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# Rethinking the 'ideal native speaker' teacher in early childhood education

Julie Waddington

Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Girona, Catalonia, Spain

## ABSTRACT

Current foreign language education policies advocate plurilingual approaches to learning and teaching languages and call into question the 'ideal native speaker' as the ultimate model. Observations within a teacher training context indicate that this ideal still holds considerable weight among pre-service teachers. A study was carried out with students enrolled on the degree programme in Early Childhood Education at a university in Catalonia to explore the extent to which the 'ideal native speaker' model prevails within this community. The study analysed data from different instruments applied within the context of a core module which includes an innovative approach to embedding English as a foreign language in the early years. Findings confirm the prevalence of the model and reveal beliefs and assumptions which not only perpetuate the ideal itself, but also reinforce disempowering and discriminatory attitudes which are incongruent with current policies regarding language education. Changes reported in post-intervention findings highlight the need to develop reflective skills alongside linguistic and didactic competences in Early Childhood EFL Education. One of the main contributions of the study is its identification of deficit views of non-specialist teachers and its call for collaborative practice in which all linguistic abilities have a place.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

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## Introduction

The cultural diversity found within today's classrooms compels us to rethink some of the basic foundations upon which current education is based. Regarding language education, recent studies have highlighted the fact that it is no longer tenable to think in terms of homogenous classes with students whose L1 is the same as the main language of instruction, accompanied by teachers who are 'ideal native speakers' of the target languages being taught (Cenoz, 2015). From a European policy perspective, this position is supported by the plurilingual shift advocated from the beginning of this century, urging language teachers and policy makers to rethink their views on what and how to teach:

**CONTACT** Julie Waddington  [julie.waddington@udg.edu](mailto:julie.waddington@udg.edu)

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[T]he aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 14)

Expanding further, the document highlights the need to develop aspects such as learner motivation and the confidence needed to face language experiences, as well as the importance of recognising that language learning is a lifelong task.

### Early childhood education

Marking the beginning of this journey, quality early childhood education is increasingly recognised as a fundamental basis for inclusive lifelong learning. Despite the increasing tendency to introduce English as a foreign language (EFL hereinafter) in formal early years settings, publications reviewing English teaching in the early years in different cultural settings across the globe highlight the need to develop a skilled workforce through professional training (Mourão & Lourenço, 2015; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Waddington et al., 2018). Reporting on the situation in Spain, a recent study suggests that pre-service training has not prepared teachers for the task of introducing a foreign language in the early years and that specific training is needed to cover both linguistic and didactic competences (Andúgar et al., 2019). The report proposes that universities should review their academic requirements to guarantee minimum levels in the foreign language and also design foreign language itineraries within their Early Childhood Education degree programmes (Andúgar et al., 2019, p. 484). The study presented in this paper reports on actions carried out in a Catalan university which correspond precisely to these calls by designing and implementing a foreign language itinerary (EFL) within its Early Childhood Education programme. As a researcher and teacher working within this context, experiences with different cohorts of students over the course of several years (from 2010 to 2019) suggested that attitudes and beliefs towards language learning and teaching were out of sync with current policies advocating plurilingual approaches to language education. Specifically, the idea expressed in the opening citation that language should not be taken in isolation, ‘with the “ideal native speaker” as the ultimate model’, seemed not to have filtered through from theory into practice. On the contrary, it seemed to me that the ideal was strongly operational among students, shaping their self-perceptions and beliefs about language teaching.

### The ‘ideal native speaker’ teacher

5According to Council of Europe policy discussed in the Introduction to this paper, language education is ‘no longer seen as simply to achieve “mastery” of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the “ideal native speaker” as the ultimate model’ (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 14). Nevertheless, initial findings within the educational context referred to above suggest that policy changes may not have filtered through to practice and that beliefs about language education among pre-service teachers are still shaped by the assumptions and approaches deemed to be outdated by policy makers and experts in the field. When we relate this more specifically to the field of early childhood education, these prevailing attitudes conflict with recent approaches which emphasise the importance of holistic learning and the need for

teachers to be trained to attend to all the developmental needs of young children: cognitive, physical, affective *and* linguistic (Taylor, 2005; Waddington, *forthcoming*). Emphasising that these early language learning experiences are the beginning of a lifelong journey, other authors (Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar Soto, 2018; Mourão & Ellis, 2020) highlight the need to ensure that these experiences are positive, in a way which is closely aligned with the Council of Europe's insistence on the need to shift our attention to aspects such as learner motivation and confidence (2001). Considering the 'native' speaker to be the ideal candidate to introduce English in early years settings solely (or primarily) on the basis of their 'nativeness' is evidently at odds with such approaches and could have negative effects in terms of (a) affecting non-native English speaker teachers' (NNESTs hereinafter) self-perceived competences and inhibiting them from using or introducing English in their classrooms (see Bernat, 2009; Suarez, 2000); (b) affecting school policy by influencing decisions concerning whether to introduce English or not (if teaching staff's perceived language competences do not live up to the 'ideal native speaker' model); (c) generating discriminatory practices favouring native English speaker teachers (NESTs hereinafter) over NNESTs (see Selvi, 2010); or (d) limiting children's opportunities by failing to offer the diverse range of languages recommended within a plurilingual approach to early language education (Council of Europe, 2001). Although a considerable body of research has emerged during the first part of this century on the 'native' versus 'non-native' teacher debate (Bernat, 2009; Canagarajah, 2005; Holliday, 2006; Kiczkowiak, 2014; Medgyes, 2001; Moussu & Llorca, 2008; Selvi, 2011), work critiquing the native speaker construct dates back to the 1990s (Kramsch, 1997; Leung et al., 1997; Rampton, 1990; Valdès, 1998). The present study aims to contribute to this ongoing critique, focusing specifically on the self-perceptions and attitudes of pre-service teachers. In this respect, the study is aligned with work developed in locations as diverse as Uruguay (Suarez, 2000), Germany and Austria; (Dewaele et al., 2020), and responds to calls for further investigations in different geographical settings.

## Exploring pre-service teacher perspectives

### *Study background*

The study reports on work carried out in the Faculty of Education at the University of Girona, which has embedded foreign language teacher training within its early childhood degree programme, in a compulsory second year annual module. The module *Diversitat i connexions entre àrees curriculars i entorn* (*Diversity and connections between curricular areas and the environment*) includes four blocks of content, delivered by different specialist teachers, providing students with an introduction to the main objectives of the second stage of the preschool curriculum (3–6 years) and to key theoretical and practical advances in this field. Students design a holistic/interdisciplinary teaching unit based on a topic of their choice and following the different requirements set according to the focus of each block. One of the most challenging requirements comes in the final block of the module which is dedicated to introducing EFL in the early years. Unlike the rest of the module (75%), which is delivered in the main language of instruction of the university (Catalan, referred to as L1 hereinafter), this block is delivered in English and organised according to the overview provided in [Figure 1](#).

<b>NAME OF MODULE: <i>Diversitat i connexions entre àrees curriculars i entorn</i></b> <b>(Diversity and connections between curricular areas and the environment)</b>			
<b>BLOCK 4: Introducing ELT within an integrated early years approach</b>			
<b>Session</b> (90" class)	<b>Content</b>	<b>Focus*</b>	<b>Portfolio Tasks</b>
1	Foreign languages in the early years:the European context & the Catalan Curriculum. Key objectives & principles	Why?	4.1 (Pedagogical Justification)
2	The challenges of introducing English at preschool: specialist or generalist?	Who?	4.1
3	Contextualising English learning activities within the preschool day	When?	
4	Incorporating English learning activities into existing projects/teaching units	What?	4.3 (design of English language learning activities to include in group project...)
5	Selecting learning activities at preschool (addressing <i>all</i> educational needs)	How?	4.3 (...following same format as previous blocks)
<b>Break for 2-week school placement / Development of group projects</b>			
6	Oral presentation of teaching proposals + Peer Assessment Activity		4.2 Peer feedback activity (observing & completing a rubric highlighting strengths, potential difficulties, etc. of other groups' proposals)
7	Peer feedback on proposals. Review of Block + Resolution of doubts / guidance on final tasks.		4.2 Peer feedback activity (giving and receiving feedback on proposals) Writing a summary/reflection on feedback received & modifications to proposals for portfolios
Driving questions help structure the content and maintain the focus of each session.			

**Figure 1.** Embedding ELT within early years education. Source: Waddington (forthcoming).

This strategy of asking students to incorporate foreign language activities within a previously established context corresponds to one of the key recommendations of the Catalan Early Years Curriculum (3-6 years) which recommends that when a foreign language is introduced, it should not be taught separately from other areas, but integrated and contextualised within existing classroom projects (Departament d'Educació, 2008). Task 4.3 gives students an opportunity to test out this approach by exploring ways in which they could integrate English language learning activities in their units in ways which are consistent and coherent with the work already being developed in L1. Before designing activities for their own projects, students are asked to reflect on the questions debated during the block, relating them to their own projects, and elaborating a pedagogical justification as indicated in the instructions for Task 4.1 (see Figure 2).

The work carried out in this block represents a challenge to students who have been accustomed to a system which treats foreign language learning as something different from or additional to 'regular' learning, and as the exclusive domain of specialist language teachers.

### **Study aims**

Conducted within the specific context described above, the study explores the extent to which the changes called for since the beginning of the century are reflected in pre-service teachers' thinking about language education almost twenty years on. In particular,

***Diversitat i connexions entre àrees curriculars i entorn***

**Group Portfolio Task 4.1**

**Incorporating English into existing projects**

Based on the input provided in the last five sessions, discuss the different ways in which you could introduce English activities into your projects (Teaching Units). Remember that all activities should be meaningful (for the children) and related to the other activities they will be carrying out during the project.

Write a brief pedagogical justification, describing **how** you are going to introduce English into your project and **justifying** your reasons for making this decision (why have you decided to do it this way? In what way will this approach be meaningful/relevant for the children?).

Pay particular attention to the following:

- Who will introduce the activities (generalist/class teacher, specialist language teacher?)
- How will the switch from L1 to L2 occur?
- When will the activities take place?
- What methodology/ies will be used?

**Figure 2.** Pedagogical justification for incorporating English into existing preschool projects.

we consider the extent to which the ‘ideal native speaker’ is still perceived to be the ‘ultimate model’ and whether the idea of developing ‘a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place’ has filtered through from theory to practice (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 14). Two research questions have been formulated to focus our enquiry:

- (1) To what extent is the ‘ideal native speaker’ model prevalent among pre-service early years teachers?
- (2) To what extent has the idea of developing ‘a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place’ established itself in early childhood education?

### **Participants**

The main sample was made up of all students enrolled on the module during the academic years 2016–2017 (N = 125 students, Group 1), 2017–2018 (N = 124, Group 2), and 2018–2019 (N = 133, Group 3): a total of 382 students enrolled on the early childhood education degree and the dual degree in early childhood and primary education. A smaller section of this population (N = 40 in 2016–2017; N = 42 in 2017–2018: total 82) were invited to participate in focus groups to obtain more in-depth qualitative data. These groups included a representative sample of the whole cohort, with students reporting

linguistic competences ranging from CEFR A2 to C2 (levels were obtained through the pre-intervention questionnaire) and different academic profiles/interests (students enrolled on different minors). All 82 students accepted the invitation after being informed of the nature of the research and the procedure to be followed. The majority (95.5%) of these participants were female, reflecting tendencies in both pre-school and primary training and employment in this and other countries. The socio-economic factors underpinning this gender breakdown are discussed at length by Wallet (2006, pp. 17–18), helping to expose the gender stereotyping of the profession. All participants shared the same L1 (Catalan) and their mean age was 20.5 years. An Informed Consent Form was used to provide them with a clear briefing prior to the focus groups and to establish a working agreement whereby all opinions shared in the groups would be treated confidentially and anonymously.

## Methods

The study is part of a wider project which aims to assess the results of designing and implementing a foreign language itinerary within a general Early Childhood Education degree programme. For the purposes of this particular study, and in order to address the research questions stated above, we focus on the results of two specific instruments applied during three consecutive academic years between 2016 and 2019. The first instrument consisted of pre- and post-intervention self-reporting questionnaires prompting participants to share their views on how EFL should be introduced in preschool. The questionnaires included closed questions with multiple response options, while also providing the option for respondents to add open-ended comments to justify and explain their responses. Two closed questions were designed to obtain specific data pertaining to our research questions:

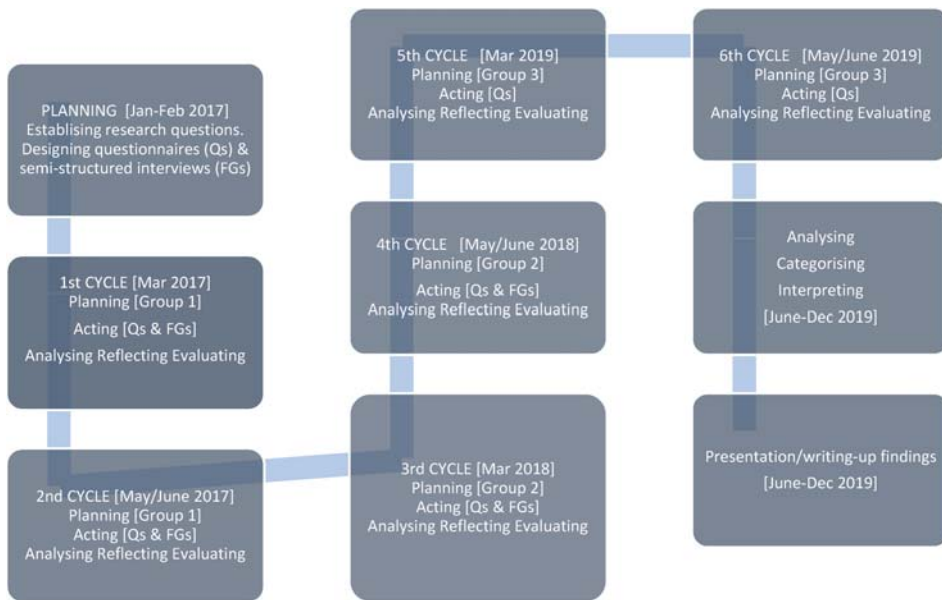
If English is introduced in early years' settings, who should be responsible for introducing it?

Response options: generalist teacher, specialist language teacher, native speakers.

Do you think you'll be able to contribute toward the task of introducing English at preschool?

Response options: yes, maybe, probably not, definitely not.

Questionnaires were administered to all participants before and after the intervention. Although the language of instruction of the teaching intervention was English, the questionnaires were administered in L1 to ensure that all participants understood the questions fully and to encourage maximum expression in the open-ended component. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain an initial overview of student perspectives before exploring them in more depth in the second instrument, consisting of focus groups conducted in small groups of 4–5 participants. The focus groups were organised to coincide with group tutorials provided at the end of each block to provide students with support and guidance. As a teacher of the module (Block 4), I had already established a working relation with the groups I had been assigned to tutor (a quarter of the total student cohort) and was therefore in a position to be able to invite them to participate in the study. The focus groups were held before the teaching intervention began (March), and once again after the block had been completed (May/June) in the first and second year of the study, as indicated in [Figure 3](#). With 9 focus groups in year one (Group 1 interviewed twice) and 10 in year 2 (Group 2 interviewed twice), this resulted in a total of 38 focus groups across the two-year period.



**Figure 3.** Data collection and analysis process over the three-year period of the study.

Discussions lasted approximately 30 min and were recorded to facilitate subsequent data analysis. I initiated discussions by repeating the same questions participants had already answered individually in the questionnaires, encouraging them to expand on their answers and to debate the different points raised together (in L1).

### *Data analysis*

The data collection and analysis process was organised into different cycles, as indicated in [Figure 3](#). Data was triangulated and analysed within an interpretative framework, using the ‘constant comparison method’ of grounded theory developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Data from the questionnaires was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively to obtain a general overview of participants’ views on the specific questions posed and to capture the specific perspectives and views expressed in open-ended responses. Recordings of the study groups were analysed in detail through repeated and careful listenings to capture what was actually there, as opposed to what I expected (Bailey, 2008). In this respect, and in line with recommendations, I opted to transcribe the recordings myself and to analyse them within an interpretative approach framed by the research questions and facilitated by my familiarity with the context (Bailey, 2008). During repeated listenings, I was able to establish a set of emerging categories that helped organise and make sense of the data obtained. Before proceeding to represent the findings, all contributions were anonymised, with names coded according to Focus group and participant: i.e. participant 1 from Focus Group 1 became FG1\_P1. Secondly, fragments of particular relevance were translated from L1 to English and reviewed by a professional translator to ensure that meanings had been reproduced accurately.



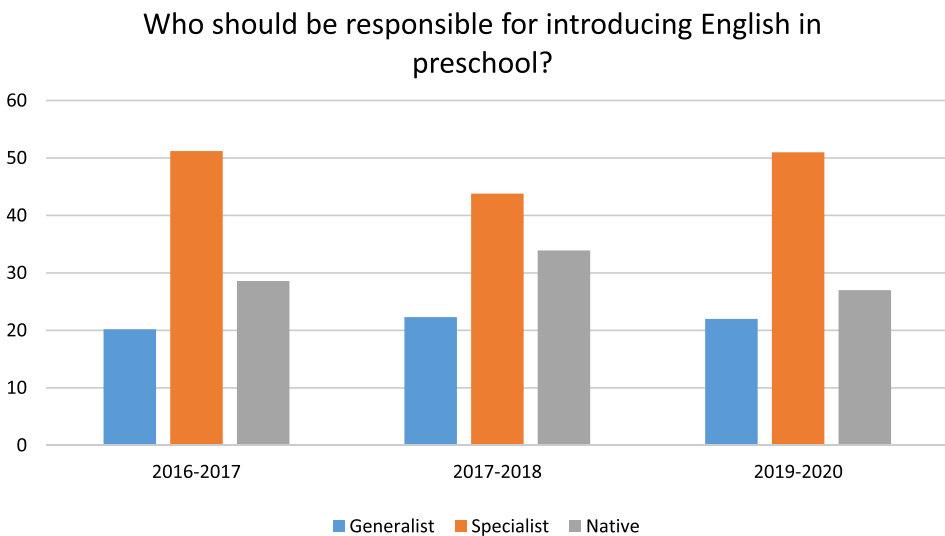
## Findings

### *Exploring the prevalence of the 'ideal native speaker' model*

#### *Pre-intervention perspectives*

When asked who should be responsible for introducing English with preschool children, participants consistently rate the generalist preschool teacher in third place on the scale, after specialist language teachers and native speakers, as shown in [Figure 4](#). Despite the specific training needed to work with preschool children, this appears to come second place in the participants' order of priorities.

Data obtained from questionnaires across the three-year period shows a consistent tendency to select the specialist language teacher as the person who should be responsible for introducing English with preschool children. This tendency corresponds with the general practice observed in the community, in which the specialist English teacher (usually trained as a primary school teacher) is deployed to 'teach an hour of English a week' in the preschool classroom. Although this practice has been called into question on pedagogical grounds by authors in different geographical settings – Flores & Corcoll, in Catalonia (2008); Cerná in the Czech Republic (Cerná, 2015); and Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar Soto in Spain (2018) – it is not surprising to find that participants' responses reflect what they have observed and deemed to be 'normal' practice up to now. What is surprising, however, is that more participants consider NESTs to be better suited to the task than specially trained preschool teachers (generalists). When this point is analysed in more depth, drawing on data obtained from the focus groups, we find considerable evidence that the 'ideal native speaker' model holds strong within the population studied. At the beginning of the discussions, the belief that 'native is obviously best' is advanced in most of the focus groups as something which is perceived to be self-evident and common knowledge: 'well obviously native's best' (FG6\_P3); 'I mean we all know native's best, but ... (FG22\_P2)'. The doubt expressed ('but) does not



**Figure 4.** Pre-Intervention Questionnaire results over 3-year period.

call into question the premise upon which the assumption is based, but rather the lack of native teachers in the educational community. That is, the native teacher model is considered to be the ideal, but one which is currently unattainable, as expressed in the following comments ‘we think it would be fantastic to have native teachers, but it’s really difficult to find them’ (FG27\_P1); ‘yes, sure, that’s true, but there’s obviously not enough of them’ (FG4\_P4). When participants are encouraged to develop their ideas further and to explain why they consider native teachers to be the ideal model, two categories emerge. The first category pertains to beliefs concerning pronunciation. Within this category we find the assertion that native speaker’s pronunciation is ‘unquestionably the best’ (FG23\_P3), which supports the accompanying claim that ‘children’s pronunciation will be better if they learn from a native’ (FG7\_P2). When analysing this question further, we find that native is always equated with ‘British’, or as ‘British or American’, as indicated in the following response to one of the open-ended questions of the pre-intervention questionnaire:

In response to the answer about who should introduce it, I think there are two answers to this: teachers specialised in foreign languages and preferably native speakers. I think this because that way the children will be able to acquire a British or American accent. (Group 1)

The second category that emerges from our analysis corresponds to notions of what is ‘real’ or ‘authentic’. Although agreeing that a NNEST can acquire a high level of proficiency in the language, participants in FG7 argue that it will never be the same (as that of a native), and that ‘it’s always more tiring to speak in a language that’s not your real one’ (FG7\_P5). Referring back to the question of pronunciation, an interesting exchange occurs in FG20 when P2 pinpoints a factor which explains why she considers ‘natives to be best’. ‘The fact is’, she claims, ‘with a native, the accent’s always much more real’. Her emphasis on the word *real* prompts some gentle laughter within the group, to which she responds by expanding further: ‘It’s true! It’s much more real!’. Finally, in an exchange considering the need to link language development with cultural awareness, participants in FG9 argue that a native speaker will always have an advantage over NNESTs since their cultural knowledge is ‘real’ rather than learned: ‘of course a non-native can find out things about English culture, but she doesn’t have that authentic knowledge; she can’t answer questions spontaneously in the same way’ (FG9\_P3). This question of spontaneity also arises in relation to managing unpredictable turns in communicative situations: ‘you might have a good level of English, and you might have prepared everything really well, but things will always come up that you don’t know, because it’s not your real language: then what do you do?’ (FG2\_P1).

### *Post-intervention perspectives*

When analysing data from the post-intervention stage, we find a marked shift in perspective in participants’ responses to the question of who should be responsible for introducing English in preschool. In contrast to results from pre-intervention questionnaires, in which the generalist teacher had been ranked last, 65% of participants consider that generalist preschool teachers should be the ones responsible for this task. Participants who maintain the view that NESTs are ‘best’, provide comments indicating that while their initial belief has stayed the same, it is now more informed and subject to certain conditions, as illustrated in the following example: ‘Although natives are preferable, there are obviously a lot of

other factors that we have to take into account' (Group 2). These other factors are discussed at length in post-intervention focus groups and our analysis of the data obtained leads to the emergence of three main categories: (1) issues related to teacher training; (2) knowledge of the language of instruction (3) language teaching aims. Regarding the first category, the importance of professional teacher training is highlighted throughout the discussions. Some participants maintain their preference for NESTs, but insist that they must also be adequately trained to work with preschool children. On this note, some participants refer back to their pre-intervention responses and express surprise that the question of training had not been foremost in their minds – 'I can't believe I hadn't thought about that before' (FG11\_P2). Taking this further, concerns are raised about the prevalence of such views among the general population: 'It's quite worrying really, because I know if you ask most people they'll say they'd definitely prefer a native teacher, whether they're properly trained or not' (FG17\_P4). In relation to the second category, participants show a heightened awareness of the need to establish close communication with children. Referring back to simulation activities carried out in class, participants insist on the importance of being able to communicate effectively in the child's L1, arguing that 'native teachers must be able to understand the language of instruction' (FG29\_P1) and/or 'they also need to be able to communicate in the children's language' (FG35\_P4). As well as concerns about L1 competence (category 2), reflection on the class simulations also generates considerable discussion about the aims and objectives of language teaching itself (category 3), as indicated in the following account:

What matters is that we make sure the children have good first experiences with the language. This matters much more than whether the teacher speaks this way or that way. It matters more that she can understand them and knows how to encourage them to express themselves. (FG10\_P3)

From this perspective, the objective of language teaching shifts. Considering their own (often negative) past experiences in conjunction with the activities carried out during the intervention, participants emphasise the need to 'build children's confidence (FG17\_P3)' when using the language, or to 'make them feel motivated in English time (FG36\_P2)'. Rethinking their initial beliefs, some participants insist that these two factors (confidence and motivation) represent the key to successful language learning and should be prioritised by teachers. These shifts in perspectives lead to a re-evaluation of previous beliefs upholding the native speaker as the ideal model, as highlighted in the following comment: 'I've realised there's much more to being a good English teacher than having a good accent or being native' (FG33\_P1).

### ***Developing a linguistic repertory in which all linguistic abilities have a place?***

#### ***Pre-intervention perspectives***

During the pre-intervention stage, when asked if they think they'll be able to contribute towards the task of introducing English in the preschool classroom, questionnaire responses suggest that opinions are split evenly between those who answer affirmatively (*yes* = 45%) and those who are not sure (*maybe* = 45%). A small minority (8%) respond that they will probably not be able to do this, while the remaining 2% answer '*definitely not*'. Reflecting a general level of uncertainty, some participants add comments in the open-ended section, revealing concerns about their ability to follow the block – 'I don't feel

confident speaking English. If the teacher speaks too fast, I won't understand anything' (Group 3) – and questioning the fact that the block is delivered in English – 'I don't understand why we have to do this part in English, it's not really fair' (Group 1). Analyses of focus group discussions shed further light on these points and help to understand the resistance detected from the students' perspective. When asked to elaborate, focus group participants explain that they expected this kind of content to be covered in the foreign language minor and don't understand why it should concern them as generalist teachers, with no aspirations to become English teachers. Commenting further on the perception of injustice detected in questionnaires, some participants express the view that it would be inappropriate to assess their performance within the same parameters as their peers who are enrolled on the foreign language minor and who have higher levels of English language competence. A division is established within the participants' discourse between the aspiring-to-be English teachers enrolled on the minor, who are expected to have advanced levels of English (minimum B2), and the other generalist pre-service teachers on the programme, whose level of English language competence is deemed to be irrelevant, as expressed in the following comment: 'I can see why you need a high level if you want to teach the language, but I mean personally I didn't sign up for that' (FG35\_P1).

### *Post-intervention perspectives*

Data obtained after the teaching intervention suggests that the idea of a clear division of roles and responsibilities detected during the pre-intervention stage has been re-evaluated, giving way to perspectives which appreciate that all linguistic abilities have a place, and that all teachers have a role to play in the task of introducing EFL in the pre-school context. The first key indicator of this change is provided by the inversion of priorities observed in participants' answers to the question of who should be responsible for introducing EFL; with respondents now selecting the generalist teacher as the first option as opposed to the last. The second indicator is provided by the increase in the number of participants answering positively to the question '*Do you think you'll be able to contribute toward the task of introducing English at preschool?*'. The mean percentage of participants answering affirmatively across the 3-year period stands at 71%, representing an increase of 26% in contrast to the pre-intervention stage. Analyses of the focus group discussions held after the teaching intervention lead to the emergence of four different categories, corresponding to the factors that have facilitated and prompted changes in perspectives. The categories are coded as follows: (1) interactive class activities and debates; (2) group project work; (3) pedagogical approaches to ELT in preschool; (4) future language goals.

Regarding the first category, the driving questions providing the theoretical focus for class sessions are mentioned as a particularly helpful strategy in practically all focus groups. Participants remark that the session focusing on the question 'who' (who should introduce EFL in the early years) particularly 'helped to think about things we'd never stopped to think about before' (FG32\_P2). Commenting on their initial reservations, participants appreciated the fact that the teacher spoke in English the whole time, making clear adjustments to promote intelligibility, checking understanding, and using clearly sign-posted visual supports to aid comprehension, while also including group work activities to stimulate participation: 'I was really nervous to start with and I felt safer speaking Catalan, but after a few sessions I decided to go for it and I'm proud that I managed to express my ideas in English in front of everyone' (FG37\_P4).

In relation to the second category, the collaborative work carried out on group projects appears to have been particularly instrumental in changing perspectives about their own roles and responsibilities. Most group formations included a diverse range of linguistic competences, in line with the diversity reported in pre-intervention questionnaires. Focus group discussions centred on this aspect and highlighted the importance of realising that they all have different skills and experiences, and that the ‘trick is to harness them and bring them together’ (FG12\_P3). As participants in several focus groups argue, this is the reality in most preschool settings, where teachers have different skills and qualities, and have to work together towards shared goals. While recognising the importance of collaboration in a general sense, what emerged as a new concept was the appreciation that this could also be applied to their diverse linguistic competences: ‘it was really interesting because ‘Anna’ thought she wouldn’t be able to contribute anything (Anna reports CEFR level A2), but she was the one who had the idea that made everything click into place’ (referring to the strategy they designed to introduce English in a meaningful way).

The example of ‘Anna’ reported above illustrates the extent to which students recognise the need for teachers with different linguistic abilities to work together, and also points to a realisation of the importance of pedagogical planning and careful design in preschool settings (category 3). Task 4.1 (see [Figure 2](#)) also appears to have played a key role in changing students’ approaches and encouraging them to design meaningful activities which are contextualised within existing projects, as opposed to designing ad-hoc activities within a language-only focus. Study group discussions frequently centre on this aspect, with students arguing for the need to develop pedagogical approaches like the ones they have designed for Task 4.1, and to stop thinking about ELT separately from other areas worked on. The sense of a need for change is summed up by the following student: ‘This part of the module has helped change my perspective altogether about how to start teaching a foreign language to preschool children’ (FG17\_P1).

Concerning the fourth and final category, one of the most encouraging outcomes for the participants in the study relates to attitudes and intentions regarding future language learning goals. Contrasting sharply with the fears and concerns expressed in the pre-intervention stage, the positive experiences and shifting perspectives reported during the intervention prompt students to set new goals for themselves, and to reconsider their own roles, as indicated in the following extract:

I never thought of myself as having anything to do with teaching English. I’ve never been that good at it myself. Now I realise that as preschool teachers we should all be able to teach it to help our students have a better start than we did. One of my main aims now is to improve my own level. This module has given me loads of ideas of how I could introduce it and make it work and I’d love to be able to do that. I just need to get my own level up. But I can do it now, I know I can. (FG15\_P4)

## Discussion

### *Pre-intervention perspectives*

The overall picture obtained prior to the teaching intervention suggests that the changes in language education advocated since the beginning of this century are not reflected in the beliefs expressed by participants in our study. Regarding the first research question,

concerning the extent to which the 'ideal native speaker' model prevails among pre-service early years teachers, we find considerable evidence to support the initial conjecture that the model remains operational among this population. While pre-intervention findings show that participants select the Specialist English teacher as the ideal candidate to introduce English in the early years, further analysis of Focus Group data shows that conceptions of the 'ideal specialist' often contain the additional proviso that this trained professional should also be a native speaker of the language. The perceived problem, according to the views expressed, is that it is difficult to find or recruit such teachers. In the first instance, before discussing the pedagogical questions that emerge from these postulations, it is important to highlight the fact that such beliefs can generate and/or perpetuate discriminatory practices favouring NESTs over NNESTs, as argued at length by previous authors (Holliday, 2006; Selvi, 2010; 2011; Suarez, 2000). It is also worth noting the effect that such beliefs can have on NNESTs (Suarez, 2000), who may perceive themselves to be regarded as 'second-choice' or 'second-best' teachers, or even as 'imposters', as discussed at length by Bernat (2009). When analysing the reasons given to explain why 'native is best', we find only two categories to justify the belief. The first and most dominant explanation offered refers to native-speaker teachers' pronunciation and the belief that their students will 'pick this up' from them and learn to speak 'more like a native'. The findings show that 'more like a native' is equated with sounding either British or American. Work developed in the field of teaching and learning English as an International language, or Lingua Franca (ELF), has helped to expose the prevailing orientation within published materials and international examinations towards British or North American varieties (Jenkins, 2012). Jenkin's work highlights the fact that this prevalence – or bias – is incongruent with uses of English across the globe, and that native English speakers (from whichever English-speaking country they may hail) 'constitute a small minority of those who use English for the purposes of intercultural communication' (2012, p. 487). Consequently, and considering that 80 per cent of English language teachers worldwide are thought to be 'non-native-speaker teachers' (Canagarajah, 2005), this majority 'should not feel the need to defer to them [native speaker teachers] for appropriate English use' (Jenkins, 2012, p. 487; Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 2). The findings of our study suggest that this 'need' or tendency to defer to the native ideal is still present, at least within the population studied. Moreover, and contrasting sharply with the international dimension emphasised by the researchers cited above, the ideal remains rooted within the geographically bounded parameters of British and/or American borders.

The second category identified when analysing justifications for considering 'native to be best' relates to perceptions of authenticity or to 'being more real'. Considering oneself (as a NNEST) to be less authentic than another (NEST) teacher could have the kind of disempowering effect identified within the literature, generating cases of imposter syndrome, as suggested by Bernat (2009). Our findings also concur with earlier work carried out by Pavlenko (2006), who discusses the way in which participants in her study invoke a distinction between their 'real' or 'natural' L1-speaking selves, in opposition to the 'artificial' or 'performative' L2-speaking self. Questioning the linguistic and psychoanalytic underpinnings of their discourse, Pavlenko asks whether it may not be more accurate to say 'that the feeling of ease and comfort attributed to speaking one's own first language stems from superior mastery of the language, whereas the perception of artificiality stems from the need to manipulate less familiar repertoires of languages learned later in life' (2006, p. 19).

Our second research question focused on the extent to which the idea of developing ‘a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place’ (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 14) has established itself in early childhood education. The results of the pre-intervention analysis suggest that this idea has not filtered through to the population studied, and that a clear opposition is established between teachers considered to be responsible for the task of introducing English (those *with* the required linguistic abilities) and those who are not (those *lacking* the required linguistic abilities). In other words, the prevailing view seems to be more in line with the (supposedly outdated) idea that the goal of language education is ‘to achieve mastery’ of languages, ‘each taken in isolation, with the “ideal native speaker” as the ultimate model’ (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 14). To some extent, this oppositional view is understandable since it corresponds to the minimum threshold levels set for the recruitment of foreign language teachers. The problem, however, is that it appears to underpin and perpetuate a deficit view of the non-specialist teacher which excludes them from what should be a collaborative practice (teaching in the early years), and can also have a debilitating effect on their own language learning processes, by reinforcing the assumption that some people are ‘just good at languages’ while others are not.

### *Post-intervention perspectives*

Findings from the post-intervention stage support the view that strategic interventions within teacher education can help bring about positive and necessary shifts in attitudes and beliefs concerning language teaching and learning (Dewaele et al., 2020). Regarding the deficit view of the non-language-specialist teacher referred to above, these are challenged from both a personal and collective perspective. From a personal standpoint, and as illustrated in the excerpt from FG15\_P4 at the end of the Findings section, participants report changes in the way they perceive their own language learning. In contrast to pre-intervention perspectives, in which language ability appeared to be conceived as something fixed, or determined by past actions (or failures), perspectives now appear to be more aligned with the principles of lifelong learning, with the focus shifting positively and constructively towards future goals and intentions. From a collective perspective, a shift is also identified in beliefs about language teaching in the early years, with a heightened awareness of the need for all early years teachers to work collaboratively to develop holistic learning environments in which ELF is embedded within existing practice (Mourão & Ellis, 2020; Waddington, forthcoming).

Rethinking deep-rooted beliefs about the ‘ideal native speaker model’ prompts a shift in attitudes and concerns, with attention turning to other factors deemed to be essential to promote appropriate and effective practice in the early years, such as receiving quality training in early childhood education and being competent in the language of instruction. These findings support calls for more specifically-designed foreign language itineraries within general early childhood education (Andúgar et al., 2019), placing the emphasis not only on the development of the foreign language competence, but also on the need to recognise the place of L1 within this plurilingual context. The findings also reveal changing conceptions regarding the aims of language teaching in early childhood education, placing greater emphasis on the need to promote positive learning experiences, in line with recent work in the field (Mourão & Ellis, 2020), and highlighting the key point that ‘the broad conception of what teaching language entails in part depends on how language itself is conceptualised’ (Council of Europe, 2009, p. 3).



## Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm our initial hypothesis that beliefs about how languages should be taught are still shaped by the 'native speaker ideal' and a restrictive view of who should be involved in the task of introducing EFL in the early years. Findings are in line with previous work highlighting: the potential negative effect of such views on the self-esteem and self-perceptions of NNESTs (Bernat, 2009; Suarez, 2000); potential discrimination in favour of NESTs (Holliday, 2006; Selvi, 2010, 2011; Suarez, 2000); the perpetuation of stereotypical views of language, equating 'ideal' English with American/British varieties (Canagarajah, 2005; Jenkins, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011); and the perpetuation of disempowering views of language use, rooted in distinctions between real and artificial selves (Pavlenko, 2006). Moreover, and given the specific focus of this study, this paper makes a unique contribution to early childhood education by highlighting the way in which such beliefs perpetuate deficit views of non-specialist language teachers, excluding them from a practice which should be collaborative and holistically-driven. Post-intervention findings testify to the benefits of embedding EFL in early childhood education in a way which encourages pre-service teachers to rethink their beliefs about language teaching. In this regard, the most significant contribution of this study is that it stresses the need to interpret a key principle of plurilingual policy – the idea of developing a linguistic repertory in which all linguistic abilities have a place – as applicable not just to learners, but also to teachers. Such a shift in focus could help move beyond deficit views of non-specialist teachers, recognising that language learning is a lifelong process for them as well as their learners, while also acknowledging their role in the collaborative task of designing and implementing age-appropriate EFL methodologies in early childhood settings.

The fact that the study has been limited to one specific context could clearly influence the results obtained, as discussed by researchers in places (e.g. Uruguay) where being an L2 English teacher is deemed to be 'the norm' and therefore carries 'no stigma' (Suarez, 2000, p. 1), and places (e.g. Germany and Austria) where pre-service teachers 'seem not to have been afflicted by Native-speakerism' (Dewaele et al., 2020, p. 19). Despite the overall results of the latter study, the authors suggest that some individuals still hold prejudices and that further work needs to be carried out in their own context and other geographical settings. Our study contributes towards this line of enquiry and shares the hope expressed by these scholars 'that educating the next generation of teachers consciously and explicitly about this issue and the related problems will inform attitudes from a grassroots level' (Dewaele et al., 2020, p. 19).

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