Creating and evaluating a foreign language area in an early childhood setting

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing tendency to introduce a foreign language in early years settings, little guidance is provided for practitioners in government steering documents or in the published literature. This article aims to bridge this gap by presenting a study which considers the importance of deploying the holistic approaches used in early years settings when introducing a foreign language. It focuses particularly on the creation and evaluation of a foreign language area as a strategy to help strike a balance between structured teacher-led instruction and the free play and interaction essential at this stage. The results of an interpretative qualitative study with a group of 4-year-olds show a positive correlation between the language used in the teacher-led sessions and children’s interactions during free play in the newly created learning area. The results will be of interest to all practitioners aiming to introduce a foreign language in early years settings.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education; early foreign language learning; preschool learning areas; quality learning environments; holistic learning

Introduction

The importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is becoming increasingly acknowledged as a fundamental basis for inclusive and quality lifelong learning. In spite of this, and as highlighted in the most recent Eurydice and Eurostat report on ECEC in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014), many European countries are only just beginning to provide steering documents to guide early years providers. Such documents are considered essential to provide an account of the government-sanctioned approaches used in different countries to steer or guide practitioners in early years settings. Although varying considerably depending on the country, steering documents may include the following: ‘learning content, objectives and outcomes, attainment targets, as well as guidelines on pedagogical approaches, learning activities and assessment methods’ (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, 117). The report observes that the most common focus of all the steering documents audited is on children’s personal, emotional, social and language development. In addition to these elements, some countries include other specific learning areas and objectives; one of which refers explicitly to early foreign/second language learning. Out of the 38 countries surveyed in the report, only 9 – Belgium (French community), Denmark, Germany, Spain, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia – refer to this element with regard to provision.
at all pre-primary ages (from birth to approximately 6 years old). A further nine countries include specific objectives related to foreign/second language learning for children in the years just prior to accessing primary education: Belgium (German-speaking community), Belgium (Flemish community), Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Austria, Romania, Slovakia, UK (Wales) and UK (Scotland).

The findings of the report are consistent with those of a recent publication on Early Years Second Language Education which highlights the fact that little published research exists to support teachers and inform policy-makers in this field, despite the growing tendency to introduce foreign language learning at early ages (Mourão and Lourenço 2015). Outside the European context, the body of research on second language learning among young learners in the French Canadian context can provide insight into some of the key questions raised, as well as recommendations on best practice (Toohey 1996; Genesse 1998). Referring specifically to the introduction of English as a foreign language, the recent British Council publication, *Early Childhood Education in English for Speakers of Other Languages*, aims to provide a global perspective on the issue, as well as examples of case studies carried out in different cultural settings (Murphy and Evangelou 2016).

The volume ends by reiterating the call for increased research in this area, pointing out specific areas in particular need of development: (i) developing a skilled workforce through professional training, (ii) developing quality environments in early years settings and (iii) the need for more research into children’s development both within and across settings (2016, 303).

In the European context, a policy document elaborated by the European Commission (2010) offers one of the first attempts to identify and disseminate good practice in foreign language learning in ECEC settings, showcasing the (often award-winning) pedagogical processes implemented in different European countries. A survey of these different processes shows a general tendency towards the use of a repertoire of well-established foreign language learning practices: games, songs, total physical response activities, routines, performances and narrative strategies using picture books and other material. Without exception, all the processes referred to in this policy document are teacher-led activities; i.e. activities planned, initiated, led and guided by the teacher. This is consistent with the observations made in the policy documents reviewed, as well as in the literature on current practice, which emphasise that early years learners tend to be ‘taught’ a foreign language by primary teachers with specific training in foreign language education (Flores and Corcoll 2008; Murphy and Evangelou 2016). This fact in itself testifies to the first need established by Murphy and Evangelou to develop a skilled workforce through professional training (2016, 303): a workforce, that is, not only trained in foreign language teaching, but also, and crucially, with in-depth knowledge of how children develop and learn during the early years.

The literature on second language learning during childhood emphasises that young learners should be given opportunities to learn in a holistic way (Cameron 2001) and highlights the role that social interaction has as a key element of all education with young children (Vygotsky 1978; Rogoff, Goodman Turkanis, and Bartlett 2001). At this age, children are learning how to get along with others in a formal classroom setting, while also learning to share things and become part of a group. Learning a second language is like any other form of learning and, as such, should not be isolated from other practices and routine activities carried out during the course of the day; which is where the best models of
natural language occur. In other words, the acquisition of any language is a social process in which students should be given the opportunity to interact and be exposed to the language by doing activities which are meaningful. Children will only benefit from being exposed to more than one language simultaneously if we can ensure that the environment in which the languages are introduced is appropriate and provides children with opportunities to interact and use the language in a natural way. Consistent with this view, the steering documents on formal preschool education in the country in which this study was carried out (Catalonia, Spain) emphasise that foreign languages should not be taught separately from other areas, but integrated and contextualised within existing classroom projects (Departament d’Educatió 2008).

Of the different case studies presented in the European Commission survey of best practice, only one of the cases – the experience developed in the Basque Country in Spain – makes a specific reference to the use of and distribution of space, indicating that

it is important to differentiate between two physical areas of the classroom: one for activities with the whole group […] and another area for small group or individual work (the corners normally used in Nursery Education can be put to good use here). (European Commission 2010, 43)

Interestingly, the use of the ‘corners’ used for clear pedagogical purposes within the preschool classroom is referred to in parentheses in this case study report, almost as an afterthought. It is our view, however, that this parenthetical aside contains a critical observation which can contribute towards the task of developing quality learning environments in order to foster holistic approaches to foreign language learning at this age.

**Quality learning environments**

Corners, also known as learning areas or learning centres, are a common feature within preschool settings across different cultural contexts, since they provide children with the opportunity to work independently or with other children on different tasks, as well as the chance to experiment with language and discover things for themselves. An early study on the link between play and learning in preschool settings emphasises the importance of careful organisation of the classroom space and the partitioning off of specific interest zones (Field 1980). In general, however, a considerable gap exists in the literature in relation to the importance and relevance of this pedagogical aspect in preschool settings. Theoretical support for the use of partitioned spaces, along with practical advice on setting up such areas, can be found in the guidelines published online by various institutions and practitioners. An example can be found in the guidelines developed by the Early Childhood Centre of the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community (U.S.), which provides an in-depth account of how clearly designated areas can help to provide guided, but not teacher-led, learning opportunities in a way which respects the pace and developmental stage of each child:

The children were free to move about the centers, but they were redirected if they were having difficulty […] The children largely determined the activities at each center, although the materials arranged at the two tables guided their play at these centers. (Conn-Powers 2010, 3)
If the centres are well organised and distributed, they can offer children a great variety of activities and a rich environment to learn through experimentation and hands-on experience, whether working alone, with others, or with the guided support of the teacher when necessary. What is of particular relevance to our study is the point highlighted in the Indiana experience that although the children were free to roam around and choose from the different activities (thus attending to the physical and affective needs of children of this age), the materials at the tables guided their play; i.e. the materials and activities had been planned and structured in line with the other areas being developed in a more instructional way during whole class activities. Providing children with spaces in which they can develop learning at their own pace and in a non-led context is thus seen as a vital component of learning during the early years.

Our study

Although the pedagogical value of corners or learning areas is widely accepted and integrated into early years practice, their use to support the introduction of foreign language learning at this educational stage has been given little, if any, consideration in the literature. This present study thus aims to bridge the gap in the existing literature by presenting a proposal for creating and evaluating a foreign language area in an ECEC setting. In doing this, our objective is to create an environment which provides opportunities for genuine communication in the foreign language, thereby helping to integrate this language within everyday practice and within the linguistic repertoire of the classroom. The primary objective of our study is to determine the extent to which a link can be established between the teacher-led input worked on during the pre-programmed English sessions and the freer, less-structured, learner-centred activities carried out in the foreign language learning area. In addition, our aim is also to analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of the foreign language area in relation to the children’s (1) degree of participation in the new learning area; (2) use of material in the area; (3) use of language and, specifically, use of the lexical items introduced in their daily foreign language classes; and, finally (4) perception of the experience.

In summary, and in a general sense, our study sets out to address the third need established by Murphy and Evangelou (2016) by providing further research into young learners’ foreign language development within a specific setting. More specifically, the study attends in detail to the second need identified by them to develop quality environments, emphasising how this aspect is intrinsically related to effective and successful foreign language learning at this age.

Context

The research was carried out in a four-year-old class in a state school located in the city of Girona (Catalonia), which provides three years of early years education for 3, 4 and 5-year-olds, followed by 6 years of primary education. One of the general aims of the school is to introduce and promote the use of a first foreign language – English – in a gradual way from the outset of the learners’ schooling. As such, English is taught for 30 minutes every day with all the early years groups by their own class teacher (not an external specialist as is often the case in other preschool settings). During this 30-minute time slot, teachers
usually practice daily routines with the children, tell them stories, or take them to the audio-visual room to either watch videos in English or sing songs.

During the rest of the time, the main language of instruction is Catalan (the school language) and preschool activities tend to be organised around interest areas, or learning areas, allowing the children to play and explore materials with the guidance of the teacher, either individually or in small groups. In the classroom where the research took place there were two types of learning areas: those which had a more playful nature and those which required pupils to concentrate on specific tasks. The children’s use of the learning areas was very flexible, with them spending most of their classroom time playing in them, except when the teacher was explaining explicit content or giving direct instructions related to music, arts and crafts, psychomotor activities or English. Following some teacher-led sessions, the learners would be asked to carry out specific tasks in the learning areas. At other times, the children were free to play in the areas and the teacher acted only as an observer, guiding the students when they required help. Six different learning areas had been established: (1) the language area (storybooks, board games, etc. in L1); (2) the maths area; (3) the arts and crafts area; (4) two symbolic play areas (the kitchen and the doctor’s office); (5) an exploration/construction area, and (6) the ICT area. The learning areas were all related to the different curricular areas developed at this educational stage and had been specifically designed to allow the children to review and practice what had been done previously in teacher-led class time. The only exception to this was the curricular area of foreign language learning, which was restricted to the 30-minute teacher-led class activities, with no specific space allocated to its free development outside this designated period.

**Participants**

Our research was conducted with the middle class of the preschool stage, with a group of 24 students – 11 boys and 13 girls – aged between 4 and 5. With the exception of three students, all pupils had started their schooling in the same school in the previous school year, during which they had been introduced to English on a daily basis following the school’s 30-minute a day policy. None of the students used English outside the school and none were native speakers of the language.

**Design and procedure**

After spending time in the class and observing the usual procedures followed, a B.Ed. student completing her pre-service final year placement observed an inconsistency in the organisation of the learning areas: i.e. the fact that all curricular areas had their own corner with the exception of the foreign language (English), which had no specific space of its own. Discussions with her university tutors encouraged her to explore this question further and subsequent consultations with the school, particularly the teachers responsible for the preschool classes, led to a decision being made to develop a specific Foreign Language Area. The inclusion and use of such an area represented an innovation not just in this particular school, but in most preschool environments in this country which have not yet developed this feature within their classrooms. All those involved agreed that its inclusion could help to promote the genuine and integrated use of
English within usual classroom practice. An initial consultation process was carried out in which the children were asked their views on introducing a new learning area – an English area - into their classroom. The children’s ideas were taken into account and their help was enlisted in deciding the most suitable location for the area and the furniture needed to store the material. Once decided, the children hanged flags in the designated place to mark and reserve this special spot during the next phase, dedicated to the preparation of suitable material for the area. This material was designed to support and develop the language content already being introduced and practiced during their daily English sessions. As such, materials were introduced first in the teacher-led sessions before being incorporated into the new learning area. The presentation of all the new material took place over a period of three weeks, to avoid giving the children too much information at once, to allow them to become familiar with the new learning area in a gradual way, and to ensure that the maximum time was spent on the newly introduced materials.

**Methodology**

A basic interpretative qualitative study was used to help identify how participants made meaning of the new situation (Merriam 2002). According to Merriam, ‘observation is the best technique when an activity, event, or situation can be observed first-hand, when a fresh perspective is desired, or when participants are not able or willing to discuss the phenomenon under study’ (2002, 13). The first two scenarios presented by Merriam corresponded to our case, in which we considered that direct observation to describe the children’s actions as thoroughly as possible and to provide a fresh perspective on their activity in this context would help yield relevant results. Given the complexity of direct observation, and in an effort to capture as much information as possible, we also video recorded all the observed sessions in order to complement the data obtained through direct observation. Although most of the data collected were qualitative, we were also able to quantify the students’ participation in the learning area and identify which particular learners had used it. However, in contrast to the third scenario posited by Merriam, we wondered whether the participants of the study may in fact be both willing and able to discuss the phenomenon under study. In order to pursue this question, and to comply fully with the ethical requirements of informed consent and good practice, meetings were held with the children’s teachers to explore this matter further. The school practitioners not only agreed that the children would be willing participants, but considered this to be a particularly valid way of foregrounding their voice and helping to identify their views and preferences. In view of this, the children’s parents were informed of the research and asked for their consent. Given the favourable response of all interested parties, discussion groups were held with the children to gauge their perceptions and views about the experience. The discussion groups were conducted with half the class members at a time to facilitate discussion and ensure a relaxed atmosphere in conditions that replicated the usual circle time format followed in their daily practice.

**Data collection**

An open coding observation grid was designed to help focus on the specific items we wanted to observe. The observation grid included information about participation in
the English learning centre; the materials used by the children; and the children’s inter-
actions. The observation grid also helped to identify the students’ use of language, as we
were particularly interested in analysing which languages were used by the children
during their interactions: i.e. if pupils only used L1 (Catalan or Spanish depending on
the child), as they did when playing in the other areas, or if they were starting to use
some English words or phrases. If this was found to be the case, we also wanted to find
out if these were related to the lexical items previously introduced during English class
time and this factor was therefore included in the observation grid.

The observation sessions began as soon as the learning area had enough material to
start being used and lasted for approximately one month. At least two and sometimes
three half-hour sessions were observed and recorded each week. Data were then extracted
from the direct observations contained in the observation grids and also from the video
recordings which afforded additional information. The final results are drawn from five
hours of real observation time.

Discussion groups were held at the end of the observation period to ascertain the stu-
dents’ opinions about the new learning area. The discussion groups took the form of
unstructured interviews focused on a specific topic, without following a fixed sequence
of predetermined questions (Merriam 2002).

Results
We have divided the results obtained from the data collection process according to the
degree of participation in the area; the learners’ use of the material; learners’ interactions
and their use of language; and, finally, the perceptions revealed by the learners in the two
discussion groups.

It is important to stress that the children were allowed to move around the learning
areas freely and were never told to use one area or another. Our observations allowed
us to verify that nearly all the children in the class participated in the newly created
area. Of the 24 learners in the class, only 3 of them never used the English area during
the period they were being observed and another 3 only used it once. It was interesting
to observe that children who were usually quite passive and not very participative in
the everyday English sessions took a much more active role and interacted with others
considerably in the English area. It was also interesting to note that some children
spent time in the area in silence, without playing, and simply observing others. The fact
that these children appeared to be happy watching others playing with and using the
language suggests that they were engaged in a process of passively assimilating the new
language which is known to be a vital part of the process involved in language acquisition
for some learners (Krashen 1981; Tabors 1997; Ellis 2008). In this sense, the area provided
a rich environment which both respected this silent period, while also fostering positive
attitudes to encourage the further development of the learning process.

In relation to the materials offered, a positive aspect was that pupils used all of them. It
was noted, however, that pupils paid less attention to materials which did not offer clear
potential for direct play, as happened, for instance, with the English words placed on the
walls surrounding the learning area. Nevertheless, they clearly took pleasure in looking at
them on other occasions, such as before going out to the playground, when some students
touched the words, tracing the letters with their fingers, or sometimes saying the words out
loud. This explicit use of the material indicated that it could contribute positively towards early literacy awareness in the foreign language.

Once the learning area was complete and included all the materials specifically designed for this purpose, the learners tended to choose material related to the activities practiced most frequently in class time, as happened, for example, with the songs which were often used in English sessions, or the routines which were repeated every day. A direct correlation is thus established between the teacher-led instruction and the free play engaged in by the children, suggesting a high level of interest and willingness to continue practicing and developing the language among the learners.

Some learners did not always use the material in the way previously modelled by the teacher. When this happened, other members of the group were clearly concerned and either told the teacher directly or took it upon themselves to explain to their peers how they should be using them. This generated highly meaningful interactions between the learners, involving the purposeful use of the foreign language.

In general, and consistent with this developmental age, learners did not spend a long time on the same activity and frequently changed the material used. Sometimes this happened when they saw other pupils playing with games that caught their attention, and it also happened when students decided to choose a different activity to play with, as shown in the example below:

Five pupils were playing together. After a while, another girl came to the English area and started to play with a different game. Three of the pupils that had been playing with the other game immediately went to play with the new member of the group.

Another fact that caught our attention was that some materials were more likely to be used in groups, such as the games requiring more than one player. This observation prompted us to analyse the interaction between the children and also the language they spoke while playing.

Our observations allowed us to note that students interacted much more with each other when the number of students using an activity was not very high. On the contrary, if there were too many students in the same learning area, they tended to distract each other, as illustrated in the following example:

There were six pupils in the same area. They were watching the others and not paying much attention to what they themselves were doing. In addition, some of them were speaking very loudly and getting over-excited in a way which affected the general classroom environment.

We also observed that students used three types of interaction: they played with the teacher, with their classmates, and sometimes alone. The kind of interaction used had a significant influence on how they played and on their use of language.

With regard to learner–teacher interactions, we found that most of the learners who were playing in the area for the first time, or those who wanted to know the name of specific words in English, asked the teacher for help, as shown in the dialogue below between the teacher (T) and one of the students (S):

S: Mira, snowy! (Look, snowy)

T: Is it snowy today?

S: Yes! (laughing)
Once they had played with the teacher, they continued playing alone or with other classmates. In general, after the explicit guidance provided by the teacher, the learners were more likely to play in the correct way and to use more words in English, as shown in the following example:

The children were singing a song: [...] *Put your finger up, put your finger down, put it on your... com es diu la cama? (what's the word for 'leg'?).* The teacher answered their question saying 'leg' and the pupils immediately resumed their singing, incorporating the word they did not know or remember into their song: *put it on your leg! [...]*. 

When the children were playing in pairs or groups, it was observed that some boys and girls – those who remembered more words in English or were keen to practice the words they had recently acquired, became a source of reference for their peers. However, it was also observed that children who were less participative in structured input sessions appeared to be much more confident using English in the learning area and seemed to actively enjoy imitating their classmates, who helped them and showed them how to play. A clear example of this can be found below:

Three girls were singing with the songbook: [...] *If you’re sleepy, sleepy, sleepy...* One girl stopped because she did not know how to continue, and the others said: *Take a nap!* After this brief pause, the three girls continued singing together: *If you’re sleepy, sleepy, sleepy take a nap [...]*. 

The children obviously made frequent mistakes when speaking English and when playing together in small groups or pairs they were often observed to be correcting each other, as shown below:

One student was pointing to a green dinosaur and said to the other: *mira, red! (look, red!)* The other student looked at him and replied: *No! Aquest és green! (No! That’s green!).*

Sometimes, it was clear that some children did not want to play with others and opted to play alone instead. When playing alone, the children usually remained in the area for less time than when playing with others. However, on the plus side, they seemed to be able
to concentrate very well during this period without the distraction of others. Most of the pupils who played alone either remained silent or uttered a few words in English in a way which indicated that they were consolidating some of the previously learned vocabulary. If they did not know some of the words they needed to carry out the activity, they remained silent, but they appeared to be establishing a link between what they were doing and what they had done previously in their daily English sessions. The next example shows the language used by a girl who was playing alone and how she managed to continue playing when she did not know some specific words:

A girl was playing alone with *The very hungry caterpillar* storybook and game, saying aloud what she was reading in the tale: *one apple; two pears; one, two, three ...* At this moment she stopped, she did not say the name of the next fruit and continued counting the following ones: *One, two, three, four ...* She stopped again and did not say the name of the next fruit but went on, instead, to say the next one that she remembered the name for: *five oranges [...]*.

Regarding overall use of the language in the learning area, while all the children were observed making constant use of their first language (Catalan or Spanish depending on the child) during their interactions, nearly all of them were also observed using the English language while playing. The language they used usually corresponded to the main lexical items worked on during the daily English sessions. A clear example of this is provided below:

Two students were playing with the feelings masks and one student asked the other: *¿Cómo me ves? (How do I look?).* His partner answered him in Spanish: *contento, ¿y tú cómo me ves? (happy, and me?).* This time, the other child replied in Catalan: *amb por, i a mi? (scared, and me?)* His partner continued answering him in Spanish: *tú llorando, ¿y a mi? (you, crying, and me?)* Finally, one of the children answered the question in English: *sleepy!* This changed the pattern of the sequence. Once English had been introduced in this way, they continued to ask the questions in their mother tongue, but the answers were now given in English.

The group discussions with the children revealed that, overall, the pupils had enjoyed playing in the learning area. These discussions also provided detailed information on which games they had liked the most and how they had used them, which helped us to analyse the materials used and to consider modifications for future practice. Some of the children highlighted that they enjoyed speaking in English and wanted to continue playing in the area, providing evidence of the positive value of the proposal from the learners’ perspective, thus adding further support to the theoretical foundations for implementing this pedagogical strategy.

**Final considerations**

The primary objective of this study has been to determine the extent to which a link can be established between the teacher-led input worked on during the pre-programmed class sessions and the freer, less-structured, learner-centred activities carried out in a carefully designed foreign language learning area. This objective has been achieved insofar as a strong positive correlation has been found between the content worked on in teacher-led sessions and the children’s interactions during free play in the learning area.
In terms of analysing the effectiveness of the area, the data obtained shows that the creation of a foreign language learning area provides students with the opportunity to practice the language with a real purpose and in a real context; something which does not happen to the same extent in teacher-led sessions, where activities are more structured and ‘contrived’. The term ‘contrived’ is not used in a pejorative sense here, but rather to emphasise that the interactions are generated and contained by the teacher rather than arising naturally or spontaneously.

The purpose of this study has not been to question this structured approach to language learning, which has been shown to have benefits within formal educational settings, particularly in relation to the effective acquisition of the authentic language used in the daily routines which structure the day in preschool environments (‘What’s the weather like today?’; ‘Is Anna here today?’). Rather, the purpose has been to emphasise the importance of striking a balance between structured/controlled instruction and free practice/play in early years settings. As such, the focus is consistent with the widely accepted arguments put forward in the literature on second language learning during childhood, emphasising that young learners should be given opportunities to learn in a holistic way (Cameron 2001; Tabors and Snow 1994), and with European policy aimed at promoting efficient and sustainable practice (European Commission 2011).

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study to the literature on early foreign language learning is the fact that it highlights the disparity between general practice at this age – which aims to foster holistic learning environments precisely through the use of learning areas – and the specific practice of foreign language teaching, where the emphasis appears to be on ‘teaching’, or teacher-led practice, as opposed to learner-centred, holistic approaches. This is consistent with calls for the development and professional training of a skilled workforce highlighted in a recent global overview of foreign language learning at early ages (Murphy and Evangelou 2016), and the observations (or warnings) that foreign language learning in preschool environments tends to be developed by primary teachers trained to respond to the needs of older children (Flores and Corcoll 2008), but with insufficient training and knowledge of early years needs. What is relevant about this present study is that it presents a strategy for bridging this gap by drawing on one of the most commonly used organisational and pedagogical strategies already used in early years settings.

In this regard, the use of a foreign language area is not seen as one of the many and diverse methodological proposals available to the foreign language teacher. Instead, it is regarded and proposed as a vital step in normalising the foreign language and contextualising it within everyday practice. As such, it is advanced as a necessary feature that should be incorporated into the organisational plans of any preschool environment which embarks on the task of introducing a foreign language. In view of the lack of information provided in current steering documents, it is hoped that the data provided in this study may help to inform policy-makers and provide specific guidelines to assist early years providers in recognising the need for a specific foreign language area, and in taking steps to create such an area in their own context.

This study has set out to draw attention to the gap in this area both at policy-level and in terms of published literature. Nevertheless, given the increasing tendency to introduce a foreign language in early years settings, it is our belief that many practitioners will have already identified and addressed the needs highlighted in this paper and, in some cases,
introduced similar developments into their learning environments. The authors of this study would like to encourage more professionals to contribute towards the development of this important field of study to make such work visible and accessible to the wider community. Future studies could focus on specific aspects related to the development of such learning areas, including, but not limited to: the most suitable materials to be included in the area; the teacher’s role during the process; techniques for evaluating/improving the area; techniques for evaluating individual learners’ behaviour/development in the area. The last point is contemplated not in relation to performance, or to the attainment of specific language learning targets, but as a means of monitoring overall development during the early years, particularly in relation to social interaction and communicative competence levels, and also with a view to fostering positive and inquisitive attitudes towards languages.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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