

Title: **Developing intercultural competence with young learners of English**

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Introduction: Teaching English to primary school learners

Even though educational arguments for the introduction of foreign languages to young learners had been expressed as early as the 1960s, it was only at the end of the 1980's and in the 1990's that European language programmes specifically targeted young learners and began to promote the introduction of foreign language learning in primary schools as a major policy initiative. Europe's commitment to multilingualism, the importance of developing intercultural competences as a basis for building European citizenship have made early language learning a focal point in current European programmes and actions. Early foreign language education has now become a priority issue on the agenda of the European Union with central government ministries in Europe committed to promoting it nationwide.

In Greece, although English as a foreign language had been introduced in the primary school (4th, 5th, 6th grade) in the 1990's, it was in 2010 that English was also introduced in the first and second grades of public primary schools within the context of the Project entitled "New Foreign Language Education Policy in Schools: English for Young Learners," or else the PEAP programme. The decision to offer the first foreign language from an earlier age in school was not a random decision. The Greek Ministry of Education consulted with academics, experts in the areas of foreign language education and early language learning. The Ministry's question was not so much about which foreign language to introduce first, since in Greece as in many other European countries, English is viewed as the de facto international language and it is the first language in the vast majority of European schools. Rather, the issue at hand was whether foreign language learning should start at such an early age. The experts' standpoint in favour of early language learning (ELL) was supported by research findings and by recent recommendations by the European Commission that regards ELL as a factor contributing to multilingualism.

Within the context of the PEAP programme a tailor made curriculum, syllabi for the 1st and 2nd grade and a series of learning materials and tasks were developed. All these outputs were accessible online through the PEAP portal (<http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/peap/>).

It is important to remember that an early start to foreign language learning is neither strictly necessary nor a sufficient condition for the attainment of proficiency in another language. Adults can learn foreign language as efficiently and effectively as young learners. However, if the right educational environment is produced, an early start can be extremely beneficial and facilitate the introduction of a second foreign language at a later stage. Above all, an early start to foreign languages is seen to positively impact on the child's overall language and educational development and in particular to help engender a positive attitude towards other cultures. More specifically, the benefits of an early start to language learning include:

- ✓ The earlier the onset of FLL, the greater the chances for language proficiency.
- ✓ Potential to develop native-like pronunciation.
- ✓ Improved overall school performance and superior problem-solving skills.
- ✓ Enhancement of knowledge of native language.
- ✓ Development of lifelong ability to communicate with more people.
- ✓ Better understanding of other cultures.
- ✓ Competitive advantage in the work force by opening up additional job opportunities.

Foreign language learning at an early age takes advantage of age related psychological and physical characteristics of children such as curiosity, eagerness to learn, need to communicate, readiness and ability to imitate and ability to produce new sounds.

Understanding the Young language learner

Most researchers and theoreticians use the term 'young learners' to refer to students who are approximately five to eleven years old (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990, Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou, 2003); young learners are often divided into two categories; students who are five to seven years old and students who are eight to eleven years old (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990). It is argued that the students belonging to the two abovementioned categories differ in their maturity level, perception of the world and the language system, as well as their willingness to take responsibility in the learning process (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990).

Children aged 7 - 9 come to the English Language classroom having accomplished a number of difficult feats. They possess fundamental social strategies and cognitive skills and a considerable degree of self-confidence and self-esteem. By the age of seven, children have not only learned how to dress, feed and clean themselves, they have acquired social mediation skills, i.e., how to cooperate and negotiate with their peers, as well as how to collaborate with their peers and adults or certain authority figures.

Children are at a crucial age for developing self-esteem, peer-esteem, emotional intelligence and a sense of critical thinking and assessment. Seven year olds become young "explorers" in the EFL classroom, willing to make sense of this "new world". They are active, they receive information through all their senses, they develop their individuality and they enjoy improvisation, listening to stories, role-playing, singing and participating in games.

Children of course differ from teenagers and adults. These are some of their distinguishing characteristics.

Young Learners:

- have a short attention span
- are very active (kinesthetic)

- are egocentric
- love praise and reward
- are less shy than older learners
- enjoy imitating and are skilful in listening accurately
- enjoy learning through playing, acting, making and doing
- are imaginative
- understand language as units not separate words
- interpret meaning without necessarily understanding the individual word
- learn indirectly rather than directly
- develop physically, mentally and conceptually

Children see the foreign language 'from the inside' and try to find meaning in how the language is used in action, in interaction and with interaction rather than from the outside as system and form. Good YL teaching will provide opportunities for children to construct meaning in the language they encounter by incorporating it in purposeful action and interaction. As children move through their primary years, they become more able to work with abstract concepts and thus take an outside stance to the language and work with it as decontextualised and as an object of study. While working within the capabilities of children, language teaching can also contribute to the development of abstract thinking.

In designing materials and activities for young learners, teachers need to take into account the following:

- ✓ Children of this age are egocentric. This means that they see things from their own point of view, through their personal experiences.
- ✓ Children understand concepts through their senses and through experience.
- ✓ They need constant repetition in order to retain in memory conceptual representations - they repeat a phrase so that they can memorise it.
- ✓ Children need to involve their senses in order to make sense of logical constructs: they count on their fingers, they draw a shape, they look for a picture to understand a word.
- ✓ Children at the age of six go through an emergent literacy process and develop a number of social literacies in their first language. Up to the age of five, each child has acquired the complex system of the spoken form of his or her L1.



- ✓ The English language teacher of young Learners can build on the L1 competences which children have developed. However, explicit and systematic “teaching” of English is not advisable. At this stage, children begin their formal literacy development in Greek.
- ✓ Words and phrases, not single letters, should be the focus units for language work.

According to Cameron, L., 2001, Teaching languages to Young Learners, foreign language learning should first focus on developing young learners’ listening and speaking skills. Listening skills are very important since they provide

- a rich source of data to begin to build an idea of how language works
- safe space for learners who are not ready to speak the language / talk
- chances to focus on the language used and demonstrate what has been understood
- opportunities for non-verbal support (e.g. pictures)- essential for learners who cannot read
- rich source for language forms to repeat or imitate

Moreover, by the age of 5 children have developed a series of language skills and capacities in speaking, which can be transferred to FL learning

- ✓ a vocabulary span which covers several thousand words
- ✓ basic grammatical forms
- ✓ adult-like pronunciation
- ✓ can talk for a number of purposes (some of them high order ones like hypothesising, speculating, predicting)
- ✓ engage in role play and experiment with different interactional identities
- ✓ enjoy playing with and through language
- ✓ have developed a sense of genres of talk (jokes, stories, news etc.)

Original thought and creativity is a distinguishing feature of childhood. Children are not aware of epistemological constraints upon “knowledge”, so they make associations and original constructs spontaneously, putting together incompatible elements. Language teachers, working with children, can elaborate on children’s creative thinking and use it to make up imaginary stories, with unlikely and incompatible heroes - such as dancing vegetables, animals that cook, talking plants - and action games with heroes things like a stone or a piece of paper, which become alive.....Children are fond of stories, imaginary journeys into the world of magic, tales and fairy tales.

- Story telling creates a framework within which social behaviour is coded and children’s sentimental value and moral world is scaffolded.



- ❑ The more opportunities children have to listen to the same story, the more they process the information and the messages communicated through narration. We have, however, to keep in mind their short attention span.
- ❑ The smaller the number of sentences in a story, or the more the verbal hints and the more the questions are rephrased during narration, the deeper the understanding of the sequence of events and of the messages.
- ❑ Motion and songs effectively promote foreign language learning. They help children memorise rhythm, intonation and vocabulary and develop important learning strategies, both for language comprehension and for language production
- ❑ Children, learning a foreign language, need a variety of stimuli from multimodal texts such as: pictures, films, books, songs, signs, labels, videos, simulations of every day situations.

The classroom, operating as a unit within the general school context, should broaden the functional potential of children's language, so that they will become able to distinguish variety and variation in the use of language

Play is also an essential way through which young learners:

- develop cognitive schemata about objects, meet people,
- experience situations,
- focus their attention for more than ten minutes, and
- develop a number of competences simultaneously: physical, social, affective, mental and linguistic.

Imaginary play, which involves the children in role play, frees them from cognitive and affective restrictions.

As teachers we must consider how to (*Moon, 2005*)

- ❑ ..make our EFL classroom a lively place (displays on the walls, pupils' work on boards, book corner, etc)
- ❑ ..create a warm and happy classroom environment (pupils and teachers enjoy working together)
- ❑ ..motivate our pupils (use of interesting and engaging all students learning activities, e.g. games, drama, etc)
- ❑ ..help young learners to develop personal reasons for learning English (encourage out-of-school class activities, e.g. pen pals, projects, etc)



Designing intercultural activities for young learners

As mentioned in session 1, Intercultural learning develops best when it starts at early primary school because...

- Children may internalise stereotypes and negative attitudes towards difference from the age of 5. The younger they are exposed to tolerance and intercultural thinking, the more the chances these stereotypes will be broken down.
- Children already experience pluriculturalism and plurilingualism in their classroom. Within this context they learn who they and others are.
- Intercultural skills are more easily and more effectively developed during childhood
- Children have more time to internalise and develop the values and ethos of intercultural communication throughout schooling

In designing intercultural activities for the young learner EFL classroom, the teacher needs to take into account the distinctive characteristics of young learners and the features of intercultural activities.

What is an intercultural activity?

Intercultural activity is one which

- treats all cultural specificities and structures politely and with respect,
- does not offend anyone,
- promotes cultural differences,
- enforces the participation of all students, the sense of collectivity and of belonging to a team,
- aims at the cooperation and has interactive force,
- reinforces mutual understanding and aims at creating feelings of empathy,
- avoids superficial approach of other cultures,
- does not carry knowledge about other cultures directly but offers opportunities to discover them through context and create links between existing and new knowledge,
- sets off all the things that bind us together and the fact that we all have the same needs and, starting from the things that bind us, it goes on to the specificities/differences that we all have anyway,
- does not focus on a differentiation as an issue to be treated, but it shows different ways that we all use in order to react, to think, to behave, to live.



What are the characteristics of intercultural activities?

It has been suggested that intercultural activities for young learners especially should begin with awareness of the young learners' culture through rhymes, stories, songs and games, should proceed with activities in which learners compare and contrast their own culture with others' and should at a later stage include activities in which children become aware of other world cultures. Thus learners should first discuss their own experiences with a target language culture on the basis of listening or reading about it, and then compare the target language culture with their own. In a similar manner, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) propose two groups of skills that should be developed for intercultural competence: skills of comparison, interpreting and relating, which help learners predict misunderstandings and resolve them, and skills of discovery and interaction, which enable learners to acquire new knowledge of a culture. According to the authors, learners should be aware of their own values and should become able to critically evaluate both their own perspectives and practices and those of people from other cultures. Curtain and Dahlberg (2010, 429) argue that attitudes toward nations and groups perceived as 'other' must be developed by the age of ten, when children are in the process of moving from egocentricity to reciprocity and information received before this age is eagerly received. The authors go on to suggest that learners in grades 3–5 become more receptive to information about people who are different from themselves.

The topics and situations of intercultural activities should match learners' language level and intellectual development, and can serve for covering cross-curricular themes. Cultural topics that are of high interest to learners should be covered, like food, music, dance, holiday celebrations and festivals, current events, literature, politeness, home, school, tourism and leisure. Authentic materials (texts, audio and video materials) which can be easily found on the internet can be used for bringing a target culture into the classroom. Authentic stories, written for native speakers, can provide contexts that can provoke worthwhile discussion, analysis and comparison. One of the most effective means for developing intercultural literacy in a YL classroom is storytelling because it is a direct and enjoyable means of communicating cultural ideas and values and giving children cultural experiences similar to experiences of those who live in the target culture (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2010, 72). See Korosidou E. & Griva E. (2016) for an example of the use of stories with young learners aiming at developing their sensitivity towards diversity and enhancing their citizenship awareness

In summary, intercultural activities for children should be

- **Interesting:** Anything that has to do with their experiences and their concerns is perceived more easily, so students are motivated to act and react, to participate and create and to express themselves when they are really interested in what they are dealing with. They learn by doing and playing using the language. Activities that use their languages, such as games, stories, appropriate poems, songs, can be effortless but also effective. So, authentic texts that are appealing to them, videos and multimodal texts can be most useful tools.
- **Experiential:** In experiential learning, students are directly involved in what they study, through participation and action. This helps the process of understanding,



through lived experiences, but also the knowledge of self, "self-awareness". Experiential learning can be applied through simulations and role plays in which learners' schemata and background knowledge are activated, resulting in cultural behaviour that prepares learners for real intercultural communication (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002, 14). *Aristotle once said, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them"*

Experiential learning is based on two facts:

- ✓ Each student will benefit from the experience
- ✓ Every student is treated with the same respect

Teachers take into account this informal knowledge and experiences of all the children in the class.

But what about the experiences of children from different cultural environments?

Do they have the same opportunities to express and explore their identity?

Try this simple test.

Give the children of your class a piece of paper with three circles drawn on it. Ask them to write in the first circle how each of them thinks of him/her self, in the second something that they want the others to know about them and in the third something that they are dreaming of.

Every student can read the information that he/she chooses to share with his/her classmates. He/she can either share information from 1-3 circles. It's an opportunity to "open" to the others, but first of all it's an opportunity for you, the teacher, to take a deep look into your students' opinions and their self-esteem. It will also give you information about their experiences and how much these experiences concern the whole class.

- **Cooperative:** During cooperative learning children are empowered! It is appropriate for an intercultural approach. Students of different races, sexes and abilities are work together. Cooperative structures create and transform the "culture of the class".
- **Interdisciplinary:** Interdisciplinarity in education tries to approach school knowledge as a whole; a spherical study of universal interest's topics and of major importance. Approaching and applying interdisciplinary programs, the teacher can choose which scientific fields and activities to pursue, so that they would relate to the students' interests, experiences and needs. Such a school seeks to help all children locate and then deconstruct prejudices, to accept diversity and promotes coexistence. It offers children the opportunity to experience and discuss issues about different cultural backgrounds (values, habits, lifestyle, etc.) in the classroom. Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is an approach to language

teaching that lends itself perfectly to developing intercultural competence as it focuses on themes and encourages analysis and comparison of cultural practices and products.

- **developmentally appropriate** : To plan developmentally appropriate instruction for young learners (YLS, children aged seven to eleven), teachers should recognise that YLS are going through the stage of concrete operations in which they are learning to apply logical thought to concrete problems, and that they learn best through hands-on concrete experiences, while focusing on meaning and being supported by meaningful context, visual cues and multisensory classroom activities in low-anxiety environment (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010, 5). All children can participate in group work and projects according to their abilities and interests. Such projects can be parallel actions, a collective work in sections that can be completed and presented to the class. This will support collaboration, so that the team can resolve conflicts in a socially acceptable manner, and it ensures the participation of everyone in whatever field interests them most and is developmentally appropriate

The teaching methods in multicultural education:

- are student-centred, as they begin with the student, making use of his/her personal **cultural capital** and finish with the student, aiming at his/her **personal and social empowerment**
- are collaborative and participatory, through the organization and implementation of **action plans** (projects)
- combine traditional and contemporary, typical and atypical **teaching approaches** (e.g. reading, storytelling, singing, games, visits, use of ICTs for New Technologies, etc.)
- are linked to the **local community** (parents/family, wider community i.e. professionals) and also to the global community (twinning, educational exchanges, collaborative actions).

In summary, every action, at every level, derives from **seeing diversity as an asset, a resource and wealth** that can be used to foster a climate of mutual understanding, respect and peaceful problem-solving.

