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Foreign language teaching: does it still make sense?

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Abstract: This paper discusses the question of whether foreign language teaching and teacher training makes sense today. Pre-service teacher views are collected and analysed. Their views concerning the reasons for introducing a foreign language in the early years show strong bias towards instrumental conceptions which do not correspond to the ages and needs of the students in question. A training activity is described which prompts students (future teachers) to recall childhood experiences as foreign language learners, while illustrating scaffolding techniques to promote communication with students of different levels/abilities. Pictorial narrative evidence is analysed, with findings offering insight into aspects that generate negative and positive experiences for young learners. Reflections on these findings discuss the need to balance both instrumental and substantive conceptions of foreign language education; rethinking the former in an age-appropriate manner, and highlighting the latter as the key to making language education meaningful.

Keywords: Foreign language teacher training; foreign language education; substantive; instrumental; pictorial narrative analysis.

Resumen: Este artículo aborda la cuestión de si la enseñanza de lengua extranjera y la formación del respectivo profesorado siguen teniendo sentido hoy en día. Para ello, se recogen y analizan las visiones de maestros/as en formación. Sus visiones sobre los motivos para introducir una lengua extranjera en los primeros años revelan un fuerte sesgo hacia concepciones instrumentales que no se corresponden con las edades y las necesidades de los alumnos en cuestión. Se describe una actividad de formación que incita al alumnado (maestros/as en formación) a recordar sus experiencias como aprendices de lenguas extranjeras durante la infancia, a la vez que también ilustra técnicas de andamiaje para fomentar la comunicación con el alumnado de niveles y habilidades diferentes. Se analizan evidencias narrativas pictóricas. Los hallazgos ofrecen una perspectiva sobre aspectos que generan experiencias negativas y positivas para aprendices de edades tempranas. Las reflexiones sobre estos hallazgos abordan la necesidad de equilibrar las concepciones tanto instrumentales como sustantivas de la enseñanza de la lengua extranjera, replanteando la primera de manera más apropiada según la edad y destacando la segunda como clave para que la enseñanza de la lengua tenga sentido.

Palabras clave: Formación del profesorado de lengua extranjera; didáctica de lengua extranjera; sustantiva; instrumental; análisis narrativo pictórico.

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INTRODUCTION

In a time of significant change, we need to ask ourselves some uncomfortable questions. Joan Subirats begins his paper by asking whether going to university actually makes sense anymore. The debate that this question opens positions the university as an intermediary between the individual (student) and education, with the traditional assumption being that university serves an essential role as intermediary agent between the two. But what happens when this assumption breaks down? What happens when the intermediary role is no longer seen as necessary because individuals are able to access the knowledge and skills they require in different ways? The key, as Subirats indicates, lies in the appreciation of value; in other words, in our perception of whether the intermediary agent offers added value or not. These questions are highly pertinent to foreign language teaching throughout the different stages of compulsory education, and to the training of future foreign language teachers, as I will suggest in this paper.

The reflections in this paper emerge from my experience teaching students on the Early Childhood Education and Primary School Education degrees. As part of their training, all students take a compulsory module providing a basic introduction to current approaches to teaching a foreign language. The foreign language focused on is English, and classes are conducted in this language. This proves to be a challenge in view of the considerably diverse levels of linguistic competence within the groups. Without fail, day one of class leads to discussions about this diversity. Year after year a significant number of students (sometimes the majority within a group of 30 to 40) complain that although they did English at school from an early age (6 to 8 years-old is reported as the usual starting point), they do not have a sufficient level of the language to be able to communicate in everyday situations. Not surprisingly, this leads to discussions about the very purpose and sense of teaching a foreign language at school, which resonate strongly with the questions posited by Subirats about university and its role in today's society. Students often report that they have learned more from watching TV series and films; playing online games which involve communicating with players in different countries; listening to music; and so on, than they did at school. In other words, they have found self-teaching strategies that call into question the traditional role of the intermediary agent (school/foreign language teacher) and the value of formal foreign language classes.

Aims of foreign language education: instrumental to substantive

The questions that emerge from these initial reflections help focus our attention on what these students (future teachers) consider to be the main aims of foreign language education in the early ages, and the approaches that can be used to achieve such aims. Regarding the first question about the aims of foreign language education, Subirats' suggestion that education has a substantive and instrumental component is highly relevant. According to the students' experiences and current perspectives, we find a strong bias towards instrumental conceptions. On such accounts, it seems that learning a foreign language is simply a means to an end; whether this is accessing higher education, getting a good job, or having better opportunities. This focus on instrumentality is even found in Early Childhood Education students. When asked to consider the aims of introducing a foreign language in preschool education (with 3 to 5 year-olds), the conversation tends to be dominated by a focus on the future (job) prospects of these small children. While efforts to improve the future opportunities of all individuals are the cornerstone of inclusive education, this bias towards instrumental thinking is harmful insofar as it fails to address the question in an age-appropriate way and appeals to future needs (which may not even be relevant in the future) instead of establishing clear aims in the present. Why then, should young children start to learn foreign languages? What are the main aims in line with their respective cognitive, emotional and physical stages of development? Should we expect a five-year-old (or 12-year-old) to want to learn English to improve their future job prospects? To make any attempt to address these questions, we need to turn our attention away from the instrumental and focus, instead, on the role of the substantive component of education. Subirats asserts that this component is related to the construction of the person. Thus, on this account, developing the substantive component contributes to the development of the person. At the same time, basing educational practice on the substantive endows such practice with meaning by anchoring it to the

interests, concerns, and previous experiences of each individual, regardless of their age or educational level.

To demonstrate this point, I will describe an activity carried out with students enrolled on the third year of the Primary School Education degree programme at the University of Girona. The activity takes place on the first day of a compulsory module providing them with a basic introduction to current approaches to teaching a foreign language (English in this case). The aim is twofold: 1) to recall their individual past experiences, sharing them to create a collective resource on which to base reflections, discussions, proposals, etc.; 2) to illustrate scaffolding techniques to promote foreign language communication with students of different levels/abilities. Step-by-step instructions are given in which students are asked to think about their experiences and express their memories and feelings in different formats; pictorial, single words, sentence completion and, finally, a free-form text. A full description of the activity is provided in Figure 1.

Activity: Recalling experiences of learning English at school

Objectives

- *Recall individual experiences
- *Share experiences to create a collective resource on which to base reflections, discussions, and proposals throughout the module
- * Illustrate scaffolding strategies for the foreign language classroom

Preparation

Ask students to take two pieces of paper. Tear one piece into 2 and number each slip with the numbers 1 & 5. Tear the second piece into three and number them 2, 3, and 4. Give students step-by-step instructions for each stage. Collect the respective slips of paper as they complete each stage. Organise the slips into piles according to number.

Instructions for each stage (numbers correspond to numbered slips of paper)

- 1) Think back to when you learned English at primary school. How does this make you feel? Draw a picture to illustrate.
- 2) Write down three adjectives to describe what you illustrated in the picture.
- 3) Thinking about your English classes, complete the sentence on the board. [When I was at primary school, I particularly liked...]
- 4) Thinking about your English classes, complete the sentence on the board. [When I was at primary school, I did not like...]
- 5) Write a brief summary of your experience of learning English at primary school.

Follow-up

Assign students a number from 1 to 5. Ask them to form groups according to the numbers assigned. Give each group the corresponding slips of paper (e.g. give group 1 the pictures from stage 1). Ask them to analyse the information collected, categorising the different experiences and highlighting key findings. Ask them to prepare a brief summary of the findings.

Sharing group findings

A spokesperson from each group (usually delegated by the others due to their language competence) presents their findings to the whole class. Each presentation is followed by an open debate where students are encouraged to expand on the findings or to contribute relevant reflections.

Reflect on scaffolding activity

Ask students to reflect on the formats used during the different stages of the activity.

Ask them how they felt during these different stages.

Round-up

Ask students to think about the following questions for the next class, keeping in mind the reflections and discussions from today:

- What are the main aims of foreign language education in the early ages?
- What kind of approaches can be used to achieve such aims?

Figure 1. Activity to reflect on students' experiences of learning English at school

The activity described above emphasises the role of the substantive component of education, linking educational practice with the personal, and making it meaningful by introducing theory on the basis of students' previous experiences and individual concerns. Within the context of foreign language teaching, the activity is designed in a way which provides sufficient scaffolding to ensure that all students can participate and express their views in accordance with their varied levels of linguistic competence. The findings extracted from the activity over several years provide further insight which can help us rethink the role of foreign language teaching. The pictures drawn by students are particularly revealing, showing experiences ranging from 1) negative (or very negative); 2) contrasting both positive and negative memories; to 3) conveying positive memories. Looking at the negative experiences first, we find examples such as the one in Figure 2, in which we clearly see the impact on the child (and on the adult who is now recalling this) of being in a situation in which she neither understands what is being said or what is expected of her.



Figure 2. Negative memories (category 1)

The marked contrast between the dominant position of the teacher and the helpless child crying at her desk is evident and supports recent calls for more attention to be paid to protecting students' self-esteem and emerging self-concepts (Csizér & Magid 2014; Rubio 2014; Miyahara 2015; Waddington 2019). This example also points to an aspect which is focused on in several drawings: the distribution of space in the classroom and the importance of seating arrangements. A drawing from category 2 - contrasting both positive and negative aspects – can help illustrate this further; namely Figure 3, which shows a classroom distribution with students sitting in lines, facing teacher and repeating what teacher says. This drawing highlights the depersonalised character of this scenario by representing each student in exactly the same anonymous way, showing a group of identical heads enclosed within their desks, facing an equally anonymous teacher.

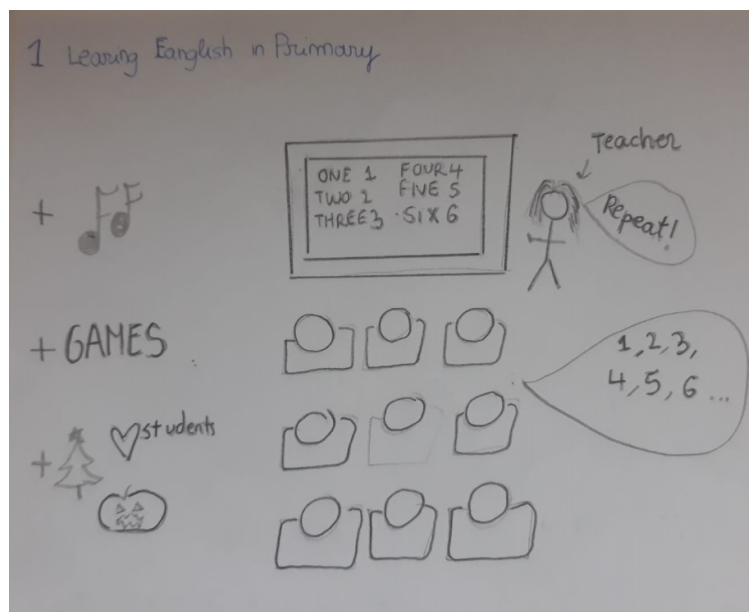


Figure 3. Contrasting positive and negative memories (category 2)

When sharing their findings and discussing the issues raised, students highlighted the importance of seating and classroom distribution, arguing that they would organise classroom space differently to enable students to work together in groups, in line with recommendations in research on applied linguistics in early childhood education (Field 1980) and primary school education (Wright 2005) dating back to at least the 1980s. As for the role of the teacher, they felt that it was important to take the lead when giving instructions or explaining, but that in general the teacher should act as facilitator, supporting and guiding students and working closely with them. In relation to this point, they criticised the overuse of drilling techniques such as the one illustrated in Figure 3, where we see the teacher asking students to “repeat”. By contrast, they argued that activities which immerse children in the world of songs, games and activities related to topics of relevance and interest to them (such as Christmas or Halloween as we see on the left-hand side of Figure 3) help develop language skills in a way which resembles the conditions in which they acquire their first language. For some authors, recreating these (home) conditions within the context of formal education is the key to successful language education (Siqués & Vila 2014). This idea is reinforced further by many student representations, such as the one in Figure 4, where we see an explicit criticism of the overuse of workbooks and grammar-based approaches.



Figure 4. Contrasting positive and negative memories (category 2)

Using the present class activity (recalling their own experiences) as an example, some students highlighted the way in which grammar can be worked on implicitly, without the monotonous and decontextualized activities that are often found in workbooks. Stage 2 of the experience recall activity specifically asks them to select appropriate “adjectives” (to describe what they illustrated in the picture), while stages 3 and 4 ask them to carry out an activity (sentence completion) that can be used to introduce and practice grammatical structures, such as the conjugation of the verb ‘to like’ in the past tense in affirmative and negative modes. This insight helped clarify the usefulness of the training activity for some students, who admitted to being surprised when their university teacher had asked them to draw a picture instead of explaining theory to them, as they had expected. To end this brief analysis on a positive note, Figure 5 presents us with a simple, yet powerful image that captures the essence of successful foreign language teaching insofar as it shows both teacher and student engaged in a positive communicative process.



Figure 5. Positive memories (category 3)

Substantive and instrumental

Returning to the question posited above regarding the aims of foreign language education in the early years, the memory evoked in Figure 5 can help address this question in a substantive way, and in a way which is consistent not only with current curricular guidelines, but also with wider theoretical advances in this field. In the context of preschool education, curricular guidelines make it clear that the main aim is to provide children with an opportunity to start ‘living the language’, using it to discover, socialise, experiment, express feelings and experiences, while gradually becoming aware that the (foreign) language is not just a ‘subject’ we do at school, but a means of communicating just like the language(s) we use at home (Departament d’Educació 2009; Waddington 2019). In the context of primary education, the recently updated competency-based curriculum also emphasises the communicative aspect, adding that learning different languages helps develop children’s plurilingual and intercultural competence, understood as the capacity to use languages for communicative purposes and to take part in intercultural interactions (Departament d’Ensenyament 2015, p.7). Within a wider context, Council of Europe guidelines also emphasise that the aim of language education today is to facilitate communication and interaction of Europeans of different mother tongues (Council of Europe 2001, p.2). We could argue that this is yet another manifestation of instrumental thinking, with language again being conceived as a means to an end. However, the instrumental approach presented here differs significantly from the versions referred to earlier, which centred on improving individual opportunities. In the first place, the underlying purpose referred to has a collective rather than individual character, and specifically aims to promote ‘mutual understanding and cooperation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination’ (2001, p. 2). Secondly, although the instrumental component is clear, the importance of foregrounding the substantive component of education is also highlighted strongly in the guidelines provided. Thus, in the section providing teachers with recommendations to help them apply the principles of constructive language learning in their classrooms, the first measure refers explicitly to ‘basing language teaching and learning on the needs, motivations, characteristics and resources of learners’ (2001, p. 3). What emerges is the need to take into

account both the substantive and instrumental components of education; taking care to ensure that the latter is understood in an age-appropriate and realistic way. This means focusing on the role of language as a vital component of education which contributes to the construction of the self (at all ages) and the emergence of positive relationships between self and others, based on respect, cooperation and understanding.

Added value = linking educational practice with individual experience

With regards to the substantive component of foreign language teaching and learning, I would like to conclude this paper by arguing that it is precisely this component that can help address the question of whether foreign language classes and foreign language teacher training still have a place in today's society. In other words, as an intermediary agent, does the school or university provide any added value that cannot already be obtained in other spaces and from other resources? In my view, basing education on the person and linking educational practice with the heterogeneous experiences and interests of our students is, in itself, the added value which endows our practice with sense. If they wanted to, the students who participated in the training experience described in this paper could develop their own language skills and acquire knowledge about the latest theoretical developments in foreign language teaching without the assistance of an intermediary agent (university teacher). However, outside the intermediary space (university), what they could not do so easily is participate in carefully designed collective and constructive learning activities based on their own individual experiences, which prompt them to link these experiences with current theories and think how they will make their own practice meaningful and valuable for their future students.

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