

Teaching EFL to Young Learners in Vulnerable Settings: from the Results to the SWIRL Planning Guide

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Abstract: English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching is an increasingly serious challenge for language teachers in disadvantaged socio-educational backgrounds. Thus, we propose the SWIRL planning guide (Speak-Write-Interact-Read-Listen) for the Pre-A1 and A1 levels of language command as a helpful resource. We developed this proposal with a qualitative appraisal supported by a quantitative value to illustrate the ideal dedication to each communication skill. Validation was carried out through five prospective longitudinal case studies conducted through a descriptive observational methodology in schools with students in a situation of socio-educational vulnerability. The findings obtained in communication skills' dedication led us to draw conclusions and implications regarding policies, and the need to focus lesson planning on the development of oral comprehension in this type of educational settings.

Keywords: EFL; language acquisition; planning guide; vulnerable settings.

ES Enseñanza de ILE en las primeras edades en contextos vulnerables: resultados para la planificación con el instrumento HIELO

Resumen: La enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) supone un gran desafío para los especialistas que ejercen su docencia en entornos socialmente desfavorecidos. Ante esta problemática, proponemos una guía para la planificación –HIELO (Hablar-Interactuar-Escribir-Leer-Oír)– en los niveles referenciales Pre-A1 y A1 de dominio del idioma, como un recurso útil que ilustra cualitativa y cuantitativamente la dedicación que debería otorgarse al desarrollo de cada destreza comunicativa. Para validar nuestra propuesta, se han realizado cinco estudios de caso longitudinales prospectivos a través de una metodología observacional descriptiva, aplicada en centros educativos con alumnado en situación de vulnerabilidad socioeducativa. Se obtienen resultados sobre la dedicación de las destrezas comunicativas en estos contextos vulnerables que permiten extraer conclusiones relativas a las políticas educativas para la enseñanza de ILE, y a la necesidad de focalizar las planificaciones docentes en el desarrollo de la comprensión oral.

Palabras clave: ILE; adquisición de la lengua; instrumento de planificación; contextos vulnerables.

FR L'Enseignement de l'ALE pour la petite enfance dans des contextes vulnérables: résultat pour la planification avec l'instrument PIELE

Résumé : L'enseignement de l'anglais comme langue étrangère (ALE) représente un grand défi pour les spécialistes qui enseignent dans des environnements socialement défavorisés. Par rapport à cette problématique, nous proposons un guide de planification –PIELE (Parler-Interagir-Écrire-Lire-Écouter)– aux niveaux de référence préalable-A1 et A1 du niveau de langue, comme une ressource utile qui illustre qualitativement et quantitativement le dévouement qu'on devrait octroyer au développement de chaque compétence communicative. Pour valider notre proposition, cinq études de cas longitudinales prospectives ont été réalisées à travers une méthodologie d'observation descriptive, appliquée dans des centres éducatifs avec des élèves en situation de vulnérabilité socio-éducative. Des résultats sont obtenus sur la valorisation des compétences communicatives dans ces contextes vulnérables, ce qui nous permet de conclure sur les politiques éducatives pour l'enseignement de l'ALE, et sur le besoin d'orienter les planifications d'enseignement sur le développement de la compréhension orale.

Mots-clés : ALE ; acquisition du langage instrument de planification ; contextes vulnérables.

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Declaración de contribución de autoría

Para la firma del artículo, se ha optado por la categoría "Equal contribution" norm (EC). Según la taxonomía CRediT, ambos autores se han encargado de la conceptualización, la investigación, la metodología, la visualización y la redacción.

1. Introduction

There exists an increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in society at present, strongly marked by the plurality and coexistence of some ethnic communities with others. Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda (2015) stressed that education institutions should "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (p. 9). Therefore, teaching professionals are urged to consider this diversity and develop appropriate practices in schools and, a fortiori, in vulnerable settings.

As trainers of future English teachers in primary education, we found the characteristics of vulnerable settings to be challenging. Learners in situations of social vulnerability are highly detached from the compulsory education system and, thus, potential lifelong learning opportunities are drastically reduced for them. Larsen-Freeman's (2018) view of current language teaching is meaningful for this study since it "is for students to confront their own monolingual biases and to understand the many pragmatic and humanitarian benefits of language learning" (p. 61). Strikingly, the educational attention given to vulnerable students from some national and regional education policies does not focus widely on the development of foreign language communication skills. Apparently, it does not pay enough attention to the fact that multilingual competences (European Commission, 2019) contribute to fostering linguistic competences. In this sense, the Annex of the Council Recommendation 2018/C 189/01 (Official Journal of the European Union, 2018) sets out 1. Literacy competences and 2. Multilingual competences as key competences; and both overlap and interlock with each other.

To develop these competences, focus may well be placed on foreign language acquisition theories (Krashen, 2003, 2009; Markee, 1997; Mason, 2003) from initial teacher training. In so doing, engaging primary students considered to be vulnerable in EFL and pushing their learning pace is deemed to be a greater feat.

2. Young learners' foreign language acquisition

In teaching languages to young learners as part of our research object, the theoretical and conceptual referents lead us to discuss language acquisition rather than learning foreign languages. Thus, we call upon the use of the classical dichotomy revisited in Krashen (2009) who stated in his Natural Approach theory that a foreign language is acquired through a process similar to how the mother tongue is. Therefore, we assume the hypotheses he poses, emphasising, for those young learners that concern us, three of them: the acquisition-learning hypothesis; the input hypothesis; and the affective filter hypothesis.

The acquisition-learning hypothesis, focused on acquisition, involves a subconscious process by which the student uses language to communicate. The input hypothesis has been selected because input offered in quantity and quality and contextualised greatly favours the acquisition of the language. Finally, the affective filter hypothesis, as a "psychological barrier" in interdependence with emotional factors, must be kept as low as possible to ensure a successful acquisition. In this sense, we can assume that a relaxed classroom atmosphere (CA) will contribute to the student easily acquiring the foreign language.

These assumptions seem to be contrary to Swain's (2000) output hypothesis, stressing the importance of production and interaction activities through a process of negotiation to learn a foreign language. In fact, these are not conflicting hypotheses, as "the possibility" of free production might emerge naturally. However, the input hypothesis advises us of the harm of planning activities for students to produce when children do not feel ready to accomplish such a task (Markee, 1997; Patrick, 2019).

This leads us to stress that, at early ages, speaking and writing should not be included as part of the syllabi; instead, these should be allowed to freely emerge. Besides, comprehensible-input based methods (CIM) should be developed (Krashen, 2003; Mason, 2003) together with an age-adapted teaching style (Tuyet, 2020) to improve the quality of the foreign language acquisition process. By the same token, there are numerous studies that confirm that we can start developing language and literacy competence without any language production at all (Boyd & Goldberg, 2009; Ellis, 2005; Hounhanou, 2020; Lee, 2018; Yavuz & Celik, 2017). These scholars argue that language and literacy competence is related to input, predicting that speaking and writing skills are the result of obtaining comprehensible input. These authors agree that the skills planned (SK) by teachers should focus on input –listening and reading– skills at the first stage of acquiring a foreign language (the *pre-production* period). This idea was later endorsed by Krashen (2009), who stressed

that “the best way, and perhaps the only way, to teach speaking [...] is simply to provide comprehensible input [...] Production ability emerges. It is not taught directly” (p. 22).

In this respect, Edelenbos et al. (2006) list “comprehension precedes production” as the first pedagogical principle for the teaching of a foreign language to very young learners in their pre-production period, releasing the same premises and urging teachers to focus on reception/input skills before introducing the production/output skills. These scholars manifest that the pre-production period will, of course, vary depending on the amount and quality of input provided to children.

Despite those who find reluctances in focusing on certain skills, what nearly all theorists have shared for decades is that the main objective of language acquisition is the development of communicative competence (Brown, 2014; Cantón Mayo & Pérez Barrioluengo, 2017; Richards, 2006; Van Tuan, 2017). As Garcés Rodríguez (2019) points out, communicative competence “can be oral, written or even non-verbal” (p. 339), an argument that helps us verify if here exists the development of communicative competences with appropriate non-verbal responses from students, which is truly convenient when referring to young learners. In sum, students’ participation (SP) in the learning process with non-verbal responses is, of course, evidence that communicative competences are being developed. Therefore, to start the development of young learners’ communicative competences, teachers should plan according to what Krashen & Mason (2020) refer to as the optimal input hypothesis, which implies that apart from being comprehensible, input should be compelling, rich and abundant.

2.1. Pre-A1 and A1 Referential Levels of Language Command: Official Guidelines

Language learning, teaching and assessment are popularly guided by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001, 2020) across the European Education Area. For primary students in vulnerable settings with a low level of language command or even in their pre-production period, we can use this referential document selecting the most adequate scales. Therefore, when a student is said to be at a particular level, that student has been acquiring/learning the foreign language for a certain period of time and has achieved some linguistic competence.

To this effect, Gisbert da Cruz (2011), president of the Spanish Association for Bilingual Teaching, presented a proposal of language referential levels (see Table 1) to be reached by the end of primary education in ordinary/non-bilingual schools (the next section presents types of schools). As no data is offered for preschool education, students are supposed to be working at the Pre-A1 level by the time they finish it.

Table 1. Proposal of Language Referential Levels to be Reached by the end of Primary Education

	School year	CEFR Referential levels	
Preschool Education (optional education)	Year 1 (37 hours/year)	Pre-A1 Basic users Pre-beginners (after 111 hours)	Pre-A1.1
	Year 2 (37 hours/year)		Pre-A1.2
	Year 3 (37 hours/year)		Pre-A1.3
Primary Education (compulsory education)	Year 1 (72 hours/year)	A1 Basic users Beginners (after 589 hours)	A1.1
	Year 2 (92 hours/year)		A1.2
	Year 3 (92 hours/year)		A1.3
	Year 4 (111 hours/year)		A1.4
	Year 5 (111 hours/year)	A2.2 Basic users Elementary (after 222 hours)	A2.1
	Year 6 (111 hours/year)		A2.2

Source: Translated and Adapted from Gisbert da Cruz, 2011, for Ordinary Schools

As we can observe, Gisbert da Cruz (2011) affirms students should be working at level A1 when finishing year 4 of primary education; that is, after 589 compulsory hours of instruction in the foreign language. This number of hours is increased by 111 hours if students have attended pre-school, which is extremely common in countries like Spain and Belgium where the teaching of a foreign language begins with 3-year-old children. By contrast, it is not the case in countries like Check Republic or Denmark where foreign language teaching begins with 9-year-old children (Morales Gálvez, 2009).

In the first version of the CEFR, the Pre-A1 level was not even taken into consideration, but in the updated documents (Council of Europe, 2020) it is. Here we present some extracts, in terms of what students can do, for both levels.

In Pre-A1 referential level students:

- Can understand short, very simple questions and statements [...] accompanied by visuals or manual gestures. (p. 48)
- Can recognise everyday familiar words. (p. 48)
- Can recognise numbers, prices, dates and days of the week. (p. 48)
- Can recognise familiar words/signs accompanied by pictures. (p. 54)
- Can produce short phrases about themselves, giving basic personal information. (p. 62)
- Can give basic personal information [...] perhaps with the use of a dictionary. (p. 66)

- Can ask and answer questions about themselves and daily routines. (p. 72)

In A1 referential level students:

- Can follow language which is very slow and carefully articulated [...] (p. 48)
- Can recognise concrete information (e.g., places and times) on familiar topics [...] (p. 48)
- Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time [...] (p. 54)
- Can produce simple mainly isolated phrases about people and places. (p. 62)
- Can give information about matters of personal relevance [...] (p. 66)
- Can interact in a simple way but communication is totally dependent on repetition at a slower rate, rephrasing and repair. (p. 72)
- Can ask for or pass on personal details. (p. 82)

This policy instrument has been designed to homogenise the processes of learning, teaching and evaluating languages in Europe, involving different European education systems (Morales Gálvez, 2009), and making it very difficult to fit all the proposals in all the systems. This is, undoubtedly, a highly useful instrument for adult learners, but it appears to be somewhat removed from acquisition theories for young learners.

Young learners will certainly learn –either in oral and/or in written form– during the lessons when they are ready to do so. In conjunction with the theories of acquisition, teachers can assist this preparation period by simply planning input activities and specifically oral input at the beginning of the learning process.

2.2. EFL in Preschool and Primary Education

Spain is divided into 17 Autonomous Regions, which have their own education competences. In each region, different types of schools can be identified if we consider attention paid to foreign languages. In this section, we focus on the Autonomous Region of Castile and Leon since it has a long-standing monolingual tradition with numerous socio-educational vulnerable settings over its 9 provinces, on which education authorities are enacting several laws. In this region, there are 819 primary schools divided into:

- 402 ordinary or non-bilingual schools (49.2%), with two or three hours per week of EFL.
- 369 bilingual schools (45%), with two or three hours per week of EFL and two or three non-linguistic subjects taught on a foreign language, mainly English.
- 19 schools (2.3%) with an agreement between the British Council and the Spanish Ministry of Education, with around 60% of teaching hours taught in English and two or three hours per week of EFL.
- 29 schools named 2030 (3.5%), with vulnerable students, with two or three hours per week of EFL.

In September 2018, with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 in mind, the regional government of Castile and Leon launched Program 2030 for schools with students belonging to vulnerable education settings. Several schools were contacted by the educational administration and were informed that they could take part in the programme due to their characteristics, as quoted in Order EDU/939/2018:

- More than 30 percent of its students in a vulnerable socio-educational situation.
- More than 30 percent of its students with specific needs for educational support.
- School located in a vulnerable environment according to the information provided by local entities.
- School presenting difficulties of school coexistence, in accordance with the data in the competent education department.
- Percentage of school results below the average for Castile and Leon.

In the capital of the region, seven schools –onwards called Schools 2030– gave account of the aforementioned characteristics: 99% of Romani students in vulnerable neighbourhoods, difficulties of coexistence and low school results. These schools joined the programme, thus allowing them to carry out the necessary measures to adapt to the needs of each one of the students; offering flexibility towards the organisation of groups and students; hours dedicated to each subject; and evaluation of the students, establishing references to determine individualised progress. These measures are intended to significantly contribute to improving students' learning outcomes, which are regulated in the following two decrees.

Preschool education comprises three years –from three to six-year-old children. This stage requirements are stated in Decree 37/2022 of December 29, which establishes the curriculum for the second cycle of preschool education in the Autonomous Region of Castile and Leon, and it is divided into three areas. Area III, entitled Communication and reality representation, establishes the specific competences, assessment criteria, and contents related to the teaching and learning of foreign languages. In order to awake the plurilingual competence, contact with different languages and cultures begins by fostering appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity. The Preschool EFL specific competences –in which the Pre-A1 linguistic referential level will supposedly be obtained– state that students should:

- Express interest in interacting in everyday situations through the exploration and use of their communicative repertoire, to express their needs and intentions [...] (p. 48286).
- Interpret and understand messages and representations [...] (p. 48286).

- Produce messages [...] using different languages, [...] (p. 48287).
- Participate [...] in activities related to written texts [...] (p. 48287).
- Value the linguistic diversity present in the environment [...] to enrich students' communication strategies and cultural background (p. 48288).

Primary education requirements are stated in Decree 38/2022, of September 29, which establishes the curriculum and regulates the implementation, evaluation, and development of primary education in the Autonomous Region of Castile and Leon. It is divided into six school years and gives an account of specific competences, assessment criteria and contents to be developed each year. Some of the Primary EFL assessment criteria (year 4) –in which the A1 linguistic referential level will supposedly be obtained– state that students should:

- Recognize and interpret the global meaning and essential information [...] (p. 48705).
- Orally express short phrases and short texts [...] (p. 48705).
- Write very short and simple texts [...] (p. 48705).
- Participate in brief interactive situations showing empathy and respect for linguistic courtesy [...] (p. 48705).
- Interpret and explain texts [...] (p. 48706).
- Compare and contrast the similarities and differences between different languages, [...] (p. 48706).
- Act with respect in intercultural situations [...] (p. 48706).

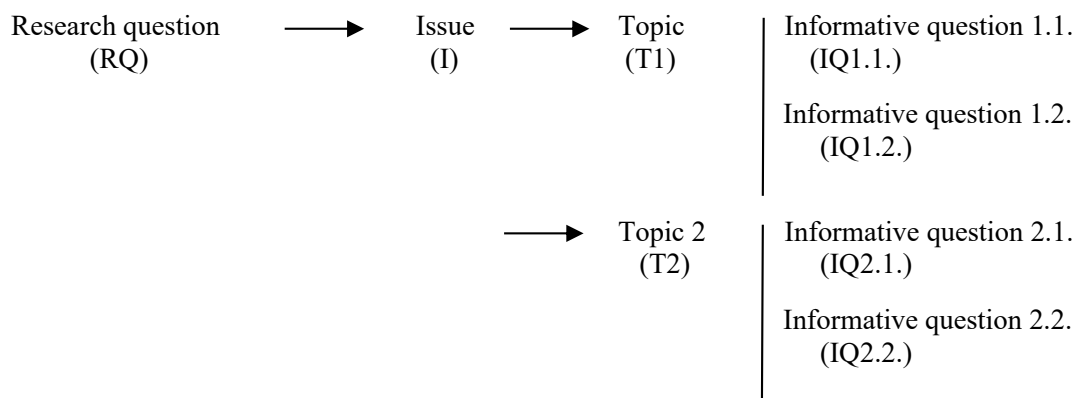
As we can observe in the actions proposed, these decrees prescribe, to a certain extent, what is proposed in the CEFR. Nevertheless, since they are comprised specifically for young learners, they are closer to language acquisition theories focusing largely on input skills.

In order to support the theoretical constructs from the literature, we conducted a study in vulnerable settings to provide empirical findings regarding the dedication to each communication skill of EFL in the first levels of schooling. Thus, our purpose is to provide a teaching guide based on the findings obtained in those settings.

3. Research methodology

This study is interpretive in nature (Noon, 2018; O'Donoghue, 2018) since five prospective longitudinal case studies have been conducted gathering qualitative evidence through a descriptive observational methodology (Bryant et al., 2017). In *Figure 1*, the research process outline is presented.

Figure 1. Schemata of the Qualitative Research Process Followed



Source: own elaboration

The research question (RQ) explored in this study is:

- What orientation does EFL acquisition, and the development of communicative competence received in early years have in vulnerable settings?

This RQ led us to identify the following issue (I):

- Do teachers in the first levels of schooling in vulnerable settings plan according to the precepts of EFL acquisition?

This RQ and the issue led us to determine two specific topics (T):

- T1. Which communication skills are mobilised at early ages in vulnerable settings? Do they contribute to improve the students' EFL acquisition process?
- T2. What value should be attributed in the planning of teaching at each communication skill for Pre-A1 and A1 reference levels? Is a skill-planning guide required?

On a last and more specific level, we assume two informative questions (IQ) per topic, as follows:

- IQ1.1. Are the skills (SK) clearly planned and connected to a specific methodology?
- IQ1.2. Are the skills (SK) clearly planned and associated with a better classroom atmosphere (CA) and a higher students' participation (SP)?
- IQ2.1. Which planned skills (SK) do we observe contribute to improve the students' EFL acquisition?
- IQ2.2. Do teachers think that a planning guide showing the qualitative appraisal and percentage of each communication skill for the target levels would contribute to improve their teaching in vulnerable settings?

3.1. Participants

The sample was selected following these criteria in the provided order:

- a) Primary Schools 2030, since these are the target type of school.
- b) School availability and accessibility, since the school principals had to decide whether to participate or not.
- c) The possibility of observing a year 4 class, since this is the target year.
- d) Low levels of absenteeism, in order to take advantage of the largest number of students.

Finally, the study was conducted in 5 out of 7 Schools 2030 in Valladolid in 2023, the capital of the region. In particular, five groups in year 4 were observed for three months, with 24 girls and 27 boys in total. All were aged 9-10 and presented a low-medium degree of absenteeism. As further detailed, the number of teachers observed and interviewed was five and the overall observation period was 8 hours per teacher which amounts to 40 hours in total.

3.2. Instruments for data collection

The techniques employed to collect data were observation (Arias-Pujol & Anguera, 2017) and personal interviews with teachers (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Ten researchers, sorted into pairs, systematically observed eight lessons in each participating School 2030 during the second semester of 2022-2023. Researchers, for the sake of systematisation, used a functional multidimensional purpose-designed observation grid based on the theoretical framework (Sánchez-Algarra & Anguera, 2013) previously negotiated, elaborated and validated by three external experts. These qualified academic experts had to confirm if the ad-hoc grid responded to the concepts of clarity, coherence, relevance and sufficiency to obtain significant data for our RQ, issue and topics. Experts agreed with the adequacy of the dimensions and categories proposed.

Each researcher completed an observation grid per lesson –a total of ten grids– and then the two observants of the same classroom shared their records and agreed on a common grid per school. Minimum discrepancies were resolved by consensus (Arias-Pujol & Anguera, 2017).

A personal unstructured interview was used to gain insights into teachers' perceptions, understandings and experiences (Corbin & Morse, 2003), as well as to reinforce empirical evidence in conjunction with the observation. It was conducted to confirm (or not) the findings from the observation period and to obtain views on how teachers' planning guides showing the appropriate skill dedication in the classroom could contribute to facilitating the teachers' teaching practices.

4. Analysis of data

The analysis of data (see Table 2) was guided by a data condensation process (Miles et al., 2013), and categorised under four main thematic dimensions (Lapadat, 2010): 1) Skills planned (SK); 2) Comprehensible-input based methods (CIM); 3) Students' participation (SP); and 4) Classroom atmosphere (CA). In particular:

- The skills planned (SK), according to the amount of time devoted to each communication skill in the classroom.
- The comprehensible-input based methods (CIM), according to common types of linguistic (language learning) and communicative (language acquisition) activities.
- The students' participation (SP), according to a Likert unipolar scale, which comprises: Null – Not very high – High – Very High.
- The classroom atmosphere (CA), according to two indicators: positive/negative reinforcement and relaxed/disturbance mood.

The personal interviews with the School 2030 teachers were fruitful in that they were able to verify that the data collected were adjusted to the reality of their planning. We can say that most of the teachers admitted being very lost in their first months of work at this kind of schools and they recognised that a planning guide referring to the skills dedication would have been a useful resource to start. A brief sample of the most relevant teacher statements is presented in the following tables.

Table 2. The Recording of data Analysis according to Thematic Dimensions

	Skills planned (SK)	Comprehensible-input based methods (CIM)	Students' participation (SP)	Classroom atmosphere (CA)
Class A 10 students	Speaking: 0% Writing: 0% Interaction: 0% Reading: 0% Listening: 100%	Total Physical Response (TPR) Story listening. Games.	Very high. They answer in a non-verbal way.	Positive reinforcement. Relaxed mood.
Class B 12 students	Speaking: 0% Writing: 50% Interaction: 0% Reading: 25% Listening: 25%	No CIM. Grammar-translation. Exercises from the textbook.	Not very high. Just 2 students try to participate in the classroom dynamics.	Negative reinforcement. Disturbance mood.
Class C 7 students	Speaking: 0% Writing: 20% Interaction: 0% Reading: 0% Listening: 80%	TPR. Whiteboard games.	High. Absent-minded when filling the copy.	Positive reinforcement. Relaxed mood.
Class D 13 students	Speaking: 0% Writing: 0% Interaction: 0% Reading: 0% Listening: 100%	Task-based approach. TPR. Songs, games.	Very high. They answer in a non-verbal way.	Positive reinforcement. Relaxed mood.
Class E 9 students	Speaking: 5% Writing: 35% Interaction: 0% Reading: 30% Listening: 30%	No CIM. Grammar-translation. Exercises from the textbook. Filling the gaps.	Null. They continually interrupt the teacher.	Negative reinforcement. Disturbance mood.

Source: own elaboration

Teacher 1 [T1] (see Table 3) shows a very positive attitude towards students' capacities. She always plans listening activities, as they have shown to attain better results and create a nice atmosphere in the classroom.

Table 3. Analytic recording of observation and teacher interview: Class A

Class A		
Thematic dimension	Observation	Interview recording [T1]
SK	Listening (100 %)	"It is very, very difficult to teach English to these children when their interest is zero, but it is possible. All in all, they are children, and if we make the classes enjoyable and they learn a little more each day, the result is wonderful. It took me years to realise it." "The administration is not very helpful. There is a curriculum that must be followed, and they ask you to account for it. Let's see if now with the new things in 2030 we can change something and make our work and bureaucracy more flexible."
CIM	TPR / Story listening	
	Games	
SP	Very high (Non-verbal answers)	
CA	Positive reinforcement	
	Relaxed mood	

Source: own elaboration

Teacher 2 [T2] (see Table 4) shows a resignation mindset, and seems to have to hope in achieving any learning outcomes. She dedicates half of the planning to writing activities focusing on grammar learning and practicing with exercises.

Table 4. Analytic recording of observation and teacher interview: Class B

Class B		
Thematic dimension	Observation	Interview recording [T2]
SK	Writing (50 %) Reading (25 %) Listening (25 %)	"Working in this type of school is exhausting. In addition to very high absenteeism, there is continuous disrespect on the part of the students and even the parents. There are times when you even feel fear." "It doesn't matter how many years they have been in the English class. Their absenteeism, their interest, their parents' interest and their horrible behaviour make them reach the 6th Grade knowing nothing."
CIM	Grammar	
	Exercises	
SP	Not very high (2 students)	
CA	Negative reinforcement	
	Disturbance mood	

Source: own elaboration

Teacher 3 [T3] (see Table 5) seems to be encouraged to plan listening activities, as she is aware of the positive results. In some moments, she decides to introduce any writing activity to sooth students.

Table 5. Analytic recording of observation and teacher interview: Class C

Class C		
Thematic dimension	Observation	Interview recording [T3]
SK	Writing (20 %) Listening (80 %)	“In this type of classrooms, it is very difficult to keep the attention of all the students. I like to speak in English all the time, and it usually works, but some days I need to hand out a worksheet to calm the students down.”
CIM	TPR	
	Whiteboard games	
SP	Mostly high	
CA	Positive reinforcement	
	Relaxed mood	

Source: own elaboration

Teacher 4 [T4] (see Table 6) makes use of dynamic activities mainly focused on listening skills to grasp the students' attention. Although she is conscious of what truly works in the classroom, having had a guide would have helped her to face daily challenges.

Table 6. Analytic recording of observation and teacher interview: Class D

Class D		
Thematic dimension	Observation	Interview recording [T4]
SK	Listening (100 %)	“Of course, a planning guide would have helped a lot, and it will, for the novice and not so novice teachers. I think it can help at least to reflect on what we do.” “It is the biggest challenge of my professional life. It seems incredible that just a few children can make things so difficult, but if you get the hang of it, it ends up working in the end. If they get bored in class, you are lost.”
CIM	TBLT / TPR	
	Songs and games	
SP	Very high (Non-verbal answers)	
CA	Positive reinforcement	
	Relaxed mood	

Source: own elaboration

Teacher 5 [T5] (see Table 7) balances writing, reading and listening activities in her classroom, where the disruptive behaviour of students prevails. For this or other reasons, she does not feel her work very recognised, and seems to be discouraged.

Table 7. Analytic recording of observation and teacher interview: Class E

Class E		
Thematic dimension	Observation	Interview recording [T5]
SK	Speaking (5%) Writing (35 %) Reading (30 %) Listening (30 %)	“I had been teaching for 15 years in other schools and I believed that I would be able to handle the situation without many problems, but sometimes it is very hopeless to see that you make an effort and it is worthless and you give up.”
CIM	Exercises	
	Filling the gaps	
SP	Null	
CA	Negative reinforcement	
	Disturbance mood	

Source: own elaboration

Curiously from Classes A and D are more positive in their reflections, affirming that the students' attitudes make a difference in the learning outcomes.

Both results and the teachers' statements towards a good teaching practice are keys for us to develop a guide for EFL planning at early ages.

5. Results and discussion

This section individually presents the results associated with Topics 1 and 2. On the one hand, the results gathered from the observation (see Table 2) lead us to present descriptive nuances as anticipators of possible inferences. In this sense, we can state that the data obtained are conclusive if we analyse and interpret the results.

5.1. Presentation and interpretation

Listening activities are associated with CIM and, interestingly, a very high degree of planning of listening activities contributes to a relaxed CA. Reading and writing activities are associated with a grammar-translation method and textbooks and, even more interestingly, the planning of reading and writing activities seems to contribute to students' disturbance mood. Thus, we could assume that a very high degree of listening activities leads to a relaxed and positive attitude, which is fundamental in the acquisition of a foreign language. Reading and writing activities should be avoided in order to keep students' attention when they are still at the starting point of their language acquisition process. We can infer, though, that the methods based on understandable comprehensible-input are linked to the listening skill, or vice versa, to contribute to a high EFL acquisition.

Therefore, as observed, analysed and interpreted, School 2030 students in year 4 should be levelled as Pre-A1s, as they can simply perform satisfactorily listening activities. Along this vein, teachers should adjust their planning having in mind, not only the students' academic level marked by general policies and curricular guidelines, but especially considering the real learners' level of communicative competence.

5.2. Discussion

This article deals with foreign language acquisition at early ages in vulnerable education settings. Our study has enabled us to reassert the idea of putting the input hypothesis (Krashen, 2003, 2009) on the front line when teaching EFL to young learners in vulnerable settings. By contrast, results indicate that the focus on speaking and writing skills (output hypothesis; Swain, 2000) should be considered at more advanced education levels such as upper primary and secondary education.

Thus, providing an optimal input (compelling, rich and abundant, according to Krashen & Mason, 2020) will lead the learners to acquire the English language naturally. This entails to a greater extent the planning of oral comprehension activities, allowing the learners to give non-verbal responses while they gradually develop their communicative competences.

Our study also allows us to approach the RQ by providing answers to the issue and associated topics.

With regard to the issue, not all the observed teachers plan on a regular basis according to the precepts of EFL acquisition. Indeed, only 2 out of our 5 targeted teachers planned activities accordingly.

In response to T1, listening, reading and writing are fundamentally the communication skills developed at early ages in vulnerable settings. The three of them combined appear not to contribute to improve the learners' EFL acquisition.

The SK are mostly connected to a specific teaching method (IQ1.1), since we found the intentional development of several communication skills through traditional methods, and the development of the listening skill through comprehensible-input based methods such as TPR or the task-based approach.

Similarly, the SK are clearly associated with the CA and the SP (IQ1.2.). Those cases in which teachers plan only around listening skills obtain clear and positive effects in both SP and CA (see Table 2). On the contrary, those teachers with other communication SK in their syllabi often use negative reinforcement and traditional methods, hence the consequence is mainly learners' disturbed mood in the classroom.

In response to T2, the planned skill that contributes positively to fostering students' EFL acquisition is oral comprehension (listening), as confirmed in IQ2.1. Furthermore, most of the teachers in these kinds of settings have stated the need for a planning guide to improve the EFL teaching and, in turn, students' EFL acquisition (IQ2.2.).

It is fair to add that those teachers who adopt traditional methods seem to disregard the curriculum items devoted to oral comprehension. Since they tend to propose activities mainly based on written communication skills, the EFL acquisition is not fully favoured. By contrast, those teachers who focus primarily on promoting listening skills and base their purposes on students' language command follow official guidelines in a sensible way. In these cases, the result is being successful in terms of EFL acquisition.

6. The SWIRL planning guide

As announced, we are firmly rooted in acquisitionist theories of language, and once the data have been analysed and the results interpreted, we will propose the SWIRL planning guide (Speak-Write-Interact-Read-Listen) for Pre-A1s and A1s. This guide infers a qualitative proposal –in terms of appraisals– and a quantitative proposal –in terms of percentage– which we understand could be a great help for EFL teachers in vulnerable settings.

It will potentially serve to reflect and internalise that not all the students who attend primary education have similar communicative competences in a foreign language. Likewise, the “very young learners” (Edelenbos et al., 2006) expression is not exclusively linked to early childhood education. Therefore, it is considered as a potential useful guide for vulnerable socio-educational settings. Our qualitative proposal for Pre-A1 and A1 students is presented in Table 8.

Taking into consideration the language acquisition tenets, at earlier ages teachers should plan activities that require input understanding (oral at the beginning and written onwards) and output activities should not be planned for young students. As a result, Pre-A1 lessons should just be devoted to listening activities and the reading skill should gradually increase in correspondence with the hours of contact with the foreign language (see Table 1). Our quantitative proposal for Pre-A1 and A1 students is presented in Table 9.

Table 8. SWIRL Planning Guide. Appraisalment for Pre-A1 and A1 Referential Levels

Teacher planning	Pre-A1 level	A1 level
Speaking	<i>Non-applicable</i> The teacher should not plan speaking skills, but only reward oral productions of those students who are able to utter, repeat or answer.	
Writing	<i>Non-applicable</i> The teacher should under no circumstances plan writing activities in the foreign language. This also includes copying and calligraphy activities.	
Interacting	<i>Non-applicable</i> The teacher should only promote pedagogical interaction, regardless of implicit communication.	
Reading	<i>Non-applicable</i> The teacher should not plan activities on reading skills, because this can negatively interfere in the early mother tongue literacy.	The teacher should partially plan some activities to start developing reading skills. Skimming techniques can especially help at the beginning through authentic texts and materials.
Listening	The teacher should plan <i>all the lessons</i> around the development of listening comprehension to promote both extensive and intensive listening skills. Some examples would include storytelling, picture narrating, songs and chants, TPR activities, and so on.	The teacher should plan <i>a broad range of listening activities</i> and tasks. At the beginning of the A1 level, activities should be completely based on listening skills. Afterwards, <i>reading activities can be gradually introduced</i> to a lesser extent.

Source: own elaboration

Table 9. Proposal of Skill Dedication for Pre-A1 and A1 Referential Levels

	School year	Skill dedication	
Preschool Education (optional education)	Year 1 (3-4 years old)	Pre-A1	100% listening
	Year 2 (4-5 years old)		100% listening
	Year 3 (5-6 years old)		100% listening
Primary Education (compulsory education)	Year 1 (6-7 years old)	A1	90% listening 10% reading
	Year 2 (7-8 years old)		80% listening 20% reading
	Year 3 (8-9 years old)		65% listening 35% reading
	Year 4 (9-10 years old)		50% listening 50% reading

Source: own elaboration

This proposal for dedication to each of the communication skills has been raised, very recently, in the General Framework of evaluations of the education system (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2023). This document proposes a diagnostic evaluation for Year 4 of Primary Education, in which students will be evaluated on their level of acquisition of specific skills in a foreign language, among others. Four independent application scenarios are presented, and number 4 exclusively contemplates the evaluation of receptive skills, that is, oral comprehension –listening– and written comprehension –reading– as we propose in our SWIRL planning guide.

7. Conclusions

We can state that the purpose of our study has been fulfilled, since we have identified the classroom dedication to each EFL communication skill in year 4 in vulnerable settings with students considered beginners in terms of language acquisition. Likewise, we have provided a teaching guide considered to be fruitful in the EFL planning for Pre-A1 and A1 reference levels.

We borrow Claxton's metaphor (1984), namely that we should not confuse the map (the curriculum for this case) with the territory (the classroom reality). The curriculum is designed for fairly homogeneous schools

where students progress year after year following common guidelines. However, not all schools present this homogeneity so teachers should learn to relativise these minimum teachings and focus on their students' needs. As for Schools 2030, we cannot deny that the education administration has taken a step forward in their acceptance of this flexibility. This flexibility, at times, instead of a useful mechanism can be seen as an abstract entity that leaves planning in teachers' hands without a guiding instrument to follow. Along this vein, it seemed relevant to us to offer a resource that can help EFL teachers to plan accordingly in vulnerable settings.

In a nutshell, there are several pieces of evidence that must be addressed when we intend to plan the EFL subject matter at early ages in vulnerable settings:

- Oral comprehension in a foreign language turns out to be, on the one hand, the communication skill that brings the greatest benefits, both in the medium and long term, to lower-level students. On the other, and paradoxically, it is the skill that presents the most difficulties and reluctance on the part of teachers due to the high involvement of their planning and teaching performance.
- One of the main problems is the divergence of practical problems and legal provisions. The needs observed in practice lead us to propose a change that begins in the organisation of foreign language objectives in reference levels instead of by years.

This study does not intend to generalise nor produce new theoretical frameworks. In addition, we are convinced that our results and conclusions may well be transposed to other vulnerable settings with similar educational characteristics.

As a line of continuity, the researchers expect to replicate the SWIRL planning guide for A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 reference levels in order to provide a useful and comprehensive resource for EFL teachers in vulnerable settings.

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