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**COMPARATIVE RESEARCH BETWEEN THE SPANISH
AND THE BULGARIAN SYSTEM IN
THEIR METHODOLOGY TO TEACH ENGLISH AS A
FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT PRIMARY SCHOOL**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers a comparative research on the methodology of teaching English as a foreign language in primary schools in Bulgaria and Spain. A quantitative analysis of results published in official statistics is provided, allowing more general conclusions to be drawn about the two countries regarding English teaching methodology and their standings on an international scale of language proficiency. However, the lack of national statistics on English proficiency outcomes for primary school students in both countries limits the research, and the conclusions drawn must be based on partial data and limited investigations. This issue reflects a general deficiency in the EU's educational systems. The thesis highlights the need to collect and use national statistics on foreign language study so that the best-performing systems can serve as examples, ensuring that all EU students have access to the most effective learning methods.

KEYWORDS

Teaching methods, English, Bulgaria, Spain, Statistics, European Union.

RESUMEN

Esta tesis ofrece una comparación sobre la metodología de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en las escuelas primarias de Bulgaria y España. Siguiendo un análisis cuantitativo de estadísticas oficiales, se busca extraer conclusiones generales para determinar la eficacia de ambos sistemas y su posición internacional en competencia lingüística. Sin embargo, la falta de estadísticas nacionales sobre los resultados en inglés de alumnos de primaria en ambos países limita la investigación y todas las conclusiones que se extraigan sobre ellos deben basarse en datos parciales y en investigaciones limitadas. Este problema refleja una deficiencia general en los sistemas educativos de la UE. La tesis resalta la necesidad de recopilar y utilizar las estadísticas nacionales sobre el estudio de lenguas extranjeras para que los sistemas que tengan mejor desempeño puedan servir de ejemplo, asegurando que todos los estudiantes de la UE tengan acceso a los métodos más efectivos de aprendizaje.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Métodos de enseñanza, inglés, Bulgaria, España, estadística, Unión Europea.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation consists of a comparison of methods for teaching English as a foreign language at primary schools in Bulgaria and Spain. The choice of countries is backed by the fact that Bulgaria is my home country and Spain is the country of my residence, so it gives an in-depth personal experience perspective.

1.1. STRUCTURE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The structure of the dissertation is divided into five sections. The first is introductory and shows the structure, objectives, and hypothesis of the work. The second focuses on the theoretical framework of teaching English in general and leading theories about it. The third reveals the methodology used for the research. The fourth gives an analytical comparison between the methodology to teach English at primary schools used in Bulgaria and Spain. The fifth makes conclusions on how results can be compared versus the hypothesis and what they can show about the success of these two systems. The work ends with the list of bibliographical sources.

The research methodology is based mostly on three methods: investigation, analysis, and comparison. At first, it investigates the legal and normative framework of the education system of Bulgaria and Spain to show how it reflects the English language teaching at primary school. Apart from this, the research carries out a comparison between the two countries on how usually English is taught at primary school as workbooks and textbooks, methods, and practices.

From a practical point of view, it also analyzes the possible paths for improvement of the current situation in both two countries by exposing the differences between how English is taught there and in countries whose students score higher in English. This is the essence of the research, its essential contribution: to possibly identify, to find out the good practices that those countries who overpass Spain and Bulgaria in English proficiency acquired by pupils at primary schools. And – in the best scenario if such practices are identified – departing from them possibly to elaborate some practical suggestions on what Spanish and Bulgarian primary schools and teachers can do more to raise the English teaching level.

The analysis is primarily done by comparison. English teaching in Bulgarian and Spanish primary education are compared versus teaching English as a foreign language

in other countries whose mother tongue is different but performs better than Bulgaria and Spain. So, relevant laws and practices in these countries are used as potential sources of information on how the current situation in the Spanish and Bulgarian primary schools can be improved to increase pupils' level of English.

In this context, before closing the research methodology section, it is vital to underline that normative frames are taken from the current education laws and rules in both two countries. As a result of comparison, the EF EPI ranking for 2022, the so-called English Proficiency Index (EPI) is known as probably the most reputable global ranking of countries by English skills of pupils. In its last edition information for 111 countries and regions by English skills is processed, including for Bulgaria and Spain (Education First, 2023), which makes it quite relevant as a database to position who is where when talking about English proficiency.

Finally, the choice of EF as a relevant source of information is justified by the fact that EF stands for a globally spread company – “Education First” – whose staff amount to more than 50,000 employees based in 116 countries working in the sector of education (Education First, 2023, online). This company was founded in 1965 by Berlitz Hult in Lund, a Swedish university town, and during its relatively long history, it gathered significant experience in education, academic and cultural exchange, and, notably, language training. So, thanks to its great expertise, it is regarded as a reputable organization and maybe the sole in the world that can measure English language skills globally due to its vast international presence; that is why the English Proficiency Index of the company is widely cited as a way to classify countries in their English-speaking abilities.

In this sense of thoughts, unfortunately, a potential limitation of the study can be cited as the global lack of more analyses on the English-speaking abilities of countries worldwide, done by state institutions. So, more or less, researchers should rely on such done by private entities which usually lack access to the full possible data on the topic that can be gathered like for example tests in English done in schools. In the case of Education First, the database is gathered through tests in English done primarily online in various countries by students. PISA is doing something similar in the countries from the OECD group, but it is a program that measures the reading, mathematics, and

science knowledge and skills of fifteen-year-olds (PISA, 2023, online) and not the English language skills notably.

Here it can also be underlined the big necessity that the European Union institutions and mostly the Directorate-General on Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (DG EAC) start gathering from national authorities at the level of the European Union statistical information on evaluations of English-speaking skills of students, following for example, the proven well-working strategies of PISA or making their ones. Otherwise, if such statistics are not available at the European Union level and if they are not used to identify the ones who perform best and who are left behind, separate countries could not do much to align the educational standards with each other. Considering that primary school is the time when students in the European Union get their basics of English language knowledge, they are left in a situation not even get the same foundation per country to build on their proficiency.

Consequently, some of them will indeed be left behind, resulting in slowly leaving the Union behind as a whole in general and in a global perspective from other countries and regions in terms of English-speaking skills. Of course, this practice would be great if even adopted towards other European languages with considerable coverage in the European Union and largely taught at schools across the Union such as Spanish, French, or German, as finally, it would indeed serve as a great base for comparison which language young Europeans speak best thanks to their primary or secondary school education.

1.2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the study is to identify if there is a connection between the methodology to teach English as a foreign language at primary schools in Bulgaria and Spain and how each country ranks as English proficient. For this purpose, the research tasks to complete are as follows:

- To present a theoretical analysis of perceptions and theories in teaching English to minors, especially in primary school.
- To offer a deductive analysis of the Bulgarian and the Spanish educational systems in matters of teaching methodology to carry the English lessons at primary schools. Some

statistics for Bulgaria and Spain related to the performance of students in English are used to compare how successful their systems are.

However, in the process of the work, I found that – due to the lack of national statistics on results in English of students at primary schools both in Bulgaria and Spain – an in-depth comparison of the two systems is practically impossible and all conclusions drawn on them must rely on partial data and narrow researches. It is also one of the biggest problems of educational systems at the level of the EU as a whole. Due to the lack of statistics on foreign language studying at the national level of primary school students, a complete comparison between different systems is impossible.

So, the dissertation appeals strongly that such statistics start to be gathered and used in educational policies so that systems that perform best can be used as examples by others to ensure that all EU children at primary schools have access to the best practices and resources to learn English as a foreign language. If such statistics are not gathered and used across the European Union, the educational systems of different member countries – not only Bulgaria and Spain – will probably never be able to ensure a homogenous and strong foundation for English proficiency for all EU students; some countries will perform better while others will drag behind, making in perspective the EU youth less competitive in business and on the labor market and this will be a loss for the whole Union.

1.3. HYPOTHESIS

The study hypothesizes that there is a strong interdependence between the teaching methodology within a national educational system and the results demonstrated by the pupils, especially if compared on an international scale. Or, briefly said, if Spain or Bulgaria use optimal teaching resources and methodologies within their educational systems to teach English at primary school, it should indeed reflect in great results of the Spanish or Bulgarian students in English, including on an international scale.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As stated above, the main objective of this project is to develop a comparative analysis of the methodology used in Spain and Bulgaria in teaching English as a foreign language at primary schools. These are both countries with clear differences in terms of their educational systems. Therefore, it can be considered essential for this study to talk

about the different models of language learning that have emerged throughout history, and which today play a vital role in foreign language teaching. By doing so, it can be carried out further analysis and which learning models are used in the countries that will be on focus.

To dig deeper into this topic, the work starts by defining a foreign language as a language that is not spoken in the immediate and local environment because daily social conditions do not require its permanent use for communication (Sánchez Jabba, 2013, p. 67). The European Commission defines a foreign language as any language considered as such or associated with this concept (second language, language B) that appears in the curriculum or another official document related to education. In general, the official curriculum considers a foreign language as a subject to be taught. However, it may be used as a language of instruction for other subjects (European Commission, 2001, p. 19).

2.1. LANGUAGE LEARNING MODELS

In the last century, several European countries undertook various reforms of their educational systems to promote and improve foreign language teaching; the strategic objective of the 2002 European Council, is agreed upon as well (Eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2006; 2008a; 2012b). To make it possible, several reforms in the school structure were agreed upon. They involved a total transformation in foreign language teaching. One of the major changes, for example, was the extension of language teaching time and the implementation of several immersion plans.

Linguists have found in language teaching an opportunity to incorporate their contributions from the research field to practice and it led to many changes in language teaching. This was reflected in the evolution of teaching methods over the last century. A shift from the grammar-translation teaching method (mainly based on the memorization of grammatical rules, translation, reading, and writing) to a communicative method (focused on developing communication skills in the target language) took place (Richards and Rodgers, 2014, p. 245).

There are various communicative methods of foreign language teaching:

Each of the approaches has in common a basic set of theories and beliefs about the nature of language, of language learning, and a set of principles for teaching a language. None of them, however, leads to a

specific set of recipes and techniques to be used in teaching a language. They are characterized by a variety of interpretations as to how the principles can be applied (Richards and Rodgers, 2007, p.245).

Communicative methods focus on making learners competent in communicating in a language rather than on mastering different structures. Many learning methods seek this communicative competence; some of them are listed below.

2.1.1. THE COMMUNICATIVE METHODS OR COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

They aim to develop communicative competence and proceedings for mastering the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Richards and Rodgers (2007, p. 245) highlight the following principles in these methods: learners learn a language when they use it to communicate, so classroom activities should involve authentic conversations. As one of the fundamental characteristics of communication is fluency, communication integrates all other language skills. Regarding teaching, three principles are leading: the principle of communication, which provides tasks that are based on real communication; the principle of tasks, which is based on activities to encourage learning by doing; and the principle of meaningfulness, which reflects that the language is meaningful to the learner.

2.1.2. THE NATURAL METHOD

In this method, language is a means for communicating meanings and messages; language learning is done through the use of language in communicative situations. It puts particular focus on the impact of comprehension and on how to transfer the meaning of different messages to recipients. Krashen and Terrel argue that language acquisition can only take place when people understand messages in the target language (1983, p. 19). Their theories emphasize language exposure rather than production; they advocate for the priority of vocabulary and meaning over form or grammar and stress the affective and emotional aspects that lead to successful learning.

2.1.3. COOPERATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

This method emphasizes the use of cooperative activities in pairs and small groups of learners in the classroom. Olsen and Kagan, stepping on Dewey's ideas of building cooperation in learning, define it as follows:

Cooperative learning is a group learning activity organized in such a way that learning depends on a socially structured exchange of information between groups of learners and is motivated by contributing to the learning of others (Olsen and Kagan, 2001, p.192).

It is based on structural and functional models of language theory and interaction models. Its activities focus on the form of language and the practice of its functions.

2.1.4. CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION

In this method, learners are organized according to the content to be acquired. It is based on two principles: people learn a second language best when they use it as a means of acquiring information; content-based instructions are optimal to guide learners through. This can be summarized in some important assumptions: the learner learns a second language more successfully if the content is interesting and useful; there are content areas that are more useful for learning than others; learners learn more quickly in the areas that respond best to their needs. Therefore, it can be concluded that teaching in this method is based on the prior experience of learners.

2.1.5. TASK-BASED LEARNING

It is based on the use of tasks motivated largely by a learning theory rather than a language theory. These tasks are used as a means to promote communication and authentic language use. Tasks are based mostly on authentic sources of the target language. The method puts language use in the center, lexical units are a priority and conversation is a common way to boost language acquisition.

2.1.6. CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING

It is based on the study of subjects in a target language. Its proponents in Europe define it as follows:

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a dual educational approach focusing on the fact that an additional language is used for teaching and learning both the content and the language itself. That is, the teaching and learning process emphasizes not only content and not only language (Coyle, Hood, and Marsh, 2010, p.1).

This type of teaching is known as bilingual and is strongly influenced by the content-based instruction method. It is also called Immersion and is considered as total if all areas of learning are taught in the target language, or partial when only some areas are

taught in the target language which allows the student to immerse in the language (Ghasemi, 2011, p. 875). The goals are to acquire a high level of foreign language proficiency, to show positive attitudes towards foreign language speakers and their culture, and to acquire skills and knowledge in the content areas.

Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010, p. 12) argue that this learning is based on four building blocks: Content (subject matter), Communication (language learning and use), Cognition (learning and thinking processes), and Culture (developing intercultural understanding and global citizenship). It is based on the following principles: content is related to learning and thinking; the language used must be clear and accessible; interaction and intercultural awareness are essential.

2.2. TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS

English proficiency is commonly referred to as a whole of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. So, after explaining the teaching methods above, the dissertation logic led to clarifying the basics of these four types of skills as well.

2.2.1. LISTENING

According to Pinter (2006, p. 45), teachers are the major source of input for children. He also mentions that English should begin to be learned with greater emphasis on listening and speaking skills, as is the case in the mother tongue from a young age.

Students in English classes listen to many texts but also do activities where the teacher is the guide: speaking, singing, dialoguing, giving instructions, telling stories, playing drama, etc. Although younger students receive more input from the teacher, there are also other sources necessary for the development of listening, such as watching a video on the computer or listening to audio from the textbook being used in class (Pinter, 2006, p. 45).

Listening is an active skill with many factors that make it very difficult, especially when it comes to teaching it as a skill. Two important factors can contribute to its difficulty: the first is the type and length of the text the learners have to listen to and the second is familiarity with the person the learners are listening to. In the latter factor, learners find it easier to listen to the teacher than to a recording because the teacher adjusts to the speed of the learners and can modify the tone, speed, and some words. In the case of a

recording, this is impossible as the speed, tone, and language, all are pre-established. In addition, the teacher can repeat the message if necessary and even use gestures and facial expressions to help the learner understand the text better (Pinter, 2006, p. 45).

2.2.2. SPEAKING

This skill is one of the first skills needed to achieve communicative competence. Pinter (2006, p. 55) mentions that teaching how to speak fluently and appropriately is one of the biggest challenges for teachers as for learners it is usually hard to speak and think at the same time. To speak, it comes as first thinking about what to say, then thinking about the words to use and finally, it comes the delivery of the information. To be able to speak fluently in a foreign language requires a lot of practice. However, learners need to know several things to become fluent, such as what is appropriate to say in different situations, how to manage a conversation, or how to interrupt and give an opinion (Pinter, 2006, p. 55).

Goh and Burns (2012, p. 21) mention in their book that learners of English as a second language must develop various pragmatic competencies to speak English. Learners need to develop both speaking and listening skills to communicate well in class. Therefore, students need to be able to hold a fluent conversation, describe feelings, give reasons appropriately, and ask questions about something they have not understood. Teachers' speech is an important tool to help pupils explore, develop, and consolidate ideas.

2.2.3. READING

Pinter (2006, p. 65) talks about the fact that learners should first of all read and write in their mother tongue and when they are proficient enough, they can introduce these two skills in the foreign language they are studying. However, one of the reasons why reading and writing skills are taught is because – apart from creating interest and enthusiasm in learners – it helps to reinforce learners' oral skills. Another reason is its practical impact, e. g. being able to read an invitation to a party or write a shopping list enables pupils to take such actions into everyday life, giving them a real sense of achievement.

Reading competence can be subdivided into two types. On one hand, extensive reading “consists of reading complete texts of a certain length to understand their general meaning” (Centro Virtual Cervantes, n.d., *Lectura extensiva*). On the other hand, it

comes intensive or creative reading “consists of reading a text paying special attention to the meaning of the words and their context” (Centro Virtual Cervantes, n.d., *Lectura intensiva*).

2.2.4. WRITING

According to Yan (2011, para. 5), there are two approaches to teaching writing. Firstly, the Product Approach is to give priority to the outcome of the learning process. Brown (Yan, 2011, para. 5) states that in this approach teachers focus on the result of the written production. The criteria of vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, or spelling are as important as the organization or content.

Second, there is The Process Approach. The Process Approach is divided into four stages: 1) prewriting, 2) composing/brainstorming, 3) revising, and 4) editing. Raimes (cited in Aldana, 2005, p. 48) adds that these four stages mean that students first try to generate ideas to organize themselves, considering the purpose and type of text they have to develop. Subsequently, students choose the right words, adding or deleting ideas. Finally, students share their ideas with their peers to produce a final draft and to receive feedback.

2.3. AGE AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT: RELATED LANGUAGE TEACHING AND ACQUISITION THEORIES

Intellectual development and age are considered by theorists as leading factors in choosing the appropriate teaching methodology, especially when it comes to a foreign language. Intellectual development is an area - as interesting as it is provocative - often shrouded in misunderstanding and even speculation. Especially among the teachers' collectives in our country, it can be regrettably noted that there is an old-fashioned feeling about the intellectual development of students, which is connected to their grades and the general idea of knowledge and, accordingly, ignorance of the learning material.

This view is narrow, to say the least, so as not to qualify as “wrong”, because intelligence is not just memory, it is coping ability. In the literature, intellectual development is an area of research in neuroscience and psychology focusing on child development in terms of information processing, conceptual resources, perceptual skills,

language learning, and other aspects of the developing brain and adult cognitive psychology.

Four stages of development of cognitive information determine the degree of intellectual development of a person and they depend mainly upon age. They are reasoning, intelligence, language, and memory. These stages begin when the baby is about 18 months old, playing with toys, listening to their parents, watching TV, and anything that catches their attention helps build their cognitive development.

Jean Piaget was a major force in creating this field, forming his theory of cognitive intellectual development (Piaget, 1936, p. 68). Piaget proposed four stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational periods. His description of the most notable changes in cognition with age is generally accepted to this day (e.g., how early perception shifts from dependence on concrete, external actions; later, abstract understanding of observable aspects of reality can be captured; of basic abstract rules and principles usually beginning in adolescence). So, according to Piaget's theory, the whole teaching process must be adapted primarily to the age of the pupils, to let them process the information they get, including linguistic one.

Another leading theorist that outlines age as the primary factor for education is James Sully (1842–1923). The English author wrote several books on childhood development, including *Studies of Childhood* and *The Child Path*. He uses a detailed observational method with children. Modern research in child development repeats observations and methods of observation summarized by Sully in *Studies of Childhood*, such as the mirror technique that allows to teacher to learn the children by making them repeat the teacher's actions and can be very useful in language teaching (Sully, 1896, p. 78).

The famous psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) also developed a theory of psychosexual development that showed that individuals must go through several stages as they develop their intellectual and cognitive skills and these changes can be used in optimally educating the individual (Freud, 1971, p. 98).

Lev Vygotsky's (1896–1934) controversial theory of the "zone of proximal development" states that play and fun should be the main activity of children and young people, as they are still strongly positive about life and this is their main source of

development in terms of emotional, volitional and cognitive development. They need beautiful emotions to develop. So, it is the link between children's and adolescents' learning and intellectual development and suggests that teaching for pupils in primary schools should be very active, playful, and interest-grabbing to have optimal results (Van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2016, p. 243).

Maria Montessori (1870–1952) is another great theorist when it comes to teaching methodology. She began her career working with mentally handicapped children in 1897, then conducted observational and experimental research in elementary schools. She wrote *The Discovery of the Child*, where she fixed the four stages of development: birth - 6 years, 6-12 years, 12-18 years, and 18-24 years. According to her, the stage between 12 and 18 years is a transition from childhood to the mature person, and then intellectually one can expect from the youth both childish actions and those revealing a high level of maturity and intellectual development (Montessori, 1948, p. 298).

Arnold Gesell (1880–1961) comes next as the creator of the theory of maturation and development. Gesell says that development occurs because of biological heritable characteristics such as genetics, and individuals will reach the stages of development when they are ready to do so in a predictable sequence. Thanks to his developmental theory, he also devised a developmental scale that is used today, called the Gesell Developmental Chart, which provides parents, teachers, doctors, and other relevant people with an overview of where an infant, child, or youth falls across the developmental spectrum.

Eric Erickson (1902 –1994) focused in his studies on how children and youth develop personality and identity. Although a contemporary of Freud, in his works there is a greater focus on social experiences that occur throughout life, as opposed to exclusively childhood, that contribute to how personality and identity emerge. His framework uses eight systematic stages that all children and youth must go through as they reach adulthood and what these experiences teach them. According to him, the experience that each of us acquires as a child and youth predetermines how quickly we will mature intellectually as a person (Sacco, 2013, online).

Yuri Brofenbrenner (1917–2005) developed the so-called ecological systems theory, which identified different levels of children's environments. The main focus of this theory is on the quality and context of children's environments. Brofenbrenner

concludes that the faster a person develops intellectually, the more complex he begins to communicate with his environment. From there, he concludes that sometimes very intellectually highly developed individuals may experience problems with communication, especially if they communicate with people whose intellectual level is very low, primitive, and, ultimately, considered insufficient by the highly intellectual interlocutor (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 27).

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987) created the theory of stages of moral development, which extended Piaget's findings on cognitive development and showed that they continue throughout life. Kohlberg's six stages follow Piaget's constructivist requirements in that these stages cannot be skipped, and it is very rare to regress in stages. Kohlberg's notable works on the subject include *Moral Stages and Moralization: The Cognitive Developmental Approach* (1976) and *Essays on Moral Development* (1984). In them, he also claims that people with higher intellectual development tend to show higher morals (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 33).

Attention to personality is an exciting characteristic that also attracts researchers seriously. Attention is the behavioral and cognitive process of selectively concentrating on a discrete aspect of information, whether considered subjective or objective while ignoring other information deemed less important by the person focusing their attention. Attention as a psychological construct has been studied since the nineteenth century.

William James (1890) wrote that “Attention is the possession by the mind, in a clear and vivid form, of one of what appear to be several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, and consciousness are essential” (Goldstein, 2012, p. 34).

Attention has also been described as the allocation of limited resources to cognitive processing. Attention is manifested by an attentive difficulty, in terms of the amount of data that the brain can process each second; for example, in human vision only less than 1% of the visual input. Attention remains a key area of research within education, psychology, neuroscience, cognitive neuroscience, and neuropsychology (Zaoping, 2014, p. 46).

Areas of active investigation include determining the source of sensory cues and cues that generate attention, the effects of these sensory cues and cues on the property

settings of sensory neurons, and the relationship between attention and other behavioral and cognitive processes that may include working memory and psychological alertness. Relatively new research, expanding on earlier research within psychopathology, examines the diagnostic symptoms associated with traumatic brain injury and its effects on attention. Attention also varies across cultures and may be a product of how people are raised from childhood in that culture (Zaoping, 2014, p. 89).

In more recent times, that is the last two decades, it is worth noting the progress in the study of the intellectual development of the personality, achieved thanks to neuropsychology and its related sciences. Neuroplasticity, as explained by the World Health Organization, can be summarized in three points:

- Any adaptive mechanism used by the nervous system to recover from injury.
- Any means by which the nervous system can repair individually damaged central circuits.
- Any means by which the capacity of the central nervous system can adapt to new physiological conditions and environments.

So, based on the world-known educational and psychological theorists cited above, most of them seem to unite over the conception that an efficient teaching process must be tailored according to the age of the recipients. It means that the whole methodology used there – as book systems, visuals, activities included, time and schedule of the lesson, etc. – cannot be a universal framework for all, children and adults, but must be done mostly according to the age group specifics and its intellectual development specifics.

Apart from this, theorists cited also share the conviction that children in their primary school age process information mainly in a visual, tactile, and audible manner, so the stimulus they need is connected to activities to be done. By its part, it raises a general question of whether the national educational systems around the globe deal well at all with it; as most of them require sitting for long hours in the classroom.

When it comes to a foreign language, theorists also suggest that the more touch a pupil has with the language itself through authentic materials, the more successful the whole teaching process is. The attention of the students seems to be the main pre-requisite for

an efficient teaching process, and it is up to the teacher to grab once and keep the attention of the pupils up during the whole lesson.

So, trying to detect the features of an optimal language teaching methodology – based solely on the theory which makes it more or less imaginary, as well – can be outlined as its main characteristics content based on activities that require movement, the richness of visuals, and audible materials, as well as opportunities to experience the language and even the culture through own senses, e. g. tasting the foreign cuisine, possibly even physical travels or at least “digital” travels to enhance the knowledge over the country whose language has to be acquired.

These are, in practice, tasks that are very hard to carry on by the teacher, although they may have great results over the pace that pupils get in acquiring the language and, if speaking sincerely, they are maybe the most efficient ones. Probably that is why most of the UK colleges and universities offer a year to UK soil for the students who do not master English well; submerging a student – even a grown one, and it is widely known that children usually learn even faster than adults – in the local ambiance is probably the best way to learn the language.

However, in the framework of an educational system, it could be practically impossible, but efforts to enhance the touch with the language at its authenticity seem to be worth considering the results they may have. So, the tools at the disposal of the teacher seem to include both traditional and innovative, both books and digital technologies, and much more, and their portfolio is usually determined by the skills of the teacher. But one thing is out of doubt: the rich in activities and the diversified lessons are efficient and worth most.

3. DESCRIPTION / ANALYSIS / EXPLANATION

3.1. AN OVERVIEW OF SPAIN'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. ENGLISH AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS: TEACHING METHODOLOGY AND BOOK SYSTEMS

The frame of the education system of Spain is given by the Constitution of the Kingdom of Spain (BOE.es, 2023, online). The Spanish Constitution establishes the framework of powers in educational matters between the State and the Autonomous Communities and it acts together with several laws (Educagob.educacionyfp.gob.es, 2023, online). One of

the most important laws is Organic Law 8/1985, of July 3, regulating the Right to Education; it develops the principles that, in matters of education, are contained in the Spanish Constitution. The first draft of this Law 2/2006, of May 3 was published in 2006 and establishes the regulatory bases of the national educational system, inspired, as indicated in its preamble, by three fundamental principles:

-The requirement to provide quality education to all citizens of both sexes, at all levels of the educational system.

-The need for all components of the educational community to collaborate to achieve this ambitious goal.

-A determined commitment to the educational objectives set at that time by the European Union, mainly aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems.

Other important laws are the Regulations developed by Educational Administrations. Since the powers in education are transferred to the Autonomous Communities, they will develop their regulations, on the basic regulations established by the State. It is a system where the educational powers are shared by the national Ministry of Education, Vocational Training, and Sports and Autonomous Communities. Funding for education is ensured by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, the Ministry of Universities, and the Autonomous Communities (Eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2024). Primary education is organized in public and publicly-funded private schools. Foreign language is considered a mandatory area of primary education. Around 12 % of the teaching hours are dedicated to foreign languages (Eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2023, online).

Teaching methodology in primary education is based on the principles set in Article 5 of Royal Decree 157/2022. They focus on educational inclusion, acquiring skills in reading, comprehension, oral and written expression, audiovisual and digital competencies, developing creativity and engaging in meaningful projects, and – especially for foreign languages teaching – the use of Spanish or another co-official language for the Community only as a support language, etc. The supervision of textbooks that are used is done by education authorities, so there are inspections both on

national and communal levels to ensure full compliance is achieved (Eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2023, online).

Assessment is done according to strict criteria of education authorities. The teacher can choose the techniques and instruments for those assessments. Two types of assessments are done: a formative that aims to show how each student progresses in their knowledge and skills development and summative ones that are carried out at the end of the 4th year and the end of the primary education cycle (Eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2023, online).

In Spain, there are 2,795,481 students in primary education, according to the Ministry's data (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2023, online). According to Eurydice's portal, 99.6 % of primary school children study English as a mandatory foreign language. Regarding qualifications such as degrees and certifications earned that English language teachers in primary education in Spain possess, there is no data on a national scale.

English teaching in Spain is scheduled from the first grade of primary school. Primary education is for six years, from first to sixth grade, and kids start it usually at 6 years and finish it at 12. But English teaching continues until the end of secondary school, which means that students there have the opportunity to study English as a foreign language for at least 10 years, starting first grade at 6 and finishing secondary school around 16 years old.

For teachers, they must be either native English speakers or have an appropriate academic qualification for it. Usually, primary schools teach three to five hours per week English as a foreign language during primary school. As regions in Spain have a high degree of academic freedom, English education in primary schools there can vary, so although it is the most common schedule, it may vary per region. In the Community of Madrid, for example, a bilingual program has started recently as a joint initiative between the British Council and local authorities and it brings five hours of English per week for students or a fully bilingual education (Comunidad de Madrid, 2023, online).

Books that are used to teach English in primary schools vary widely. *Incredible English* by Oxford University Press is one of the most popular, together with *Life Adventures* by

Cambridge Press and *Time Travellers* by Milton Editions. They are all books, written by native English authors and published by UK publishers.

Modern Spanish teachers in English in primary schools use both traditional and modern methods to make their pupils master the language. The lessons there are usually an exciting combination of textbook texts to read and discuss, activities book exercises for writing and listening, and plenty of innovation. Digital technologies are quite spread and often cartoons and entertaining videos, as well as authentic texts from articles and English classics available online are used as part of the lessons.

3.2. AN OVERVIEW OF BULGARIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM. ENGLISH AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS: TEACHING METHODOLOGY AND BOOKS SYSTEMS

The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria defines the universal right and access to education within the public national education system (Parliament. bg, 2023, online). The main law that regulates the education system of the Republic of Bulgaria is The law on preschool and school education (Mon. bg, 2023, online). Apart from that, there exists a category of documents called “State educational standards” that gives on each subject for each school year what has to be mastered as theoretical knowledge and practical skills. This is done to ensure that all the schools in the country can prepare their pupils to the same level in every subject, providing them with the same knowledge and skills (Mon. bg, 2023, online). The institution that is responsible for the national education policy is the Ministry of Education and Science. At the regional level, the Regional Inspectorates on Education are entitled to ensure that every school in Bulgaria complies with the law and the relevant standards for each subject for each grade.

Bulgarian primary education system is – unlike the Spanish one – a system where the educational powers are attributed only to the national Ministry of Education and Science and it determines the budgets of the schools per number of students enrolled there in each class and grade: as much people study in a school, as bigger is its budget (Eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2023, online). Primary education there – the same as in Spain – is organized in public and publicly-funded private schools and foreign language is mandatory in primary education. It is a single-structure primary education cycle and the percentage of hours dedicated to foreign languages varies per class: just 7 % in 2nd grade, 9 % in 3rd grade, and 23% in 4th grade (Eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2023,

online), so – unlike in Spain – in Bulgaria the time spent on foreign languages teaching grows around 2,5 times between 3rd and 4th grades as a percentage.

Teaching methodology in primary education is again based on a law in its principles, and it is the law on preschool and school education (Mon. bg, 2023, online). In Bulgaria, the focus is on educational inclusion, acquiring skills in reading, comprehension, oral and written expression, audiovisual and digital competencies, developing creativity, and engaging in various projects, but – unlike in Spain, for foreign languages teaching – the use of Bulgarian language is not determined, either as a support language or in another form, so teachers are left alone to choose how much of it they can use. The supervision of textbooks used is done by the Ministry of Education and Science, and school inspections are run by the Regional Directorates experts who are part of the Ministry itself (Eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2023, online).

Assessment is done again according to pre-set criteria of the State educational standards and the teacher can choose the techniques and instruments on how to perform them, same as in Spain. Again, there are two types of assessments: a formative that aims to show how each student progresses in their knowledge and skills development and a summative one that is carried out at the end of the primary education cycle (just one, unlike in Spain where two summative assessments are carried) (Eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu, 2023, online).

In Bulgaria, there are 22,709 teachers and 232,549 students enrolled in primary education, according to the National Statistical Institute's data (Nsi. bg, 2023, online). According to the Institute, 83.7% of primary school children study a foreign language and 91.9 percent of them study English. Again like in the Spanish case, regarding qualifications as degrees and certifications earned that English language teachers in primary education in Bulgaria possess, there is no data on a national scale.

The local education system schedules English classes from second grade. In Bulgaria, primary education is for four years, from first to fourth grade, starting usually at 6 or 7 years and finishing at 10 or 11, but English teaching continues later in secondary school, as well, and in all high schools, so until the end of the lyceum or high school, pupils can learn English, totally for 12 years.

Bulgarian teachers in English in primary school have to compile and follow the instructions given by the State educational standards primary schools framework on English as a foreign language for second grade, third grade, and fourth grade. They have the choice to choose the language workbooks and textbooks they want and the English teaching is fixed at 64 hours per school year for second grade, 96 hours for third grade, and 102 hours for fourth grade.

According to the State educational standard for third grade, students should have each term at least three evaluation marks on their work in class, one mark on homework, and one mark on project work. For fourth grade, the teacher should put per term at least three evaluation marks on every student's work in class, one mark on their homework, one mark on a term assessment, and one mark on project work. However, the biggest concern of modern English teachers in Bulgaria is that the current State educational standards on English as a foreign language do not mention that at least the A1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is covered.

Most Bulgarian schools use authentic workbooks and textbooks in English, usually editions of Longman, Cambridge, or Oxford University Press. However, many Bulgarian publishing houses offer workbooks and textbooks written by Bulgarian linguists, so the teachers can choose them, as well. Although these Bulgarian authors are considered great professionals, most Bulgarian teachers prefer to trust workbooks and textbooks written by native authors or by mixed collectives with at least one native English author and published by reputable brands such as Oxford University Press or Cambridge. Some of the popular systems of Oxford University Press here are *Insight Bulgaria*, *English Plus*, *First Explorers*, *Solutions Bulgaria* and the *HELLO!* series of the biggest Bulgarian publishing house *Prosveta*.

As a methodology, most Bulgarian schools rely on mixed methods in English language teaching at primary schools, using both traditional and new methods. Usually, teachers follow the lessons as tailored in the workbook and textbook, varying reading, speaking, writing, and listening activities, but also sometimes they “break” the traditional frames by making pupils watch and discuss short cartoons or videos on the net, reading simple newspaper articles from the online UK and US press, etc. And of course, many modern Bulgarian teachers make a common Viber group or email address for all the students of

the class where they send further educational resources such as interesting exercises for homework online tests to be done, and even simple songs or videos to both learn and enjoy in the spare time of the kids.

As seen from the brief description of the two primary educational systems, the two countries – Bulgaria and Spain – although both EU member states differ quite much. Including in foreign languages studying by pupils, but also in English teaching as a percentage of students have been taught, and also as number of hours dedicated, less as methodologies and techniques used by the teachers. So, indeed the main differences are due to the national educational policies that each country has adopted, not so much concerning the teachers' competencies and skills.

On the other hand, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) has already set the level of English proficiency that has to be covered during school education. So, here comes an interesting collision – on one side, the EU countries, including Bulgaria and Spain, must align the educational standards to CEFRL, while often having quite different national educational policies and frameworks and the example of the two countries discussed reveals it. So, can an English teaching educational “homogeneity” be achieved while such big differences exist at the Union level? It is a question whose answer can be revealed by comparing how well different countries perform in English proficiency in the research part of the dissertation.

3.3. STATISTICS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF SPANISH AND BULGARIAN STUDENTS IN ENGLISH AT INTERNATIONAL SCALE

The English Proficiency Index (EPI) Report of Education First investigates how and where English proficiency is developing around the world. To create the 2022 edition of the Report, Education First analyzes the results of 2.1 million people who took the EF SET and other English tests in 2021. The EF SET tests include only listening and reading evaluation and the tasks are tailored for non-native speakers from absolute beginners to advanced people. Apart from the results from the EF SET tests, here are aggregated results from the IELTS, TOEFL, and TOFIC tests, done in EF locations that are licensed to hold them. So, it is a great database, maybe the biggest aggregated globally, that is based solely on test results and not on the widespread methods for self-evaluation polls that participants do for themselves.

In this context must be underlined that institutions that conduct statistical research on English skills globally or regionally use as a base just self-evaluation of the participants on how they evaluate themselves and their linguistic skills. It is an approach adopted even by Eurostat; so, it is a real challenge to find institutions that do their international statistics on English skills through tests, and that is why Education First stands as such from the crowd, as being able to aggregate results based on several millions of tests yearly.

The performance of Spanish and Bulgarian participants in English is illustrated by the English Proficiency Index (EPI). The absolute champion is the Netherlands, ranked 1st. Austria follows next as an EU country, classed 3rd globally. Norway and Denmark come as 4th and 5th in the world. According to these statistics, Bulgarian students are ranked 21st globally. The Spanish students are ranked 33rd globally.

3.4. ANALYSIS OF STATISTICS ON PERFORMANCE VERSUS TEACHING METHODOLOGY

As seen from statistics, Bulgarian and Spanish students' English skills are evaluated as fewer compared to the ones of many other EU countries where English is also not the mother tongue of the population. Netherlands is ranked 1st, second comes Austria, followed by Norway and Denmark. But Netherlands – although it has a great primary education system, it is also hard to say that it can be regarded impartially as a champion. It is because the Dutch language is the closest European language to English, so basically it gives a big advantage to the Dutch kids in mastering English, an advantage at a native level that unfortunately Bulgarian and Spanish kids can't enjoy.

On another side, Austria – ranked 2nd, and the Nordic countries – ranked 4th and 5th, can't enjoy the competitive advantage of the Dutch, as their mother tongues are not so close to English. Such considerable differences between EU countries are nothing but alarming and they clearly show that – unfortunately – English proficiency strongly depends on in which country the student is enrolled. So, here indeed the education system plays the biggest role in turning local kids into confident English speakers: a fact that justifies why Austria and the Nordic countries can serve as references for Bulgaria and Spain.

The first aspect being reason for e. g. Austria's better performance is indeed the fact that English teaching starts in first grade and during the end of the second grade, pupils must get 32 hours. In third grade, they already have at least one hour per week scheduled (Maurer, 2020, online). In Norway, the picture is pretty same, as they also start teaching English from first grade (LifeinNorway.com, 2022). In Denmark usually schools start teaching English from first grade, except for several municipalities that introduce it in second grade (Lifeindenmark.borger.dk, 2022). In contrast, in Bulgaria, it starts in second grade (Mon. bg, 2023), so the first year is lost. In Spain, it starts from the first year of primary school. It implies that regarding the time English language education does start, Spain needn't make any changes, while Bulgaria could make it starting from first grade.

The second aspect is indeed related to the teaching practices. According to researchers, Nordics are very far ahead in the use of digital technologies at schools, so this approach gives them free access at any time and from any point where the internet is available to authentic language resources. So, usually, English lessons there are rich in visual and audio content. No matter if it refers to short UK or US movies or TV emissions series that Nordic kids can watch and discuss during the lessons. Or if it refers to free language tests and practice materials that they can do directly from their tablets. Most of these activities are of course possible thanks to the approach to using tablets at school instead of workbooks and textbooks; traditional paper textbooks in countries like Norway and Denmark are very limited at school and most of the lessons and activities are held primarily digitally (Airey and co, 2017, p. 6).

Finally, a third aspect that justifies why the three mentioned countries are ahead in Europe in English language skills of the children, is the practice there to intensively run initiatives for language exchange for teachers. Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research runs a widespread program, in this context, entitled "Teaching Worldwide", that allows language and science teachers to travel and exchange expertise in the UK and across the EU (Oead. at, 2023). In the Nordic countries, an inter-parliamentary institution called the Nordic Council and its affiliates run various activities whose aim is to bring native English teachers to Nordic schools and also to send local teachers to master the language for shorter or longer stays in the USA, UK or Australia (Norden. org, 2023, online).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES

In conclusion, it can be reiterated that both Spain and Bulgaria have very successful educational systems that allow great freedom to teachers regarding the choice of how to teach the English language at primary schools. So, the normative framework does not need changes. What matters more here is to provide teachers mostly with authentic resources that can allow them to use these resources freely and vastly to provide the students with access and opportunities to practice modern English to a maximum extent.

The examples of countries cited that perform better in English according to the measurements of EF EPI seem to vastly apply teaching strategies and techniques within their educational systems that allow students to have a strong and regular touch to authentic English materials. Bulgaria, ranked 21st and Spain, ranking 33rd, are unfortunately left far behind countries like Austria (ranking 3rd), Norway (ranking 4th), or Denmark (ranking 5th) where the population is also not native in English, so it is taught as a foreign language.

Based on the results, the research can make several recommendations to be implemented within the Spanish and Bulgarian educational systems at primary schools. potentially raise the level of English skills of pupils:

1) Starting English education from first grade, a recommendation targeted specifically to Bulgaria, as currently the first year of education is practically lost for English. It was a highly contentious subject for years in Bulgaria, to start or not learning English from first grade where two basic points of view collided. The first one, supported mostly by some nationalistic spirit, advocated that starting to learn a foreign language at the same time as their mother tongue is unacceptable, as children should first master their mother tongue. The second one advocated for starting to learn English from first grade, as children have a good capacity to master even two languages at the same time, and this point of view was supported by the fact that many children who have a foreign parent, have no problem to speak both the local language and a foreign one.

Although the nationalistic point of view prevailed and English teaching was scheduled for second grade in the national educational system, the actual research reveals certainly that Bulgaria is surpassed by many other EU countries where English is taught from first grade. So, maybe it is time to revise the current policy. It is also justified by the fact

that starting learning a foreign language at an early age is often easier and more productive than starting at a later one, as children are more open to acquiring new information, a fact proved by multiple researches, as well (Ghasemi and Hashemi, 2011, p. 875).

2) Possibly increasing the hours of English in Spain as well, during primary school. In this sense of thoughts must be cited the good example set by the Community of Madrid that undertook, recently, education in English amounting to 5 hours per week for students.

Although the country has an outstanding tradition of academic freedom for its regions, it is probably not the best option when it comes to foreign language teaching schedules. English is the most spoken language in the developed world; so, not providing pupils in some regions with the chance to learn it more intensively compared to other regions means diminishing their chances in the future to get the maximum of their presence at the global labor and entrepreneurship market. That is why more regions may be worth considering Madrid's example and taking it on their own, especially as institutions like the British Council and relevant analogs from the USA's Department of Education may help a lot in undertaking a major reform in Spain aiming to increase English teaching at local schools. Not mentioned here the big advantage for Spain is that the USA themselves have a huge Spanish-speaking population, so many practices and resources may be successfully shared between the two countries and that is why it is certainly a path worth taking on.

3) Using mostly authentic resources in the language, a recommendation both valid for the two countries. Both two countries use workbooks and textbooks written by native English authors and it is the right approach; however, it may be insufficient to rely just on the books from the curriculum. Theorists are almost unanimous in their suggestions that as much as children are exposed to authentic materials in a foreign language, as faster they master it. So, using for primary graders free resources from reputable channels and websites such as the ones of the British Council, Longman, Oxford University Press, or even short cartoons from the UK and US YouTube cartoon channels can always be a good enhancement, that the teacher can provide their pupils for free and any time. And if the government cannot provide pupils with a tablet or a laptop for everyone whose family can't afford to buy one, it indeed can provide every

school with several laptops and projectors, plus paid internet. So that English teachers in Bulgaria and Spain can take the good practices proven so efficient in language teaching in the Nordic countries.

4) More intensive language exchange initiatives for teachers between, one side, Bulgaria or Spain, and, another side, an English-speaking country, such as the United Kingdom, United States, or Australia. In all cases, this is an approach practiced vastly in Nordic countries and Austria and it seems to give results in the schools thereby providing local pupils with the opportunities to usually learn either from native English people or from people who already had the chance to live in an authentic English-speaking ambiance. Nordic countries such as Norway and Denmark seem to have and purposely continue to vastly apply the practice to invite native English speakers to teach English at Nordic countries' schools and to send local teachers through bilateral programs to English-speaking countries.

Apart from it, a very basic recommendation can be addressed toward institutions of the European Union as well, notably toward the Directorate-General on Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (DG EAC) which is responsible for tailoring the educational policy at the European Union level. The DG EAC may try to gather and prepare statistics on English skills in each European Union country so that there can be a basis for comparison between the countries each other on the performance of their primary school systems in teaching English to pupils.

As seen from the dissertation, there is not only a lack of statistics on the results that Bulgarian and Spanish students score in English in primary grades, but also no statistics available on the qualifications as degrees and certifications earned by their teachers. So, the data gathering problems here are several; but, regarding the main research object and aims, let's outline the problem of lack of statistics for EU countries on a national level and for all just for the results on the students through the summative assessments, at least.

Such statistics can be gathered by using the results that every school at the national level scores in mid-term or yearly tests in English for each grade at primary cycle and after aggregating these results for the whole country, thus being performed for every member state or at least statistics on the summative assessments, for countries that e.g. are unable to gather more detailed ones. Potentially, such statistics would be quite helpful

in identifying the countries that perform best and in taking their best practices to be used across the European Union, so that no country is left behind and as a way for increasing the future global economic, political, and cultural power of the EU through it is already grown-up proficient English speakers.

Such statistics do not impact the principle that educational policies in each member state are of ultimate reach of national authorities nor will represent a Brussels' intervention in the work of these authorities. This data may just be used as a great foundation for identifying which educational systems in the EU perform best. So, their practices and methods are to be shared with the other member states whose results are not so bright to help them. Information exchange and the sharing of good practices between member countries is a leading principle of the Union; why not use it for the future of education as well?

If common policies for gathering statistics on English proficiency in primary school and, potentially, later in secondary school and colleges are not introduced, it will probably never be possible to achieve a homogenous level of English proficiency across the countries. If this is not done, personal English proficiency will continue to strongly depend on where the student is enrolled at school across the Union, which is a big waste of opportunities for European youth and a constraint on its development.

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