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ACQUISITION OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: THE EUROPEAN SITUATION

Autora: Esther Morillo Casas
Tutora: Natalia Barranco Izquierdo

ABSTRACT:

In this paper there is a theoretical review about Language Acquisition. First, there is an approach to language learning. After that, attention is paid to Foreign Language Acquisition in early ages, where references about its benefits, strategies and factors that might influence are made. Furthermore, there is information about specific programmes and tools related to language teaching developed by the Council of Europe.

An analysis of a report written by the European Commission is also made, to have an overview about the current European situation according to language learning. Finally, there is a focus on the Spanish curriculum to establish comparisons with these aspects related to language learning in Europe seen before.

Key words: Foreign language, children, develop, acquisition, Europe.

RESUMEN:

En este documento hay una revisión teórica sobre la Adquisición del Lenguaje. En primer lugar, hay un acercamiento sobre el aprendizaje de idiomas. Después, se presta atención a la Adquisición de Lenguas Extranjeras en edades tempranas, donde se hacen referencias sobre sus beneficios, estrategias y factores que pueden influir en esta adquisición. Además, hay información sobre programas e instrumentos específicos relacionados con la enseñanza de idiomas, desarrollados por el Consejo de Europa.

También se hace un análisis de un informe escrito por la Comisión Europea, para tener una visión general de la situación actual en Europa en relación con el aprendizaje de idiomas. Por último, se hace hincapié en el currículum español para establecer comparaciones con a aspectos relacionados con el aprendizaje de idiomas en Europa vistos anteriormente.

Palabras clave: Lengua extranjera, niños, desarrollo, adquisición, Europa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, we live in a multicultural society, we are constantly in touch with different languages. As humans are social beings, languages are our principal way of interaction, which is developed through verbal and non-verbal communication. That is why languages are so important for us, for communicating and developing successfully in society.

This research is a theoretical review about Language Acquisition. There is a focus on this issue since I am in a formative stage to be a teacher and I consider essential for my training to be aware of the latest theories and models regarding this topic. In this research, we firstly approach to language learning to understand the way children acquire a language. Then, we concentrate in Foreign Language Acquisition in early ages, referring to its benefits, strategies and factors that might influence it.

Attention is paid as well to the Council of Europe, an organism which develops programs and tools related to language teaching.

Finally, there is an analysis of a report written by the European Commission named: 'Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe'. The purpose of this report is to present the current Europe situation according to language learning and we find a deep focus in the Spanish curriculum to establish comparisons with the Europe situation regarding language learning. To have a look at this report gives a wide perspective of how we are developing regarding the process of acquisition of a foreign language.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this paper are:

- Increase knowledge about the processes of teaching and learning foreign languages in the European context.

- Increase knowledge about the processes of teaching and learning foreign languages in the Spanish curriculum.
- Deepen into factors which may influence the foreign language acquisition.
- Draw general conclusions of different aspects related to the treatments of foreign languages in European and Spanish context.

3. JUSTIFICATION

In the process of language acquisition children acquire a sign system which bears important relationships to cognitive and social aspects of their lives. Most language acquisition theories question how language, thought and social interaction interrelate in the child's life. (Hickmann, M., 1986)

First Language Acquisition (onwards, L1A) and Foreign Language Acquisition (onwards, FLA) are two distinct processes that share a number of patterns. According to Herschensohn (2007), linguistic competence can be fostered by two sources: innate genetically transmitted language capacity and social transmitted language particular knowledge. L1A is successful most of the times, while FLA shows variations due to these sources of internal and external factors which take an important role in the language acquisition. Both have a similar acquisition pattern, but some factors make the difference. The age of acquisition is irrelevant for normal L1A, however for FLA the age is not. Furthermore, foreign language students take advantage of their mother tongue language acquisitions skills to acquire the foreign language.

As regards the Council of Europe (2020) there is a growing trend across Europe to begin language learning in early primary or even in kindergarten. Cameron (2001) affirms that teaching languages to young children requires combining the general skills needed for this age group and specific language teaching approaches. The language aspects must be associated with children's cognitive and emotional development as well as their early experiences of learning together in social groups. The social, cultural and political issues around policies of teaching a foreign language, are complex and influence teaching and learning at classroom level.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper gives account about First Language and Foreign Language Acquisition. In the next paragraphs we attend to conceptual and theoretical aspects regarding these two processes.

4.1. Theories towards language development: First Language Acquisition

Hickmann (1986) affirms that during the language acquisition process, children acquire a sign system which bears important relationships to cognitive and social aspects of their life. Most language acquisition theories inquiry how language, thought and social interaction interrelate in the child's life. Moreover, there are two main theories of language development in relation to cognitive and social-interactive process, which show differences on language and its development. According to Vygotsky (1978, 1981a) the language development is intrinsically tied to social interaction while Piaget (1923, 1924, 1932) affirms that this development is relatively autonomous from its social-interactive context of use.

Piaget (1923, 1924, 1932) focuses in how children behave in the world that surrounds them and how their mental development is influenced by this world. Children are continually interacting with the world and solving problems due to this. They construct their own knowledge, then, -by interacting. According to the Piagetian psychology, the above mentioned development can take place in two ways, assimilation and accommodation. In assimilation, the action takes place without any change to the child, while in accommodation, the child has to adjust to the environmental features. Cameron (2001) argued that in the later, the environment provides children the setting to their development through the action opportunities it offers. Both ways are initially an adaptive process of behavior, but they become processes of thinking. From a Piagetian (1963) point of view child's thought develops a gradual growth of knowledges and intellectual skills, and finally arrives to the logical thinking stage, which is the last one. Piaget neglect the social dimension in child's development, on contrast, Vygotsky's ideas give priority to social interaction.

Vygotsky (1934/1962, 1978, 1981a, b) considers that language provides children with a tool which gives them opportunities for organizing information through words and symbols. In relation to the early speech of children, Vygotsky explains that children first use single words to express a whole message, but as their language develops, the message is broken into small units and expressed by putting together words. Cameron (2001) also states that the main point in Vygotsky (1978, 1981a) theory is how children development and learning take place in social context. Children are active learners and people act as mediators to help them to understand their world and make it more accessible for them. Due to this help, children are able to do more things than by their own. This is what Vygotsky (1978) calls “Zone of Proximal Development” which refers to the things that children can make with an adult’s help. In this interaction children learn to think and at the same time learn to do things. In the moment when children start thinking by themselves, in their head, the “Internalization” appears. In parallel and related to this developmental mechanism that take place in adult-child interaction, we find Bruner (1975a, b, 1981) with his concept of “Scaffolding”. This concept is based on patterns of social interaction in which adults scaffold children’s verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Through this process, several developmental phenomena achieved by children such as problem-solving behaviors and the development of language itself can be described.

In the first years of life, children move through a series of stages of developing sensibility to the language. Children develop the ability to match the forms of language to an emergent understanding of the meaning that provides them the basis to move into developing comprehension and production. Most children can understand more words than they can produce. It is important for children to be exposed to a language to be able to learn it. But nevertheless, there are individual differences between children. That could have been caused as a result of intrinsic factors or from aspects of the environment. The preschool years are a crucial period where children experiment a rapid progress of many important language and cognitive skills. During this period, children develop an organized language system, even though individual differences have been reported in oral language skills. Thus, it is considered that language acquisition is influenced by different factors such as: cognitive, environmental, direct and indirect teach oral language or explicit teach cognitive skills. (Grover, Uccelli, Rowe & Lieven, 2019)

The proficiency in the first language, does not develop as a single, global phenomenon because the different domains develop differently. Furthermore, Cameron (2002) manifests that there is a connection between children's experiences and language development. Children who are exposed to a wide vocabulary develop faster in the lexicon domain. The quality and the quantity of communication children receive plays an important role in promoting their vocabulary development during early childhood. It is not only vocabulary, but oral language, cognitive and social cognitive skills are essential for school success. (Grover, Uccelli, Rowe & Lieven, 2019)

4.2. Foreign language acquisition in early ages

Nowadays it is not easy to differentiate between the terms second language (L2) and foreign language (FL). This difference comes according to the social function this foreign language brings to our lives.

A FL is an official or societally dominant language needed for different purposes. Nevertheless, a foreign language is not widely use in the learners' immediate social context, it is not required to communicate. It is mainly used for traveling or other cross-cultural situations. The Foreign Language Acquisition (onwards, FLA) refers to the study of a language different from the mother tongue. The range of FLA includes informal learning that takes place in naturalistic contexts and formal learning that takes place in classrooms. It is not easy to explain points such as what learners of a FL learn, how they acquire the knowledge of why there are individual differences according to the learning of a FL. This is explained because FLA has a complex nature due to new findings are appearing every day in this field. (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017)

The fact that children learn a foreign language better than adults supports the early introduction of foreign language teaching. The hypothesis that sustains so, it is what Cameron (2001) calls "The Critical Period Hypothesis". Young children can learn a FL before puberty more effectively than adults because their brains still use the first language acquisition mechanisms. After this period, learners approach languages differently.

4.2.1. Foreign language learning strategies

Researches try to identify, describe and classify the language strategies used by foreign language learners. Nevertheless, according to O'Malley and Chamot (1990) there are different strategies: the ones used by more effective learners and the ones used by less effective language learners. We are going to focus on those strategies used by good language learners in order to know which of them should be taught to facilitate the acquisition of declarative and procedural knowledge. In this research a study was developed attempting to define and classify strategies used during foreign language acquisition. In the following paragraphs, we present information about the strategies, focusing in formal learning strategies used by beginners and intermediate learners. The main objective of the research is to improve students' level of English proficiency by knowing useful foreign language learning strategies. Very useful information for teachers is provided, as they can use them to achieve a more successfully language learning among students.

To create the list of strategies, the scheme proposed by Brown and Palincsar (1982) was used. This list consists in cognitive and metacognitive strategies. However, in this study strategies requiring social mediation were included. Metacognitive strategies show those that refers to planning, monitoring and evaluating a learning activity. Cognitive strategies were used all of them in the same amount, none of them was dominant and social strategies were barely used. All of this type of strategies had a pattern of use similar for both beginnings an intermediate level student.

The strategies classification made by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) is as follows:

- Metacognitive strategies:
 - o Planning: Advance organizers, Functional planning, Directed attention, Selective attention and self-management
 - o Monitoring: Self-monitoring
 - o Evaluation: Self-evaluation

- Cognitive Strategies: Resourcing, Repetition, Grouping, Deduction, Imagery, Auditory representation, Keyword method, Elaboration, Transfer, Inferencing, Note taking, Summarizing, Recombination and Translation

- Social mediation: Question for clarification and Cooperation

4.2.2. Factors that influence the foreign language acquisition

As Klein (1996) sustains, the linguistic competence can be fostered by two sources: innate genetically transmitted language capacity and social transmitted language particular knowledge. First language learners could might be destined to achieve a proficiency level no matter their circumstances, while foreign language learners depend on non-biological extra-linguistic factors. Foreign language acquisition (FLA) is explained in to two different visions according to Herschensohn (2007). On the one hand, FLA is affected by non-linguistic factors that vary by age, which means there is not a critical period for the learning, but it can be determinate by a variety of issues. On the other hand, FLA is affected by maturational constrains from whence children are capable of spontaneous learning. Nevertheless, the last vision is the most popular now.

Moyer (2004) manifests that there are some factors affecting foreign language acquisition. These factors are divided into two groups: external an internal factors. External variables include environmental factors that the learner cannot manipulate such as native language, sociocultural factors, input or instruction. The native language has an important role transferring language skills to encourage and foster foreign language learning. This is called “The Full Transfer Approach” and shows how foreign language development is motivated for this strong influence of the first language. According to social cultural factors, ethnographic considerations have an important role in foreign language acquisition. Children with younger age of acquisition of the foreign language take advantage of beneficial social interactions, such as: interpersonal interaction cultural expectation or contextual variation, crucial to this language acquisition. Another external variable is the input and output, which means the frequency of spoken interaction. That constitute the only significant experimental-interactive factor decisive in the foreign language acquisition. Consequently, as Ellis (1990, 1994) affirm, input and output are crucial elements of instruction since they cover the raw material the model and the means of learning.

Among the internal variables established by Moyer (2004), that affect the foreign language acquisition are included: acculturation, motivation, attitude and cognitive influence. First of all, the assimilation to the foreign language culture include different aspects (contact with native speakers, socializing...) which depends on the learners' attitude. Acculturation is related to culture and social assimilation, as well as motivation. The importance of effective attitude is reflected in the "Affective Filter Hypothesis" stated by Krashen (1985). This hypothesis sustains that to acquire a foreign language, children must have their affective filter low, permitting the input get through. Some aspects like motivation and easygoing (related to children) keep the effective filter low. That this why young learners attained better the foreign language achievement. The desire to learn foreign language is important to achieve a task that requires willing participation as well as conscious and hard effort that place is motivation in a decisive position for foreign language learners. Nevertheless, Moyer (2004) affirms that motivation alone does not guarantee the acquisition of the language, so it is a less significant factor in the foreign language acquisition than the external ones. General intelligence or multilingualism are criteria that contribute to a high aptitude for language learning. That aptitude is not one-dimensional but must cover a variety of skills that may operate differently in different individuals. Aptitude seems to be inseparable for cognition but there is a distinction that allow to differentiate between innate skills and those which can be sharpened to improve language learning capacity. As mentioned before, the Piagetian vision relates language acquisition with cognitive factors. Through maturation, the first language emerges and suggest that with the apparition of formal operation at puberty, the language acquisition ability could decline during this period.

4.2.3. Benefits of the foreign language acquisition

Many advantages are claimed for starting to learn a foreign language in the primary years. Cameron (2001) claim that children who have an early start in learning a foreign language have advantages in the areas of skills. The skills that benefits the most is listening comprehension as well as pronunciation, but this is restricted to language learning y naturalistic context.

Apart from these benefits, according to Bialystok and Craik (2010) and Bhattacharjee (2012) there are other non-linguistic benefits that children acquire by learning a foreign language, caused by the profound effect on children's brain that the foreign language has. That improves cognitive skills not related to language. Here we have some of these fields in which Wallin (2019) considers that foreign language acquisition causes benefits:

1. **Executive function:** Which refers to the ability to solve a wide range of non-verbal problems that require attention and control. According to Bialystok (2017) children that experiment an early foreign language acquisition, show advantages in non-verbal subjects and in content-bases curricula. Areas of development which require significant levels of attention and the ability of forming conceptual categories. Bak et al. (2014) sustain that another executive function which takes advantages is the memory and Morales, Calvo & Bialystok (2013) add that it helps foreign language learners to better recall memories.
2. **Improved IQ:** Several studies of Mechelli et al., (2004) confirm that more grey matter density is found on the left part of children's brain that learn a foreign language. This fact is important due to the left part of the brain is responsible for processing information and controlling aspects of sensor and perception, memory and speech. The superiority on intelligence tests was confirmed in those children who start learning a foreign language in early ages in the studies of the psychologists Peal and Lambert (1962)
3. **Breadth of vocabulary knowledge and reading skills:** Studies have shown that children who speak a foreign language have a wide variety of vocabulary. They have both language receptive and productive vocabulary. Sometimes even the double than students that only learn one language. That results explain why children that learn a foreign language show higher reading skills, fostered by this extra vocabulary they have.
4. **Creativity:** Bamford and Mizokawa (2006) describe it as the ability of the brain to simultaneously activate and process unrelated categories. Learning a foreign language increase students' creativity which is linked to unconscious automatic cognitive processing. In addition, creativity is highly related to functions that are enhance in the brain of a foreign language learner.
5. **Memory retrieval skills could be improved:** Memory retrieval is important for learning a foreign language and foreign language learners are constantly

practicing that. Foreign language learners can increase their brain size, exactly the hippocampus, which is the part of the brain responsible for the memories. (Alban, 2015)

6. Better decision-making skills: Foreign language speakers are more resistant to be conditionate while taking decisions. Bilingual speakers, those who speak more than his first language, are more likely to recall an experience or emotion as childhood language is infused by deep feelings. However, language learn by adults is made through another methods without emotions. That helps young foreign language learners to make decisions in a more logical way. (Costa, 2014)
7. Bilinguals´ brains will grow: A recent study show that the brain can expand when there is a need for it. This fact can encourage young foreign language learners to realise that this learning is possible for all of them. So, it is their choice to take advantage of this fact and be able to benefit of this language learning.

Apart from these individual benefits of the foreign language acquisition established by Wallin (2019), nations can benefit as well of foreign language opportunities. This are positive qualities and aspects such as: empathy development, the creation of family bonds and the possibility to getaway to other cultures which enrich people and therefore the society in which they live.

4.3. The Council of Europe

The Council of Europe is one of the oldest and largest of the European Organizations. It is considered the leading human´s right organization, and its domains of competence are human rights, legal affairs, social cohesion and education, culture and heritage, youth and sport. Some countries part of this organization founded the European Centre for Modern Languages (onwards, ECML) as an "Enlarged Partial Agreement" of the Council of Europe which means that non-member states of the Council could also join the Centre. Today the ECML has 32 member states. The ECML functions as a catalyst for reform in the teaching and learning of languages. It operates programmes focusing on key educational issues requiring action. These programmes count on European countries

cooperation and they provide training models for teacher educators, equipping them to train others within their institutions and networks.

Council of Europe (2020) main objectives are to help its member states implementing effective language teaching policies by:

- focusing on the practice of the learning and teaching of languages
- promoting dialogue and exchange among those active in the field
- training multipliers
- supporting programme-related networks and research projects

4.3.1. Early Language Learning

Several researches developed by the Council of Europe (2020) confirm the value of early language learning, but also point to difficulties and challenges. Teacher's target is to provide optimal support for early language acquisition processes, so quality pre and in-service teacher education is paramount.

In this order of things, the Council of Europe consider multiples benefits:

- Good fit between the methodology used in active, communicative language teaching and the ludic approach used in the early years of education
- Younger children are in a development stage where they are open to new phenomena and their motivation to learn is very high. They enjoy learning a new language and are receptive to it. As they are less self-conscious they may be more able to absorb the language
- Between 2 and 4, they are in the phase of "natural" language acquisition, where their brain experiments a natural language learning.
- Sensitizing children to "otherness" and to the early introduction of plurilingual and intercultural education
- Contribution to language awareness and supports the development in both first and foreign language. In addition, it enhances cognitive growth through communicative activities which help the development of linguistic skills, as well as memory and concentration.
- Social and emotional development of the child by group work

The introduction of a program of early language learning means facing several challenges and issues. That emerge different questions and doubts like how sustainable the language competences are acquired during this period, the skills or train required by those teaching languages or about the specific language learning outcomes and the criteria that can be used to assess early language learning. (Council of Europe, 2020)

4.3.2. A Teacher´s tool for teaching a foreign language: “Pepelino”

To facilitate the teacher´s role in this early language learning, the Council of Europe has developed a tool for reflective practice in initial teacher training, “The European Portfolio for Pre-Primary education”. That focuses on developing a variety of language skills on children, valuing diversity and familiarizing with the plurilingual and intercultural dimension.

This tool called “PEPELINO” is a portfolio aimed at students on initial training to become pre-primary educators working with children under the age of 7 who wish to improve their training. It is a tool for personal reflection on professional competences, which focus on the plurilingual and intercultural dimension of work with pre-primary children. These people, the educators, may be required to help children developing their linguistic abilities in the language of schooling or in a foreign language. The aim of this tool is to prompt users to ask themselves questions based on their knowledge and their personal experience and perceptions. It was developed at the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe by a team of experts from different countries and with the assistance of trainers from the member states of the ECML. It is based on language policy documents of the Language Policy Unit and the European Commission and on reference documents produced by the ECML. ‘Pepelino’ organizes the professional skills associated with children’s linguistic and cultural development into four domains and eight fields of competence, with each domain being divided into two fields of competence. Each of these competences involves a combination of appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes. (Council of Europe, 2020)

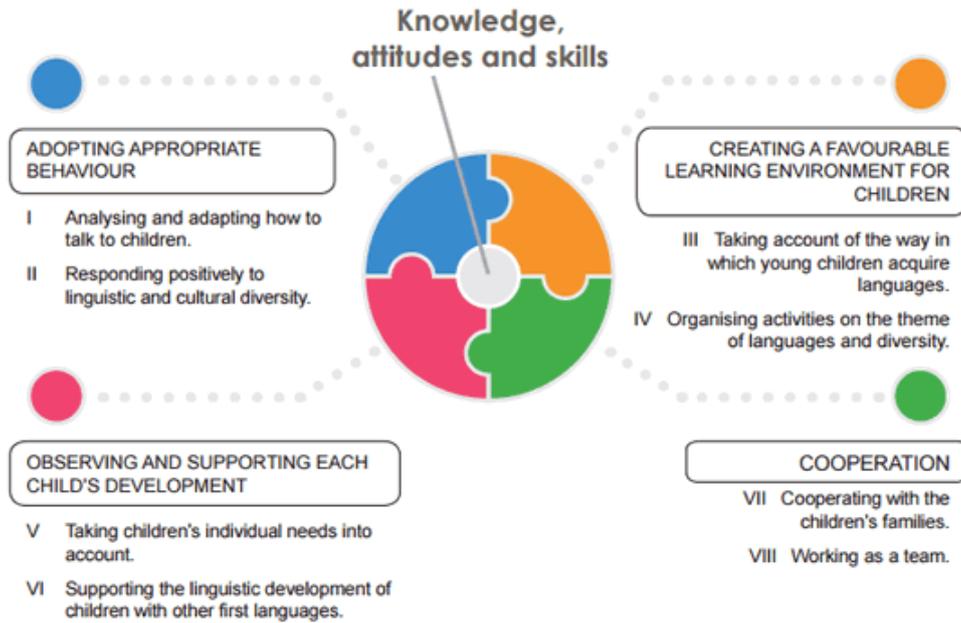


Figure 1: 'Knowledges, attitudes and skills in children's linguistic competence' (Council of Europe, 2020)

4.3.3. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: A1-A2 levels

The Council of Europe has been the responsibility of creating instruments that promote methodological innovations and new approaches to design programs in the area of teaching foreign languages. They have facilitated an approach to communicating these teaching methods in a potentially more conducive manner to operational appropriation of unknown languages. The Common European Framework of Reference (onwards, CEFR) organizes language proficiency in six levels, from A1 to C2, which can be regrouped into three broad levels: Basic User, Independent User and Proficient User. The levels are defined through 'can-do' descriptors.

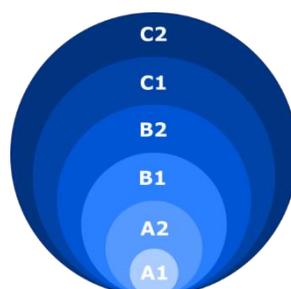


Figure 2: ‘Proficiency levels in language acquisition’ (Council of Europe, 2020)

Those levels that concern young learners are the ones that refers to Basic Users: A1 and A2. As regards the British Council (2020), the skills worked on the A1 level refer to the understanding and use of everyday expressions as well as simple phrases to meet immediate needs. The student must be able to: introduce him/herself and others, to ask and answer questions about personal details and to interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly. According to A2 level, students can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of immediate relevance for them. They can as well communicate in simple routines tasks requiring a simple exchange of information on routine matters and describe simple aspects of their background or immediate environment.

4.4. The treatment of foreign languages in Europe

The European Commission is an institution that works on specific policy priorities, which concern issues such as: economy, education, law, energy, human rights... This institution developed a document called “Eurydice Report” (2017), which includes information about: Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe. It describes the main policies on the teaching and learning of languages, with a focus on foreign languages. Its information provides insight into the policies and recommendations in place in European countries which influence foreign language teaching. It contains several indicators which cover a wide range of subjects in relation to the teaching and learning of foreign languages. These are some of the points which focus on the issues referred above:

- the provision of foreign languages in the curriculum, with a focus on the first and second foreign languages as compulsory subjects
- the range of languages studied
- foreign language teacher profiles and qualifications

4.4.1. The role of languages in European schools

Language learning and intercultural communication are core aspects in European schools. Graduates finish their studies with a proficiency level in their first language and achieve a sufficient degree of fluency as well in the foreign language (onwards, FL). Some facts like the organization arrangement which allows students to choose between a variety of FL to learn, the requirements to study some subjects in a FL and the mixture of teachers and students from other nationalities, help European graduates to become multilingual. European schools must provide their students with a multicultural and multilingual education from nursery to secondary level, which will contribute to developing their proficiency in the foreign language. As outlined by The Linguistic Society of America (2020) multilingual people are those who can comprehend and produce written or spoken utterances in more than one language, no matter their proficiency degree. The European Commission (2020) considers multilingualism to be important in the classrooms since nowadays lot of migrant students bring their own language and skills to the classrooms. Schools need to adapt their teaching methods to engage with children's language and cultural background in a positive manner. Currently European policy documents provide guiding principles on how teaching and learning practices at the school are expected to promote high degrees of language learning. European schools can be considered as a bilingual education system due to the support they provide students in learning an additional language. This system fosters multilingual proficiency among its graduates. (Leaton Gray, Scott & Mehisto, 2018)

4.4.2. Average age of learning a foreign language

In most European countries, the starting age of the first foreign language learning as a compulsory subject ranges from 6 to 8 years old, that is, in the first year(s) of primary education but depending on the country there is a different year of starting date. Among the countries where students first start learning a foreign language, in pre-primary

education, they do it at 3 years old. However, there are other countries where it is not compulsory for students to start learning a foreign language until the age of 11, when they begin secondary education. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

In addition, in other countries there is some freedom to determine the age in which the first foreign language is introduced as a compulsory subject. Central education authorities define an age bracket for the introduction of foreign languages, which could be the earliest age with 3 years old and the latest with 10 years old. It is interesting to remark that Ireland and the United Kingdom are the only countries where learning a foreign language at school is not compulsory. However, a new policy, which should be fully implemented by 2021, will establish that all students will start to learn a foreign language from age 5. Related to this, it is convenient to mention that some countries are introducing reforms to lower the starting age for the compulsory learning of the first foreign language. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

In a great majority of countries, it is compulsory for all students in general education to learn two different foreign languages at the same time at some point during their schooling. In most cases, the starting age for the second foreign language ranges from 11 to 13 years old. Usually, this corresponds to the end of primary education or the beginning of secondary education. In most countries, the learning of the second foreign language starts a number of years later than the first foreign language. Nevertheless, in several countries, this second foreign language learning as a compulsory subject follows rather quickly, only one to two years after the beginning of the first compulsory language. We observe how in some countries, students start learning the second language one year after the first; while in others do it two years after. Differently, some schools decide when to introduce the learning of the first foreign language, but most of them do so when students are between 10 and 12, that means two years or less before they start the second compulsory foreign language at the age of 12. What is more, in other countries, such as Luxembourg and Iceland the students have to study three languages, being the duration of this compulsory learning different: six years in Luxembourg, and one year in Iceland. In addition, it is a decision of the country to establish the starting age of compulsory second foreign language learning, some of them do it in early ages while in others quite later, around 13 years old. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

Regarding to compulsory learning of the first foreign language, it begins at an increasingly early age. Europe has experienced an increase in the duration of compulsory foreign language learning. This increase has been achieved almost everywhere by lowering the age at which this learning begins. The most dramatic changes have taken place in Belgium, Cyprus, Poland, the United Kingdom and Italy. In the first mentioned two countries, Belgium and Cyprus, the compulsory learning of one foreign language now starts at the beginning of preprimary level, while before this learning started in the second or third year of primary education. Italy is an exceptional case as the lengthening of the period of compulsory foreign language learning for all students has taken place not only at primary level but also, at upper secondary level. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

But not all the countries have advanced the year of compulsory learning of the first foreign language. Since 2003, 14 education systems did not lower the age at which learning a foreign language became compulsory for all students. There are, however, particular circumstances in the majority of these education systems. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

- In Luxembourg, Malta, Austria and Norway, students were already obliged to learn a language at an early age, 5-6 years old.
- In Estonia, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden, schools enjoyed some flexibility in determining the year when students had to start learning a foreign language.

In 2015/2016, in the great majority of countries, students learnt one language as a compulsory subject for 10, 11 or 12 years. A small group of countries have regulations making this learning obligatory earlier, from between seven and nine years. In extreme cases, we have the United Kingdom where compulsory language learning lasts only three years and countries such as Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania and the former Republic of Macedonia where students must learn one language for 13 years or Belgium and Cyprus where the length is 15 years. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

Nowadays, the first foreign language commands the largest share of instruction time. In the majority of European countries, two foreign languages as compulsory subjects are included in the curriculum during full-time compulsory education. In all these countries, the total amount of time devoted to the second language in a notional year is lower than the one devoted to the first language. This may be explained by the fact that the second

foreign language starts later and lasts fewer years than the first. The foreign language is introduced more than two years after the first in almost every country. However, there is a weak relationship between the minimum instruction time dedicated to foreign languages and the number of years spent teaching them. Therefore, the number of teaching years cannot completely explain the difference in instruction time between languages. The most significant difference between the time spent on the first two foreign languages can be found in Bulgaria and Slovakia. In these countries, the teaching of the second foreign language as a compulsory subject, mostly occurs after the end of full-time compulsory education. We can consider therefore, that the considerable difference in the time spent on the two languages may be caused by the need for students to master this first language quickly and to a high level. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

4.4.3. Most common foreign language teaching in Europe

In this part of the paper we make an analysis of the most studied foreign language in European schools. Among which there are: English, French and Spanish

4.4.3.1. English, the most studied foreign language

There is a wide variety of languages spoken in Europe. The European Union has 24 official and working languages, however, only a few of these languages are widely studied in schools as foreign languages. Student participation in foreign language learning is strongly influenced by the curriculum requirements in place in each country in particular and the predominance of specific languages is, in turn, largely dependent on whether they are compulsory or optional. English is unquestionably the main foreign language learnt in Europe. In almost all European countries, English is the first foreign language, or the language learnt by most students during primary and secondary education. There are very few countries where languages other than English are learnt by a majority of students. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

The number of students that learn the most common foreign language, vary across the different education levels. In most of the countries of the European Union, the students

enrolled in primary education study the same foreign language, English. In contrast Belgium is the only country with another most common foreign language, French, but only 27.0% of students take it, because foreign language learning is only compulsory for the last two years of primary education. In France as well as in other European countries such as Hungary, Portugal and Slovenia, many students do not study any foreign language during the first years of Primary education. In lower secondary education, the most common studied foreign language is English in almost all European countries, with only a few exceptions. In upper secondary education. In upper secondary education, the proportion of students learning the predominant language decreases This is partly because some students, do not study any languages and partly because there is a greater variety of foreign languages available to study. Moreover, in some countries, there is no predominant foreign language studied by a majority of students. For example, in the United Kingdom, where the most common languages are French, Spanish and German. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

4.4.3.2. French, the second most studied foreign language

French is the most commonly studied foreign language in English-speaking countries, namely in Ireland and across the United Kingdom. This places French as the second most learnt foreign language in European countries This language is a popular choice for a second foreign language learning in Europe. It is the second most studied foreign language in at least one education level in many central and southern European countries. In contrast, this language is rarely studied in eastern European countries or in the Nordic countries. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

4.4.3.3. Spanish increase its popularity as a foreign language

Nowadays, Spanish is increasing its popularity as a second foreign language. This popularity has increased during the last 10 years, although the educational authorities in most European countries put less emphasis on Spanish compared to English, French or

German. No European country specifies Spanish as a compulsory foreign language for all students, and only Malta and Sweden require that all lower or upper secondary schools must provide an opportunity to learn Spanish. At European level, there was a 5.6 percentage point increase in the number of lower secondary students learning. However, in the majority of countries, the popularity of Spanish grew in general upper secondary. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

4.4.4. Teaching a foreign language in Europe: Teacher's role

In this section of the paper, we approach information about the teaching process of foreign language in European schools.

4.4.4.1. Initial teacher training of teaching a foreign language

Initial teacher education is defined as the period of study and training during which prospective teachers attend academic, subject-based courses and undertake professional training to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to be a teacher. This period ends when prospective teachers are awarded their qualifications as a teacher. In primary education, specialist and/or semi-specialist teachers of foreign languages need to be qualified at Bachelor's level in two-thirds of the education systems. In lower secondary education, they need to be qualified at Bachelor's level in around half of the education systems and at Master's level in the other half. While at general upper secondary level, a Master's degree is the minimum level of qualification in almost two-thirds of the education systems. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

According to the minimum level of education for specialist and semi-specialist foreign language teachers, it depends on the country. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

- In the majority of the education systems, the minimum level of education is the same for both specialist and semi-specialist foreign language teachers, independently of the level of education in which they work. In 12 countries, both

types of foreign language teachers need at least a Master's degree to teach at all three levels of education.

- In some countries, which do not have either specialist or semi-specialist foreign language teachers or foreign language teaching in primary education, a Master's degree is also required for the two levels of secondary education.
- In 10 other countries, the minimum level of qualification for both specialist and semi-specialist teachers of foreign languages is a Bachelor's degree for all three levels of education.

Generally, initial teacher education for specialist and semi-specialist teachers of foreign languages usually lasts four or five years in total. Although this period varies among the different level of education.

4.4.4.2. Generalist and specialist teachers

In Europe, in primary education level, one generalist teacher often has responsibility for a particular class and teaches lessons in all or most subjects, including foreign languages. However, in many countries foreign languages are taught by a specialist or semi-specialist teacher. A specialist teacher is qualified to teach one or two subjects, while a semi-specialist is qualified to teach at least three different subjects. Foreign language is considered as a single subject even when a teacher is qualified to teach several foreign languages. Consequently, a specialist teacher may therefore be qualified to teach either one or more foreign language(s), or one or more foreign language(s) plus one other subject. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

In the majority of the education systems with central recommendations on the degree of specialization of teachers, generalist teachers teach foreign languages in primary education. Top-level education authorities recommend that generalist teachers as well as specialized staff for this level of education teach foreign languages in primary education. However, in some countries, generalist teachers need to justify their mastery of the foreign language. For instance, they may need to have dedicated part of their initial education to foreign language teaching or to prove their proficiency in the target language.

In the remaining education systems, the top-level education authorities recommend that foreign language teachers are specialists, semi-specialists or a combination of specialists and semi-specialists. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

4.5. Languages in the Spanish curriculum: Pre-primary education and Primary education

The Spanish curriculum of Pre-Primary Education (2007) establishes a deeper introduction of a foreign language during the second cycle, of this Pre-Primary education, when children are four years old. This fact shows relation with the European Policies about the age of introduction of a second language in Pre-primary education in countries all around Europe. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017) This early introduction has to be made related with the rest of contents, using the foreign language as a nexus of learnings close to the students and giving to it a globalizing approach. So, it is important to introduce the foreign language in the daily routines of the class to encourage the development of basic strategies of oral comprehension and expression in the foreign language. This process will be supported with visual context and non-verbal of the previous knowledges' students have about the topic. During this period it is necessary to develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language, fostering sensibility and curiosity to learn new languages as point the Pre-Primary Education Curriculum (2007) As in the rest of countries in Europe, English is the language chosen to be taught as a first foreign language. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017)

It is in the Primary Education curriculum where we find an extended description about foreign language learning. Is in this stage when Educational administrations can establish to teach a part of the subjects in a foreign language. In this teaching method, the mother tongue could be used as a support in the foreign language learning process. It is important the learning of a first foreign language due to the globalization process that our world is currently involved in. That is why one of the main objectives of the education, must be to provide citizens with useful tools to develop skills that allow them to adequately adapt to a new society that is increasingly interdependent and global. Since communication ability is the first requirement in a multicultural and multilingual context, the foreign language

learning takes a special relevance. It is in this stage when the learning of a second foreign language is considered. In this way, most European countries make possible that their students learn a second foreign language in the school providing them all the benefits that this practice has, such as: more possibilities of continuing successfully with their studding's, easily getting a job incorporation, as well as the positive effects that it has in several learning subjects.

Multilingualism is considered one of the inspiring principles of the European Union: unity in diversity. For that reason, in Spain, as in the rest of the counties of the European Union, students learn a second foreign language. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017) This has become one of the objectives within the European language policy. Therefore, the Spanish Primary Education curriculum shows how in the primary stage, the Second Foreign Language area is included within the block of specific subjects, in order to expand the communicative horizon of the students from the beginning of their learning process. Learning a second language allows students to learn more and better. In addition, that entails further development of the ability to draw analogies and contrasts and to infer or deduce general rules. Regarding the evaluation, expectations regarding the level of proficiency in the first foreign language are higher than in the second language. This fact is related to the instruction time. In Spain, as in the rest of the European Union countries, the instruction time and the importance given to the first foreign language is large and bigger than the one given to the second foreign language.

5. CONCLUSION

As we have been able to observe along this paper, early childhood is an important moment to encourage and help children developing their oral language abilities, and learning takes a long time to develop and requires collaboration and efforts by multiple stakeholders. Consequently, preschool teachers play a critical role in promoting oral language and cognitive development for children. According to Grove, Uccelli, Rowe and Lieven (2019) that efforts should include direct teaching of oral language and cognitive skills and indirect teaching via intentional language modeling to promote linguistically rich, cognitively demanding, and emotionally supportive learning environments. As the European Commission suggests it would be significant for teachers to be trained in how to teach the language of schooling as a second language and how to work in multi-lingual classrooms, in order to provide the context for these aspects of language diversity.

Nevertheless, that external factors, which represent the community agents, and which take part in children's education, are relatively more important than the child characteristics in enhancing bilingual children's language growth. Here we find an evidence about the crucial role of the factors involved on children environment that affect children language development. So, a main aspect that we can remark is that children acquire a language in a specific manner according the way they experience the learning. Thus, it is important to provide them a quality input and having in mind that the more exposition to the target language they have, the best they acquire it. Furthermore, as learners show linguistic, psychological and social differences, it is essential to adjust the language and activities to teach according to children characteristics.

To sum up, as we have tried to show along this pages, early language learning enhances cognitive growth and help children to develop linguistic skills, as well as non-linguistic ones. These are benefits that will constitute an advantage in children's daily life to operate successfully in society. In that sense, it is essential to provide children early language learning opportunities in order to promote their global development.

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7. ANNEXES

7.1. Annexe 1:

AND CLASSIFICATIONS

<i>Learning strategy</i>	<i>Definition</i>
A. Metacognitive Strategies	
<i>Planning</i>	
Advance organizers	Previewing the main ideas and concepts of the material to be learned, often by skimming the text for the organizing principle.
Directed attention	Deciding in advance to attend in general to a learning task and to ignore irrelevant distractors.
Functional planning	Planning for and rehearsing linguistic components necessary to carry out an upcoming language task.
Selective attention	Deciding in advance to attend to specific aspects of input, often by scanning for key words, concepts, and/or linguistic markers.
Self-management	Understanding the conditions that help one learn and arranging for the presence of those conditions.
<i>Monitoring</i>	
Self-monitoring	Checking one's comprehension during listening or reading or checking the accuracy and/or appropriateness of one's oral or written production while it is taking place.
<i>Evaluation</i>	
Self-evaluation	Checking the outcomes of one's own language learning against a standard after it has been completed.
B. Cognitive Strategies	
Resourcing	Using target language reference materials such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, or textbooks.
Repetition	Imitating a language model, including overt practice and silent rehearsal.
Grouping	Classifying words, terminology, or concepts according to their attributes or meaning.
Deduction	Applying rules to understand or produce the second language or making up rules based on language analysis.
Imagery	Using visual images (either mental or actual) to understand or remember new information.
Auditory representation	Planning back in one's mind the sound of a word, phrase, or longer language sequence.

<i>Learning strategy</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Keyword method	Remembering a new word in the second language by: (1) identifying a familiar word in the first language that sounds like or otherwise resembles the new word, and (2) generating easily recalled images of some relationship with the first language homonym and the new word in the second language.
Elaboration	Relating new information to prior knowledge, relating different parts of new information to each other, or making meaningful personal associations with the new information.
Transfer	Using previous linguistic knowledge or prior skills to assist comprehension or production.
Inferencing	Using available information to guess meanings of new items, predict outcomes, or fill in missing information.
Note taking	Writing down key words or concepts in abbreviated verbal, graphic, or numerical form while listening or reading.
Summarizing	Making a mental, oral, or written summary of new information gained through listening or reading.
Recombination	Constructing a meaningful sentence or larger language sequence by combining known elements in a new way.
Translation	Using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language.
C. Social Mediation	
Question for clarification	Eliciting from a teacher or peer additional explanations, rephrasing, examples, or verification.
Cooperation	Working together with one or more peers to solve a problem, pool information, check a learning task, model a language activity, or get feedback on oral or written performance.

- Foreign language acquisition strategies