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Alexandra Anastasiadou, Eleni Griva

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Identifying Teachers' Views on the Impact of Early Foreign Language Learning on Children's Linguistic Development

Alexandra Anastasiadou

Regional Directorate of Education-Greece

Eleni Griva

Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, University of Western Macedonia-Greece

Abstract

The one-dimensional cultural model of society which prevailed in Europe has been replaced by multicultural societies due to the sweeping social, financial and cultural changes which resulted from globalisation. In this emerging situation, the necessity to facilitate communication among people from diverse nationalities has led to the introduction of early foreign language programmes. To this end, the present paper put under the lens the teachers' views concerning the efficacy of the "Programme of Learning English in Early Childhood" (PEAP) to boost the pupils' linguistic growth. This programme is in effect in the Greek primary schools where children start learning English as a foreign language in the first grade at the age of six. The results unraveled that the participating teachers acknowledged the efficiency of the PEAP to enhance the very young learners' linguistic evolvement and ranked its merits in a descending order of importance.

Keywords: Early Foreign Language Learning, Teachers' Attitudes, Children's Linguistic Development, Greek Educational System, Research.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, Europe has witnessed an expansion of its member states, thus, the necessity of adequate communication among the various nations surfaced. In this light, foreign language learning (FLL) was labeled a required life-skill for every European citizen (Commission, 2005). Moreover, the official authorities of European countries (2002) highlighted the significance of teaching at least two foreign languages at a very young age. This decision resulted from two factors, namely the theorists' views and parents' attitudes towards early language learning (ELL). Although, experts have not reached a unanimous consensus about early FLL, they seem to agree that starting learning a foreign language early may not always be better but it can be safer (Cameron, 2001; Dimroth, 2008; Singleton, 2003; Whong-Barr & Schwartz, 2002). More specifically, Nunan (2003) claimed that young pupils find it less difficult to learn an FL and

have at their disposal a longer time span of schooling which results in higher performance. On the other hand, parents greatly pressed governments to put ELL programmes in effect due to their assumed social and financial profits, such as ameliorated social, professional and academic status (Enever & Moon, 2009). Apart from the aforementioned benefits, an early start can aid young learners to adopt positive stances towards people from diverse cultural and linguistic background, facilitate L1 literacy, assist their cognitive growth and equip them with dexterities in other areas (Dendrinios, Zouganeli, & Karavas, 2013).

Since ELL is linked with higher achievement, various European countries have attempted to extend the duration of compulsory foreign language tuition by lowering the initiating age of foreign language (FL) teaching (Eurydice, 2012). In an effort to be in alignment with the aforementioned educational changes in Europe, the Greek Ministry of Education followed this tendency of decreasing the initial age of FL tuition introducing the teaching of English in the first and second grade of primary schools in some schools in 2010 on a pilot basis under the PEAP project. As of this academic year 2016-2017, the teaching of English was put in effect in almost all primary schools albeit the teaching hours were reduced from two to one.

BACKGROUND

A significant amount of research explored the effectiveness of English Language Learning (ELL) in diverse frameworks. Some of them focused on the linguistic benefits of ELL (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1999; Blondin et al, 1998; Griva & Semoglou, 2015; Nikolov & Curtain, 2000). Even though, oracy is prioritised in very young learners' classroom, Mertens (2003) observing German students of the first grade learning French, concluded that pupils gained profits from the written form of language, too. His findings questioned the overreliance on mainly oral methodology. Probing the linguistic improvement of French first graders who learnt Dutch, Edelenbos (2001) found out that very soon they were able to recognize words and language chunks and maintain a limited but successful interaction although they were not exposed to the foreign language outside the classroom. One of the features that have attracted a lot of attention is the creation of an exciting environment for children in order to learn English easily (Nemati et al. 2017). Griva and Semoglou (2012) investigated the potential of psychomotor activities, such as memory and word games, pictures, crafts, dramatisation, pantomime and chants to enhance the linguistic capacity of second graders learning EFL, as well as to create a motivating learning environment. The accrued data from a language test at the beginning and the end of the intervention along with findings from teacher diaries unearthed that a game-oriented methodology positively affected the learners' linguistic growth and aroused their willingness for participation in interactive playful activities. Some other researchers (eg. Homaei, 2014 in Mancheno, 2015, p.1) have studied the effect of listening to authentic texts (such as stories) on motivation, finding positive results.

A host of studies tried to identify the teachers' attitudes towards the effectiveness of ELL programmes. Szulc-Kurpaska (2007) used a variety of research methods, namely informal discussions, classroom observation, a questionnaire and a teacher diary to trace trainee instructors' opinions in relation to ELL. The findings pointed to the fact that as young learners' behavior is unforeseeable and their attention span quite limited, they are in need of playful tasks, moving around and listening to music in order to prolong their active participation in the foreign language classroom. Having investigated the teachers' stances towards the quality of

the on-line tasks of the programme Dedousi (2012) disclosed that, even though the tasks were positively endorsed, some shortcomings pertaining to the application of the particular programme emerged, demanding adaptations for their improvement. Tsami (2013) attempted to identify whether the teachers were cognizant of very young learners' needs and preferences. The employed teachers' questionnaires and classroom observations yielded results highlighting that teachers are aware of their pupils' preferences and apply methods to fulfill these needs even though shortage of infrastructure, that is computers and board games to mention but a few, seems to pose obstacles to their efforts.

Seeking to explore the teachers' views from a different perspective, that is their contribution to the maintenance and amelioration of the PEAP project, Aravantinou (2013) utilised questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations which brought to the forefront the fact that teachers are ardent proponents of the ELL.

It can be seen that the children's linguistic development through the employment of appropriate tasks has been adequately investigated along with the teachers' attitudes towards the quality of the tasks, their pupils' preferences and their own contribution to the continuation of the ELL projects. Little were, though, put under the lens the teachers' perceptions towards the potential of the totality of ELL to boost the children's linguistic competence. Taking into consideration this obvious research gap, the present researchers conducted this study with a view to shedding light on the teachers' opinions towards the linguistic benefits of the PEAP programme.

The Programme of Learning English in Early Childhood (PEAP)

Having discussed the merits of ELL and presented the results of various relevant studies, this part of the paper will briefly elaborate on the aim, the objectives, the methodology, the teaching guidelines and the actual materials of the Greek ELL programme (PEAP).

Aim and methodology of PEAP

The main aim of the PEAP programme is to trigger the young learners' basic interpersonal communicative ability (Cummins, 1979). In this line, the programme prioritises the FL oral mode and mainly seeks to foster essential linguistic skills to young learners which are conducive to using the every day language that prevails in social interaction with other people (Dendrinou, 2013). The activities are specifically designed to encourage children to use the FL creatively often reflecting mother tongue implementation.

The methodological approach utilized is "learning by doing" favouring, thus, the children with kinesthetic intelligence (Gardner, 1983) while, at the same time, care is taken to include a variety of activities tailored to promote all types of intelligences and learning styles. The interactive approach to language learning is adopted in which pupils interact with the teacher and their fellow students and, therefore, they are "scaffolded" (Bruner, 1957; 1983) to fully develop the huge potential with which all children are naturally gifted, albeit in varying degrees. Furthermore, the focus is shifted from the 'product' to the 'process' of learning with the children being actively involved in the learning process. (Dendrinou, 2013).

The linguistic goals of the programme are as follows:

- Promotion of learning strategies;
- Being accustomed to everyday communication in the target language;

- Appreciating the value of multilingualism;
- Acknowledging the importance of English and other languages;
- Developing awareness of parallel use of L1 and L2.

The teaching guidelines

The tasks revolve around topics familiar to young learners' preferences and level, that is animals, games, family ensuring, thus, a supportive learning milieu whereby pupils are empowered to learn to be engaged in meaningful tasks (Johnstone, 2009). Furthermore, the topics draw on other school subjects guaranteeing the crosscurricular approach, which favours the integration rather than the segmentation of the knowledge of different subjects.

A mascot is utilized to "talk" to children, provide the instructions and present the tasks. Moreover, the teachers are advised to resort to gestures and facial expressions in order to aid the children to infer the meaning of new words triggering their imagination which is quite vivid at this age (Scot & Ytreberg, 1990). The activities include role play, arts and crafts, drawing, games, dancing, stories and fairy tales. These tasks along with the employment of the puppet-mascot and the use of gestures by the teacher guarantee a multimodal learning environment which attracts young learners' participation and extends their limited attention span <http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/peap/articles/genikes-didaktikes-odigies>.

The activities provide clear messages which constitute the necessary input for very young learners in order to comprehend and respond. The tasks are sequenced in small steps so as to allow time to learners to process the new knowledge which is informed by and builds on the pupils' prior experiences and knowledge. Another important guideline is the use of first language (L1) in a facilitative role which aids students to capitalize on a familiar system in their effort to conceive better the second language (L2) by comparing and contrasting the new linguistic components to the ones they are acquainted with. In this perspective, far from hindering L2 learning, the employment of mother tongue eases the L2 acquisition as a) children can understand instructions better, b) teachers can elaborate more on rules of the games, c) an 'enjoyable' and unthreatening learning environment is safeguarded.

In the same line, Mohebbi (2012) claims that, translated into the classroom milieu, the use of L1 can speed up L2 learning as far as L1 is not overused. However, he highlights that only if L1 is used appropriately will it smooth target language learning without depriving the learners of valuable exposure to L2.

Teaching materials

The teaching materials were designed by the author team who worked under the supervision of the PEAP project coordinator. The authors were practicing teachers who had employed the tasks in their own classes with a view to evaluating and improving them through the 'trial and error' method concerning material formulation (Dendrinis, 2013). In the first three years of the project implementation, the materials could be accessed only digitally in the <http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/peap/home> site. In 2013-2014 the teachers were given one dossier for each grade including printed materials, that is flashcards, posters, picture stories and worksheets and a CD with the audio materials, namely stories, songs, rhymes and dialogues. Enriched materials were incorporated gradually in the site to offer more options to the instructors.

Moreover, the teachers were advised to modify the materials to suit their own teaching profile as well as their pupils' learning styles and needs as long as they followed the materials designers' philosophy and instructions (Dendrinou, 2013). Useful as the predetermined materials designed by experts may be, especially for the novice teachers, the flexibility provided to the teachers to supplement the materials according to their pupils' needs allowed them to dispose of their overreliance on the textbook. This emancipation from the textbook, though, should be carried out with caution as it might engender misinterpretations, inappropriate use of the materials or even employment of activities inappropriate to the children's needs, characteristics and proficiency.

As mentioned in the previous section, the focal point of this research, which was part of a greater study, was to gauge the teachers' opinions towards the ability of PEAP to augment the children's language performance. To this end the following hypothesis was formulated:

The Early Foreign Language Programme which is in effect in Greek state primary schools will ameliorate the learners' FL development. In an attempt to provide a more specific focus, the following research questions were articulated:

- Do teachers who teach in the PEAP programme acknowledge its contribution to the development of the children's language skills? If this is the case, what are their priorities pertaining to their acknowledgement of the significance of the development of the students' linguistic skills?
- Do teachers who hold a postgraduate degree rank the efficacy of the PEAP project in the same way with the teachers who possess a Bachelor's degree (BA henceforth)?
- ± To what extent do the years of teaching experience influence the teachers' attitudes concerning the appropriateness of the PEAP project to enhance the learners' linguistic development?

METHOD

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed in order to triangulate the data and ensure the reliability of the research (Hyland, 2002).

Participants

The sample consisted of 154 teachers of English who teach in the first and second grade of schools all over Greece. Provision was taken by the researchers to address teachers from various parts of Greece, namely Athens, Thessaloniki, Central, Eastern and Western Macedonia, Epirus, Thrace, Central Greece, Crete, the Ionian Islands and the Peloponnese.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents were female (91.6%) while only 8.4% of the subjects were male. Most of the teachers (72.1%) had sufficient teaching experience, whereas a small proportion 27.9% had moderate teaching experience varying from 1-10 years. Concerning postgraduate studies, around one third of the participants held a Master's degree, while a meager number of them-8- had a Ph.D. majoring in Education

The completed questionnaires represent 11.7% of the totality of schools which implemented the PEAP project at the time of the conduct of the study. As one third of subjects teach in two schools (a finding traced through personal communication with the Ministry of Education) it can be safely deduced that the percentage of responses is higher leading, therefore, to generalizable conclusions.

The Research Instruments

The main methodological instrument was a teachers' questionnaire which was distributed to those teaching the first and second grade of the Greek primary school in diverse parts of Greece. In this way, space triangulation was achieved (Denzin, 1970).

The employed teachers' questionnaire consisted of three parts:

1. Part one included demographic information pertaining to the respondents' gender, current post, years of teaching experience, any additional academic qualifications and the number of seminars for young learners they had attended (see 5.1).
2. The second part attempted to identify whether the teachers follow closely the materials and methodology of PEAP even though, they are at liberty to alter or supplement the activities. Only in the case in which a high alignment of the teaching practices with the materials designers' instructions emerged, could the retrieved answers illuminate the teachers' opinions regarding the contribution of the PEAP project to the learners' linguistic development. This part consisted of scaled items in the Likert type. The computed Cronbah's alpha (Cronbah, 1951) soared to .890 guaranteeing the reliability of the items.
3. Part three sought to detect the teachers' attitudes towards the potential of the ELL project to aid students linguistically. The Cronbah's alpha measurement for this part pointed to .736 revealing a quite high reliability of the included statements.

The qualitative method was small scale albeit very useful to yield additional data to the research. An open-ended question demanded any suggestions for PEAP improvement from the participants. Since the participants were free to air their views, this item is rated as qualitative resembling an unstructured interview in which the interviewees express their opinions freely (Bell, 2001).

Analysis of the results

The statistical analysis of the findings was carried out through the SPSS 19.0 (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL) and a p -value < 0.05 was set as significant. Descriptive and inferential tests were used, namely percentages and Chi-square tests (Dörnyei, 2003). In order to assist with the interpretation of the findings it should be reported that the employed Likert scale was tabulated in two codes:

1. Teachers' compliance with the materials and methodology of PEAP: always- 1, usually- 2, sometimes- 3, rarely- 4, never- 5, which denotes that the lower the mean score, the more the instructors abide by the item under discussion.
2. The degree of consensus regarding the influence of the programme on the pupils' linguistic improvement: strongly agree – 1, agree- 2, neither agree nor disagree- 3, disagree- 4, strongly disagree- 5 implying that the minor the mean record the more the teachers endorse the provided statement.

RESULTS

PEAP materials and methodology

This part of the questionnaire unearthed a high conformity to the PEAP materials and methodology, even though, the instructors have the liberty to alter and differentiate their instruction practices to meet their students' level and needs.

In relation to the utilisation of the PEAP materials, a high endorsement was granted to all items: a) 'using' the PEAP materials from the PEAP site and the printed materials accumulated a significant percentage: 87% (always and usually), b) 'following the PEAP philosophy and teaching guidelines' was voted for 92.2% (always and usually), c) 'using visual representations' (e.g. pictures, flashcards, etc) was marked by a considerably high percentage 88.4%, d) 'using audio materials' (songs) was ranked as an important item (81.8%) and e) 'using the stories of the materials' was also marked by a high number of the teachers (79.3%).

Concerning the implementation of the PEAP methodology, it was found that most items received unanimous agreement (in the scales always and usually), while some statements exhibited lower consensus. The following statements gathered the highest endorsement: the employment of games in the classroom (92.9%), the active participation of all children in the learning process (99.4%), providing ample time to the students to complete the activities (98.7%), 'recycling' (94.8%) and 'repeating the instructions' (98.7%).

The teachers showed less preference for the following three items, albeit at quite high percentages, 'asking students to work in pairs' (62.3%) or in 'groups' (75.9%) and 'roleplaying of the stories' (66.2%). The first two results can be attributed to the fact that teachers realize that children are not sociocentric, yet (Piaget, 1967) and may need extra time to work with others, whereas the third one can be attributed to the lack of space in the classrooms.

PEAP Contribution to children's linguistic performance

This part of the questionnaire which probed the teachers' approval of the potential of PEAP to increase the learners' linguistic performance was divided into three subsections to facilitate its analysis by grouping related items under the same heading as follows:

1. Skills development (items 3, 4).
2. Ways to promote FL learning (items 7, 8, 10).
3. Language learning techniques (items 1, 2, 5, 6, 9).

As the programme abides by the methodological and pedagogical approaches which pertain to young learners' characteristics and the way they think and learn, it was assumed that the teachers would grant high consent towards its contribution to the students' linguistic improvement. The novelty of the present study is that it attempted to illustrate the ranking order of the teachers' opinions in a descending order of importance.

Skills development

As regards the skills development, the teachers revealed a major accord in oracy at 96.1% (Strongly agree and Agree) attesting the salience of learner classroom discourse in the promotion of speaking. Nevertheless, they seemed to agree less concerning the value of tracing letters to develop students' written literacy. A proportion of the respondents were neutral, whereas a tiny percentage of the participants (2.6%) were against this practice. This finding

highlighted that teachers are cautious concerning the potential of tracing letters and words to boost early literacy.

Ways to promote FL learning

In relation to facilitative ways in the learning process, recycling reached a substantial percentage of 98.7% (Strongly Agree and Agree, see table 2), whereas the advantage of sequencing materials while learning English seemed to be questioned as a salient percentage (12.3%) of the participants seemed skeptical about this procedure. The item which received the most controversial ratings was the use of mother tongue by the teacher to pave the way for FL learning. Even though 74.7% were favourably disposed toward this practice, 20.1% of the total number of the participants were neutral and only 5.2% was against the use of mother tongue in the learning process.

Language learning techniques

The item which received unanimous endorsement (strongly agree and agree) was the statement related to the gains of listening to songs while learning English. Role playing and the suitability of games for learning were also ranked very high at 96.8% and 94.8% respectively. The fourth option involved the worth of listening to rhymes in assisting young children to learn the FL which accumulated a particularly high percentage (92.9%). The usefulness of making crafts in vocabulary expansion was the teachers' least preferred option at a high percentage, though (79.9%).

It can be argued, then, that the first research question was substantiated as the participating teachers acknowledged the linguistic gains of ELL in a decreasing order of significance.

Differentiation in relation to studies

The computed Pearson Chi-square test disclosed certain different opinions between the teachers with postgraduate studies and those who hold only a BA as follows:

Teachers with a postgraduate degree attribute credit to the beneficial effect of tracing letters to the emerging literacy in the foreign language at a statistical significance of 0.037 (table 1).

Table 1. Statistically significant differences in relation to emerging literacy

		Postgraduate studies		Total
		No	Yes	
4. Tracing letters helps young learners	Strongly Agree	17	18	35
		17.5%	32.7%	23.0%
	Agree	61	25	86
		62.9%	45.5%	56.6%
	Neither Agree nor	15	12	27
	15.5%	21.8%	17.8%	
	Disagree	4	0	4
			.0%	2.6%
Total		97	55	152

100.0% 100.0% 100.0%

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.473 ^a	3	.037

$$\chi^2(3) = 8.473, p = 0.037$$

In table 2, a great difference at 0.001 surfaced with the vast majority of postgraduate degree teachers acknowledging almost unanimously the merit of role playing in aiding children to learn English.

Table 2. Statistically significant differences in relation to roleplaying

		Postgraduate studies		Total
		No	Yes	
5. Roleplaying helps young learners learn English (vocabulary, structures, pronunciation, etc.)	Strongly Agree	36	38	74
		36.7%	67.9%	48.1%
	Agree	58	17	75
		59.2%	30.4%	48.7%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	4	1	5
		4.1%	1.8%	3.2%
Total		98	56	154
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.842 ^a	2	.001

$$\chi^2(2) = 13.842, p = 0.001$$

A statistical significance at 0.031 level emerged in this item, since most post graduate holders pinpointed the importance of making crafts in helping young learners to increase vocabulary ($\chi^2(3) = 8.844, p = 0.031$).

The highest variation at 0.008 was disclosed in relation to the utility of recycling of diverse components in the learning process. The teachers with further qualifications expressed a high preference for this item (table 3).

Table 3. Statistically significant differences in relation to revision

	Postgraduate studies			Total
	No		Yes	
7. Revision/recycling helps young pupils learn English (vocabulary, structures, pronunciation)	Strongly Agree	67	50	117
	68.4%		89.3%	76.0%
	Agree	30	5	35
	30.6%		8.9%	22.7%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	0	1
		1.0	.0%	.6%
	Disagree	0	1	1
		.0%	1.8%	.6%
Total		98	56	154
	100.0%		100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.746	3	.008
$\chi^2(3) = 11.746, p = 0.008$			

The results pointed to the fact that the second research question was partially verified, as teachers with further studies presented some variations in their attitudes towards the linguistic benefits of ELL as compared with their colleagues who hold a BA.

Differentiation in relation to years of teaching experience

Interesting findings surfaced in relation to the years of the participants' teaching expertise in both the second and third part of the questionnaire, that is in relation to the implementation of the PEAP materials and methodology and regarding the potential of the programme to contribute to the pupils' linguistic growth. Therefore, the Pearson Chi-square test yielded the following results:

Implementing the materials and methodology of the PEAP programme

The teachers with more teaching experience, that is those who belong to the 11-20 and 21+ groups seem to prioritise the use of the philosophical assumptions of PEAP to a greater extent than the younger teachers at a very low statistical significance 0.048, though ($\chi^2(4) = 9.599, p = 0.048$). This variation signifies that the teachers with less teaching expertise also value the guidelines of the designers of the programme but less frequently. This finding seems to run

counter to the existing literature as the novice teachers seem to prefer assigned materials which offer them a secure teaching environment (Zouganeli, 2004).

Moreover, the teachers with extended experience (11-20 and 21+) seem to be favourably disposed towards group work at a high statistical variation of 0.009 ($\chi^2(6)=17.026$, $p=0.009$). This result can be attributed to the fact that older teachers feel more confident regarding classroom management because group work may cause noise and the pupils may become restless.

An interesting finding, which may need more research so as to reach safe conclusions, emerged concerning the use of facial expressions and body language by the teacher in order to explain new words. Younger practitioners stated their preference towards facial and body gestures at a statistical significance of 0.010 (table 4). It can be deduced that less experienced teachers attempt to implement more means to convey meaning and, at the same time, feel less self-aware, thus, less embarrassed to utilise movements and gestures than the older teachers.

Table 4. Statistical significant differences in relation to use of facial expressions and body language while explaining new words

			Years of teaching experience			
			1-10	11-20	21+	Total
5. I use facial expressions and body language to explain new vocabulary.	Always	Count	29	30	11	70
		% within Years of teaching experience	67.4%	41.7%	28.2%	45.5%
	Usually	Count	11	25	19	55
		% within Years of teaching experience	25.6%	34.7%	48.7%	35.7%
	Sometimes	Count	2	15	9	26
		% within Years of teaching experience	4.7%	20.8%	23.1%	16.9%
	Rarely	Count	1	2	0	3
		% within Years of teaching experience	2.3%	2.8%	.0%	1.9%
	Total	Count	43	72	39	154
		% within Years of teaching experience	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16.864 ^a	6	.010
Likelihood Ratio	18.763	6	.005
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.179	1	.002
N of Valid Cases	154		

a. 3 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .76.

$\chi^2(6) = 16.864, p = 0.010$

Linguistic development

Concerning the contribution of speaking in English to augment the pupils' oral discourse the most experienced participants (21+) outnumbered their less experienced counterparts at a variation of 0.010 (table 5)

Table 5. Statistical significant differences in relation to the contribution of speaking in English to the development of the pupils' oral discourse

		Years of teaching experience				
		1-10	11-20	21+	Total	
3. Speaking in English helps young learners to develop the oral discourse in English (vocabulary, structures, pronunciation, etc.)	Strongly Agree	Count	23	35	29	87
		% within Years of teaching experience	53.5%	49.3%	74.4%	56.9%
	Agree	Count	17	36	8	61
		% within Years of teaching experience	39.5%	50.7%	20.5%	39.9%
	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Count	3	0	2	5
		% within Years of teaching experience	7.0%	.0%	5.1%	3.3%
Total	Count	43	71	39	153	
	% within Years of teaching experience	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.201 ^a	4	.010
Likelihood Ratio	15.492	4	.004
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.229	1	.072
N of Valid Cases	153		

a. 3 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.27.
 $\chi^2(4) = 13.201, p = 0.010$

Taking into consideration the aforementioned findings it can be argued that the third research question was partly substantiated disclosing great consensus among the three age groups in most statements. Nevertheless, the striking differentiation in some items reflected that the participants employ diverse teaching practices and exhibit different tendencies due to their dissimilar teaching experience background.

The qualitative data

Since the open-ended questioned unearthed the respondents’ personal suggestions for the amelioration of the programme, the findings are considered to be qualitative. Even though the qualitative analysis was a small scale one, it put forward the teachers’ recommendations for the improvement of the project and simultaneously, shed light on some inconsistencies which surfaced in the participants’ answers in the questionnaire. For the sake of our discussion, it should be noted that 190 out of the 154 participants provided their opinion and what is more the respondents could come up with more than one recommendation. More particularly, the respondents’ proposals can be grouped in six divisions (table 6) as follows:

1. The necessity to print and distribute books to all students, a recommendation endorsed by 25.3% of the respondents.
2. The need for bigger classrooms.
3. The need for extra equipment, such as computers and projectors as well as supplementary materials including board games, puppets and posters. The second and third category gathered equal preference at 21.1%.
4. The necessity of more seminars concerning the way young learners think and learn along with their special characteristics. The participants (13.2%) also expressed the desire for guidance from the school advisors-teacher trainers and for demonstration lessons either by a teacher trainer or a fellow teacher.
5. The requirement for more activities which will enable the pupils to compare and contrast the Greek and British culture (11.1%).
6. The demand for incorporation of more tasks which will empower the pupils to get to know their own culture better so as to accept diversity more easily. This preference was stated by a smaller percentage (8.4%).

Table 6. Suggestions for improving the teaching of English to the 1st and 2nd grade of primary

	N	Percent
<i>Suggestions</i> Seminars	25	13.2%
Bigger classrooms	40	21.1%
Equipment (computers, projectors) and supplementary materials (board games, puppets, posters)	40	21.1%
Comparison and contrast of Greek and British culture	21	11.1%
Printed materials-books for students	48	25.3%
Better knowledge of the Greek culture in order to accept diversity	16	8.4%
Total	190	100.0%

schools

The data of the open-ended question account for the divergence which emerged between the teachers’ opinions regarding certain items and their actual teaching practices. More precisely, even though, they acknowledged the significance of roleplaying, making crafts and playing games in the linguistic development of the pupils, they exhibited contrary priorities in their teaching methodology. Thus, they attributed a relatively low percentage (66.2%) to the employment of dramatization in classroom. This can be attributed to the fact that 53.3% of the participants raised the necessity for more spacious classrooms equipped with computers and

puppets which constitute essential components for role playing. Therefore, it seems that practical reasons impede the teachers from employing dramatisation in the classroom although they recognize its contribution to the pupils' linguistic evolution.

Another controversial finding in the questionnaire was also clarified through the open-ended question. Although, the teachers rated very highly the contribution of team work either in pairs (92.2%) or in groups (96.7%) to the learners' sociocultural awareness, little did they state that they used this process in the classroom (pairs- 62.3% and groups- 75.9%). The lack of spacious classroom which allow room for rearranging the desks in order to secure adequate room for collaboration seems to be the main reason why the teachers avoid the employment of team work.

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted with the purpose to record teachers' views on the effectiveness of early language learning to promote the linguistic development of very young learners in EFL. It was found out that the respondents exhibited a favourable stance towards ELL (English Language Learning). It was also revealed that the teachers follow the materials and methodology of PEAP very closely, even though they can supplement and differentiate their instruction and practices. This high conformity to the PEAP philosophy and methodology illustrates that their views result from the precise implementation of the project instead of any other extraneous or intuitive factors.

The retrieved data justify and build on the results of previously conducted studies presented in section 2. More particularly, the teachers' acknowledgement that they use the PEAP materials and philosophy as they were designed to meet the needs of early young learners tally with Tsami's (2013) results which disclosed that teachers are fully aware of their students' preferences and needs and as a result employ approaches which are age and level appropriate. Moreover, the accrued findings advocate the ones by Griva and Semoglou (2012, 2015) who highlighted the contribution of games to the very young learners' linguistic growth. Another research which unearthed the salience of games and playful activities was the one conducted by Szulc-Kurpaska (2007). A new element in this study, though, which was not probed in the current research was the effectiveness of games to attract the pupils' motivation.

The research under discussion seems to be in line with Aravantinou (2013) as both studies employed a teachers' questionnaire which disclosed that the respondents advocate ELL. The results of the present study seem to contradict Mertens (2003), who reached the conclusion that oracy in the young learners' classroom has been overestimated at the expense of literacy. Even though the participants of the current study give some credit to the promotion of literacy, they prefer to focus on oracy in the ELL classroom.

In the light of those findings, the following suggestions could be made for an optimal application and improvement of PEAP.

Improving the teaching context (teachers, classrooms, supplementary equipment):

- Provide EFL teachers with both pre- and in-service training in relation to the special traits of the early young learners and the suitable teaching methodology for this age. Thus, teacher quality will be augmented in order to attain maximum profits both in teacher development and educational outcomes.
- It hardly needs emphasizing that special care should be taken by the headteachers to

ensure spacious classrooms for the very young learners. Much in the same vein, the educational authorities should reconceptualise the primary school context and make necessary provisions, that is fewer pupils in each class, especially in the first two grades, and proper equipment (computers, lap tops, puppets, games, etc.). In this way, the teachers will have ample opportunities to implement the task-based interactive approach which is deemed suitable for teaching very young pupils (Evensen & Moon, 2009).

- The teachers have to reconceptualise their role as feedback and reward providers. Rather than being omniscient judges, the teachers should regard themselves as facilitators who ease the pupils' proficiency and development in a meaningful educational framework (Griva et al., 2009).
- More time should be allotted to the teaching of English at the early young age. Even though, the ELL programme expanded this academic year (2016-2017) to almost all Greek primary schools, the teaching hours were reduced from two to one. Teaching time must be increased by one hour to the benefit of the pupils.

Optimise the ELL gains:

- An early start can trigger the "hidden multilingual potential of every child" (Edelenbos et al. 2006, p. 129) which leads to the acquisition of a foreign language and paves the way for learning other languages, too.
- Special care must be taken to establish positive attitudes towards FL learning and promote motivation by implementing an encouraging, playful framework which will render learning a third FL a challenging endeavour.
- It is imperative to foster basic communicative abilities to pupils and enable them to achieve high proficiency in a foreign language in order to participate in mobility projects within Europe or globally.
- The pupils should be aided to become familiar with a new culture, offered the opportunity to ponder on their own cultural heritage and the culture of the foreign language, ensuring, thus, acceptance of otherness in our multicultural world.
- Substantial effort should be made to improve the learners' linguistic, cognitive and social development.
- Finally, the pupils' metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities will be fostered as they get in touch with a new language system.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ELL seems to provide various merits to the very young learners as it promotes their linguistic improvement in the FL while positively influencing their personal and academic development, and assisting them to foster a positive stance towards other languages and develop acceptance of diversity. The results pinpointed that the teachers in the Greek primary school follow the PEAP materials and methodology and in this sense they fully capitalize on the programme in order to aid the pupils to make the most of an early start in the FL.

However, there are certain limitations: the major limitation of the present study is that it focused mainly on one methodological instrument, namely a teachers' questionnaire integrating a qualitative tool to a small extent, that is an open-ended question. It can be argued, nevertheless, that limited as the qualitative instrument as it was, it unraveled the

teachers' proposals for the improvement of the project and illuminated some controversies in the questionnaire. Moreover, even though, quite a large number of answers were collected (154), another large scale research source could have provided us with more data. Through teachers' semi-structured interviews, we could have collected more in-depth data related to their views towards ELL. Further research could trace the children's attitudes towards the benefits they gained from ELL. For this purpose, second and third grade pupils' attitudes could be recorded by using smilegrams. Furthermore, another issue which seems to be underexplored in the ELL context is the gender factor. More specifically, a study could explore any variation in linguistic development and performance due to gender differentiation.

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