities. Alongside their ongoing printing of textbooks and student books, language learning professionals have invested in the growth of e-learning and new media. Multimedia platforms have also been institutionalised through online and distance training programmes such as Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). Accordingly, new media have called for a reassessment of EFL teacher training contexts and identities in the age of media convergence. EFL teachers today have more choice about how and where to spend their training time as they use Web 2.0 technologies in their everyday lives in public or private settings, and frequently migrate to non-institutional sources of learning, such as blogs and media sharing platforms (Russo). The latter may be considered as part of their training ecology, that is multiple and overlapping “contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning” (Barron 2006).

The other major issue which has been targeted by the European Commission as part of its investments in cross-national development is the low proficiency in foreign languages. The European Commission, in its report "Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: An action plan 2004-2006" (2003) emphasized the importance and advantages of early learning of one or more foreign languages in the EU member states. Above all, an early start to foreign languages is regarded as a positive factor which impacts on the child's overall language and educational development and engenders a positive attitude towards other cultures. Accordingly, recent curriculum initiatives around the globe have started to introduce foreign languages to children at an earlier age (Nikolova, 2008; Nikilov & Curtain, 2000; Nunan, 2003). Yet it has been found that language teachers are not prepared adequately to teach young learners. Common problems with current practice in Europe are that teachers are educated to teach adults; generalists are teaching language classes and teachers are frequently unaware of the special needs of younger learners (Dendrinos, 2010). Moreover, primary school language classrooms around Europe often lack variation, interesting materials, and multisensorial activities (Lundberg, 2007). The problem might be that training is often ineffective as teachers are likely to reject knowledge and skill requirements when the requirements are imposed or encountered in the context of multiple, contradictory, and overwhelming innovations; and when it is packaged in off-site courses or one off workshops that are alien to the purposes and contexts of their work. As Smylie (1989) has found, teachers rank direct classroom experience as their most important site for learning and are often resistant to

theory. Thus, a bottom-up approach is endorsed here as it entails teachers making decisions about their needs and working with trainers, in a participatory model, to engage in professional development.

3. Background

Young children tend to learn the meaning and function of new language holistically and indirectly (Ellis, 1994; Pinter, 2006). Young learners may considerably differ at ‘a group level’ and ‘an individual level’. As a group, young learners may come from different social and educational backgrounds which influence at different degrees the level of attained competence in the L2. As an individual, any learner is characterized by his/her own personal cognitive and learning styles, motivational drives as well as L1 literacy skills that in turn crucially depend on the age factor. As a matter of fact, it is extremely important to have constantly in mind the different developmental stages for learning at specific ages. Dealing with children who are between 6 and 12 years requires a continuous adjusting and grading of teachers’ attitudes towards their pupils as well as of their teaching praxis.

Appropriate and manageable tasks can be designed to increase analytic skills in line with learners’ specific developmental stages. These should be introduced gradually and through tasks that involve the learner in meaningful and interactive communication. Learners, in fact, progress from simple information processing or concrete thinking skills, such as identifying and organizing information (LOTS or *low order thinking skills*) to more complex, abstract thinking such as reasoning, hypothesizing and evaluating (HOTS or *high order thinking skills*). The whole process is seen as ‘self-motivating’, i.e. motivation is intrinsic and not reinforced by external prompts. Following the proposition that new language should be presented in meaningful authentic textual environments, it becomes clear that tasks should involve real-world processes of language use, with a clearly defined communicative outcome. Meaningful communication and socially interactive learning may be operationalized by presenting topics that have an immediate interest to the learners and building tasks that allow for indirect acquisition. Teaching methods based on constructivist and social interactionist perspectives rely on classroom practices focused on a teacher guiding a class during a narration and teaching associated vocabulary in context. One of these methodologies is based on the concept of ‘*narrative format*’ consisting in the dramatization of short narrative situations on everyday topics (Taeschner, 2005). The concept of ‘format’ dates back to 1970s theories based on the importance of common and therefore highly predictable micro-situations which form the basis of any adult-child interactions. The main assumption is that any child tends to spontaneously communicate in a familiar context in which he/she is able to recognize recurrent words and expressions linked to specific non-verbal inputs such as gestures and other visual prompts. From the language point of view the child will follow the same path already taken for the acquisition of the mother tongue from one-two words sentences (olofrasi) to vertical and more complex constructions.

The underlying idea is therefore that the learner needs to be involved in a learning experience essentially based on ‘knowledge gaps’ in which new information is non-discordant with his/her previous knowledge in the first language (L1) (Calabrese & Dawes 2008). Hence, activities such as word maps, spidergrams, guessing and recounting may be used as it is essential to make use of non-verbal clues to benefit from their ability to acquire new language implicitly. Brewster *et. al* (2002) have also highlighted that young learners have short attention spans and need physical movement in the classroom due to their high levels of energy. As a matter of fact, the right motivation to learning is supported by the dynamic interest of the learner involved in the learning process and this feature of dynamism makes motivation extremely variable. Today, task-based learning continues to evolve as new information technology tools continue to transform students’ learning experiences by heightening their motivation and sense of autonomy. To capture this synergy, teachers will need to reimagine authentic learning and task design. Tasks which have been traditionally used in the classroom to increase motivation in learning vocabulary today may be implemented in fully multimedia format enriched with texts, pictures, videos, sound and animation that offer a high degree of interaction with the text and the possibility of enjoyable assessment through self-correcting.

4. The SBATEYL Project

The project was funded by the European Commission under Erasmus+ Key Action 2: Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices, strategic partnership for school education. In line with the general objectives of the Erasmus+ Programme, the specific aim of SBATEYL is to design a professional development programme for language teachers of young learners through the creation and implementation of ten pedagogical modules. Eight

teachers and eight researchers/trainers from some European institutions participate in the project, more specifically the University of Salerno and Nicodemi Fisciano School (Italy), Mariboru University and OS Duplek Primary school (Slovenia), Universidad Autonoma de Madrid and CEIP Castilla Primary School (Spain), Gazi University and Gazi Vafki Primary School (Turkey). In the project there is collective participation at two levels—school and project. At the project level, teachers work together with researchers by participating in sessions during which they contribute and give feedback on the development of the modules sharing their experiences and the difficulties encountered during the implementation of their newly gained knowledge. Moreover, teachers and researchers participate jointly in the observation of schools and in the creation of activities. Hence, the specific aims of the project are to provide:

- A web-based on-line in-service education (INSET) programme with ten modules to introduce the recent theories, pedagogical approaches and related methodologies regarding early language teaching to teachers in Europe.
- School-based opportunities for teachers to implement and test these approaches in their own classes and develop their innovative classroom activities under the supervision of the trainers.

4.1 Operational phases

The project coordinated by Hande Uysal (Gazi University, Ankara) started in September 2014 and is developing over three years through different research and operational phases (Fig.1).

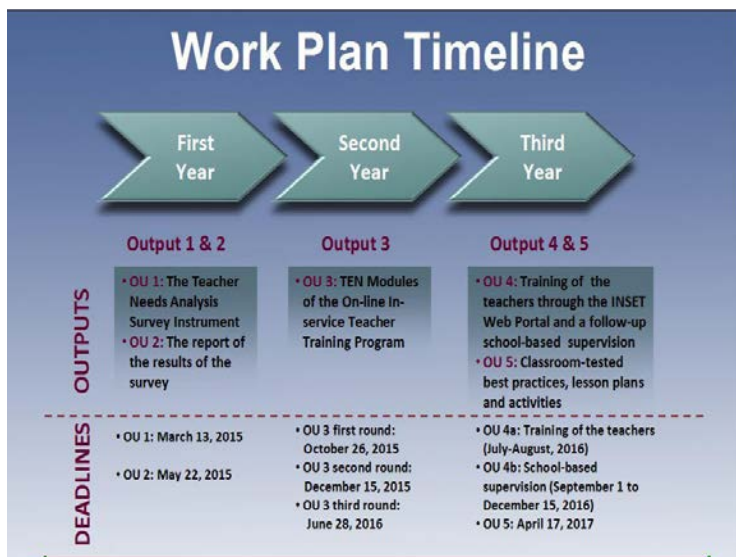


Fig.1 Planned stages and outputs of the project

At the first transnational meeting with partners, steps for preparation of a survey to understand the needs of primary school language teachers with regard to teaching children were taken. Items included in the survey were based on recent research and classroom observations by researchers in the participating primary schools. The survey was then distributed to one hundred primary school language teachers in each country. Demographic variables such as the informants' age, gender, education and experience as generalists and/or foreign language teachers in primary schools were first computed and later compared among partner countries in order to get a comprehensive view of their background. Therefore, the statistical analysis of the data highlighted specific issues related to education policies in each country as well. While the gender imbalance for the field is strikingly similar (all countries exceed 90% of female informants), the most dramatic differences among the informants lie in their age and position as generalists and/or foreign language teachers. In fact, Turkey (99%), Spain (78%) and Slovenia (65,49%) show high percentages of young primary school teachers with a degree in foreign languages working as specialists, whereas Italy with its 50% of 'experienced'/'old' generalist primary school teachers reflects the government policy on teachers' recruitment over the last years.

Subsequently, the results of the needs analyses were discussed. The discussion focused on the theoretical and pedagogical content and the techniques that had to be included in the in-service education program considering the teachers' needs. Thus, following the survey findings, the theoretical and methodological input of modules (e.g. teaching reading, teaching listening) was developed, discussed and evaluated by researchers and teachers both at face-to-face meetings and through peer-review.

Future phases will be dealt with as follows:

- The modules will be implemented in the partner countries in the participant primary schools to pilot the programme. Any problems will be noted and revisions or changes will be made before the next meeting.
- Subsequently, the piloted modules of the programme will be brought together and the programme as a whole will be implemented for the purposes of piloting as an intensive one-week seminar for the teachers from the partner primary schools from all the participating countries. After this seminar, evaluation forms and feedback will be collected from the teachers to make the final changes in the programme before finalizing the web portal.
- School-based follow-up support and observations of classes will be realized by the teacher trainers in each participating country to help teachers apply what they learned in the seminar to their classrooms. The best classroom-tested and approved practices as a result of the implementation of the in-service seminar will be pre-selected to be included in the in-service web portal and the professional book for pre-service and in-service language teachers of young learners. The results of the application of the program will be discussed and necessary adjustments will be made in the program according to the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of certain aspects of the program for future use. In addition, the best practices that were pre-selected will be evaluated by all partners and a final selection will be made.
- The project products (the portal web site and the professional development book) will be examined and tentatively shaped. The final products will be reviewed, evaluated and revised, and the final shape will be given to the web-portal and the professional development book, which will be openly provided for all pre-service and in-service language teachers of young learners in Europe.

4.2 The Teacher Needs Analysis Survey Instrument

The starting point of the project was the design of ten modules based on the needs of primary school teachers. Thus, the analysis of the survey findings was required in order to provide an adequate response to a 'self-reflective' approach to both L2 acquisition processes and teaching practices. The online survey included ten sections, i.e. one for each module including approaches and methods in teaching young learners (TYLs), listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, vocabulary teaching, grammar and error correction, intercultural communication competence, use

of technology in TYLs and assessment. The results were then processed to obtain a statistical significance overview. Demographic variables for each partner country, factor analyses of survey items, and the mean scores of the items were computed, and the responses for each survey item were compared among project partner countries through a one-way ANOVA test. Among the different variables considered in the project, specific variables were selected and investigated for the purpose of the present study. In particular, we focused on those variables concerning demands for methodological continuous training, starting from those areas which revealed the lowest score and through comparison of variables between groups. As shown in Table 1, survey items show significant variation in the reception of the Common European Framework, which is in line with context, i.e. the CEFR has a longer standing tradition in Spain and Italy. Moreover, it reveals that awareness of learners characteristics (age, learning style, intelligences) are diversely spread in the countries and in some cases they are not taken into consideration when planning classroom activities, as in the case of Italy where the mean score for learning styles and Multiple Intelligences is the highest but is not implemented through TPR. The lowest figures are attested in leading aspects of recent foreign language pedagogy such as technology and new media, and the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology, i.e. the vehicular use of a foreign language to teach a specific curricular subject (Calabrese 2004) and the use of technology in the classroom to enhance language learning. The mean scores also reveal that in Spain the percentages of application of CLIL are significantly higher.

Table 1 Characteristic of young learners, child development, approaches and methods, general classroom practices

Items	Turkey	Spain	Slovenia	Italy
I know how to understand and follow a syllabus based on Common European Framework (CEFR)	3,9700	4,0100	3,6637	4,0098
I am familiar with the psychological developmental stages of children	4,4600	4,4100	4,2300	4,0700
I test the learning styles of my students and consider their learning styles while planning my classroom activities.	3,7800	4,0400	3,6018	4,1961
I take Multiple Intelligences theory into consideration while designing my classroom activities.	4,0900	3,7600	3,7434	4,0980
I apply task-based language teaching into my classroom.	3,7300	4,1200	3,9115	4,0392
I teach my classes according to the principles of CLIL (e.g. I teach English through other school subjects).	2,8800	3,9400	2,7434	2,8039
I implement TPR (Total Physical Response) in my classroom teaching.	4,0000	4,1900	3,7168	3,5392

As a consequence of the data analysis, the contents of the modules polarised around specific needs identified in the questionnaire. For instance, teaching approaches and methodologies varied between the countries as different countries relate differently to implicit and explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary, type of input, tasks, use of L1. Some items did not display significant variation through the one way ANOVA Test. These may be due to several reasons and may be considered as an indication of shared knowledge in the country. For instance, in the listening section, songs, games, stories and tales, brainstorming and while listening activities such as comprehension questions, showed no variation and confirm the teachers' awareness of young students as curious, risk-taking and fast mapping learners. Hence, activities such as word maps, spidergrams, guessing and recounting are used to elicit, recycle.

The survey displays a growing consideration of the benefits of the development of intercultural competence, which is especially positive in light of its relatively recent introduction in school curricula. The latter results may also be due to the growing number of migrant children in European countries, who in some cases are being exposed to English as their third language.

Table 2 Intercultural Communication Competence

Items	Turkey	Spain	Slovenia	Italy
I learn about my young learners' cultural backgrounds before starting to teach them.	3,9300	3,9200	3,3717	3,5588

I adapt my behaviour and communication style to accommodate students from different culturally-conditioned communication styles	3,9100	4,1000	3,6106	3,6275
I incorporate my young learners' worldviews into my course materials.	4,0100	4,0600	3,5664	3,4804
In my intercultural teaching practice to young learners, they learn to:				
identify cultural values in their own culture (C1)	3,9400	3,9400	3,7434	3,5294
identify cultural values in the target language culture (C2)	3,9100	4,1500	3,7699	3,5490
reflect on their own cultural identity	3,9500	3,9900	3,7080	3,5882
accept other worldviews.	4,1500	4,4400	4,0354	3,7745
develop positive attitudes about the C2	4,2200	4,5000	4,1327	3,7059
When developing young learners' intercultural competence in the classroom, I use authentic materials such as films, cartoons, stories, realia, which include cultural content.	4,2800	4,1300	4,0973	3,7255
While practicing other language skills, I also try to develop young learners' intercultural competence in the classroom	4,1800	4,1400	4,0619	3,6078

Other important factors affecting early language learners are related to the amount of input and interaction available to learners. The groups average exposure to English differs according to national education policies and in some cases is very scarce (two hours in Italy). Yet the survey also revealed a scarce awareness of new information technology tools which may provide continuous input and output to young learners and transform students' learning experiences by heightening their motivation and learning autonomy.

Table 3 Use of technology

Items	Turkey	Spain	Slovenia	Italy
I am aware of the possibilities Web technologies offer.	4,5100	4,6100	4,5133	4,1373
I know some websites specifically designed for teaching English to young learners.	4,4100	4,6300	4,4779	3,9902
I am an active user of web technologies in teaching English to young learners.	4,2200	4,3100	4,1062	3,8039
I use Virtual Worlds (Second Life, Sanalika, Language Lab) in teaching languages to young learners	2,8700	2,4900	2,2655	2,4510
I use Computer Games (Age of Empire, Sims) in teaching English to young learners.	2,9100	2,7300	2,3540	2,5588
I use Social Networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) in teaching English to young learners.	3,3600	2,8500	3,0796	2,7255
I use Language Exchange Communities (Xlingo, livemocha) in teaching English to young learners.	2,3100	1,8600	1,7876	1,9706
I use Blogs (Wordpress, Blogger, Wix, Pbworks) in teaching English to young learners.	2,8300	2,8400	1,8761	2,2157
I use Digital Stories and Videos (Storybird, Xtranormal, Scriptcreator) in teaching English to young learners.	3,2400	3,4100	2,5929	2,7941
I use Digital Audio Materials (Irfanviews, Seashore, Gimp, Audacity, VoiceThread) in teaching English to young learners.	3,1100	3,1600	2,5575	2,8824

Tab.3 shows that teachers' underuse methods such as Virtual Worlds and Language Exchange Communities. Instead, the use of the Internet in informal locations of learning and the ubiquitous access to mobile devices may increasingly support learners across study locations and contexts of use, breaking down barriers between formal and informal learning. Web 2.0 has expanded access to knowledge, provided additional channels for communication and collaboration, facilities for context-inspired content creation, location-specific learning, and augmentation of a learner's intercultural competence through extra layers of visual and audio information. Moreover, even though the critical literature on English language learning is starting to embrace the idea of global English language varieties and English as a Lingua Franca, students continue to face a disconnection between the Standard varieties of formal education and the varieties in use (Russo 2014). The English Language encountered on Web 2.0, as in real life occurs in the form of varieties and interlanguages and the increasing multicultural and migratory behaviours of

learners implies dealing with the complexities of global English varieties. Bridging the divide, the teacher's inclusion of global English language varieties through virtual material and interaction in the EFL classroom may be considered as a strategy for meaningful learning. Moreover it may also be a solution to the need of addressing the emerging multilingual and multicultural identity of primary classrooms.

5. Conclusions

One of the key aspects of the present project is to develop a special teaching training syllabus in which linguistic content is embedded with methodological and pedagogical content through a “loop input” process in which the trainees are presented with input they can immediately use in their own primary classroom contexts. The trainees, in turn, can significantly contribute to the definition of this input and through their experience as primary teachers and their on-going experimentation in the primary classroom, they will be able to provide valuable feedback for researchers involved in developing the training syllabus by adopting the “research action” approach. Researchers in the universities and education faculties need to work closely with local schools where teaching practice is carried out so that trainees may experiment with methods and materials on the basis of the emerging syllabus and provide input through feedback for the experts to develop and improve the syllabus and create an acceptable cross-national standard. The outcome of the present training scheme could, in fact, be extremely useful for developing a European framework for systematic primary teacher language education. Next steps in our future work will therefore include the delineation of a professional profile whose specific competences and education can be nationally certified and recognized across Europe.

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