Early foreign language education: play as a site for child agency

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Abstract

Understanding the role of play in early childhood education is crucial. Current research suggests that play is increasingly seen as a vehicle for achieving pre-established curricular aims that prioritize school readiness, often reducing opportunities for stimulating child agency. This paper reports on a study conducted within the context of foreign language education in the early years (English as a foreign language in the Catalan context), which aimed to address the following questions: To what extent do pre-primary EFL teachers 1) recognise child agency and take it into account in foreign language education; 2) recognise the affordances play scenarios offer for children to enact their agency? A small-scale qualitative study was designed which included self-reporting questionnaires, an elicitation technique in the form of a Play Scenario Evaluation Activity, and online interviews with teachers to reflect on the Evaluation Activity and their own practice. Findings raise concerns about the ever-widening gap between understandings and implementations of play in general early childhood education and the foreign language classroom. Prevailing assumptions regarding best practice in early years ELT (teacher-centred practice, target language only policies, emphasis on fun) limit children's opportunities for enacting agency and taking an active role in their own development.

Keywords

agentic behaviour, play-pedagogy interface, learning areas, multilingual, English as a foreign language, qualitative study

Introduction

Research has shown that play-based learning can be an important element in promoting children's agency (Kultti 2022), contributing to making children happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life (Gray 2013). Understood as a 'socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001, 112), child agency - or the child's capacity to act - is heavily dependent on and shaped by the opportunities afforded to them within their everyday lives, particularly within the sphere of formal education. Recent studies in general early childhood education and care (ECEC) suggest that shifts in policy discourse are moving towards technicist and didactic uses of play which are inconsistent with recommendations for early years learning and development (Hedges 2022; Hedges, Peterson, and Wajskop 2018; Wood 2022), and which reduce opportunities for children to enact agency. Understanding the play-pedagogy interface in early childhood education can help challenge reductionist approaches which may lean disproportionally towards instruction and enculturation, reducing opportunities for children to exercise agency and engage actively in the constructive processes which are crucial to their development (Wood 2014).

In the specific context of foreign language education, concerns have been raised about the over-emphasis on instruction and the limited time allocated to child-initiated play (Robinson et al., 2015; Waddington et al., 2018). This over-emphasis correlates with an increasing drive to prepare pre-primary children for formal schooling (Ibrahim, 2022), rather than addressing the specific needs and characteristics of this unique stage of development (Taylor, 2005; Mourão & Ellis, 2020). In the specific case of English as a foreign language (EFL), studies across the globe have observed a tendency to replicate the language teaching methodologies used in primary education within early childhood settings (see Flores & Corcoll, 2008; Ng, 2013; Lau & Rao, 2013; Cernà, 2015; Cortina-Peréz & Andúgar Soto, 2018). Instead of exploring the crucial intersections between general ECEC and language education (Schwartz, 2022), this push-down tendency conceives and implements English as a 'subject' (Waddington, 2022a, p. 216), with opportunities for play restricted to structured, teacher-led activities that leave little room for children to exercise agency.

The study presented in this paper aims to contribute to these debates by considering play as a site for child agency within the context of early foreign language education. The study explores

teacher understandings of play within the foreign language classroom and the implications these understandings have for stimulating or reducing opportunities for children to enact agency. This overarching objective is crystallized in the following research questions:

To what extent do pre-primary EFL teachers

1) recognise child agency and take it into account in foreign language education?

2) recognise the affordances that play scenarios offer for children to enact agency within the foreign language classroom?

Literature Review

Child agency in early childhood education and care

Studies have shown how children as young as three express their bilingual agency either by supporting each other linguistically (Schwartz & Gorbatt, 2018) or excluding others from conversations (Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2017). Drawing on studies carried out in the US, Schwartz et al. (2020) highlight the difference between complicit agency – referring to participation in activities structured by somebody else – and controlling agency, also referred to as agency of power, referring to interactional situations where children influence, shape and change situations according to their own interests. Although strongly aligned with the concept of autonomy, this capacity to influence one's surroundings is also suggestive of an active engagement with others which has been defined as interactive agency (van Nijnatten, 2013; Almér, 2017). From this perspective, child agency is not contemplated as a mere leveraging tool to promote more or better learning (although this may indeed be a related outcome), but as a phenomenon which helps individuals exert control over and give direction to the course of their lives, while simultaneously having some influence over the conditions that shape the context in which they act (Biesta et al., 2006).

Ahearn (2001) recommends distinguishing between different types of agency - oppositional, complicit, agency of power, agency of intention - as a fruitful direction for research. In their study examining young children's language-based agency in multilingual contexts, Schwartz et. al. (2020) identified ten types of agentic behaviour related to children's active engagement, creative production of language, shaping of language activities, and managing language use (see Table 1).

Table 1. Types of agentic behaviour identified in multilingual preschool settings (Schwartz et al. (2020).

a	Engaging through non-verbal communication strategies and using home Languages
b	Engaging in repetition after peers and teacher
c	Creatively producing language, including translanguaging
d	Self-monitoring and self-correcting
e	Providing corrective feedback to others
f	Using self-talk in a novel language
g	Talking about language use and asking questions about language
h	Taking a leading role in shaping activities in a novel language
i	Managing language use in the classroom
j	Showing reluctance to use a (novel) language

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The study presented in this paper uses these exemplifications of agentic behaviour as a benchmark for identifying the affordances of different play scenarios for stimulating child agency in pre-primary English as a foreign language (EFL) settings.

Understanding play in general education

Research conducted in general early childhood education reveals that teachers are often unsure how to implement play-based pedagogical approaches (Pyle & Danniels, 2016). Two teacher profiles emerged from Pyle and Danniels' study: in the first, teachers saw play and learning as different constructs, and therefore tended to leave children to engage in free play, without teacher involvement; in the second, teachers had firmer beliefs about the pedagogical potential of play, and about their own roles during play activities, leading them to generate a wider

spectrum of play-based practice, situated along a continuum ranging from more child-directed to more teacher-directed activities.

These recent observations echo debates initiated back in the 1980s (Wood et al., 1980) about the different roles adopted by educators – from parallel players to supervising outsiders – and regarding the benefits of play for fostering child development (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Sociocultural learning theories (Vygotsky, 1978) have helped break down the false dichotomy between play and learning, emphasizing the co-construction of meanings and the necessary proactive and variable roles played by educators and learners alike. Such approaches highlight the interwoven nature of play and learning, emphasising 'how different play-based learning practices may contribute and foster not only children's social, emotional and physical development but also their academic and cognitive development in a holistic and mutually supportive manner' (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p. 778). Focusing on the important role of imagination in child development, Fleer (2018) argues that imagination in play provides a foundational basis for imagination in conceptual learning and that, consequently, play-based educational programmes that stimulate the imagination are essential for development and learning in the early years. Emphasising the sociocultural aspect of play, Wood (2014) insists that 'educational settings are seen not just as pedagogical sites for instruction and enculturation but also as sites in which children construct their own identities, friendships, rules, routines and meanings" (p. 152). Observing children during play can provide crucial information about the child's interests and motivations which can help educators foster and extend children's learning and development (Chesworth, 2016; Hedges, 2022).

Wood (2014) proposes a model for identifying three distinct modes of play: a) child-initiated play, b) adult-guided play, and c) a technicist version of educational play. In mode A, play is theorized as a natural childhood activity that supports children's exploration and discovery of their world. Mode B extends this further, drawing on Vygotskian notions of play as foundational to children's learning and socialisation, and highlighting the mediating role of the adult/educator in advancing children's learning/development. In Mode C, play is seen as a vehicle for achieving pre-established academic learning outcomes defined by curriculum policies that prioritise school readiness. Wood's model will be drawn on in this paper to consider how teachers' understandings of play can facilitate or hinder the possibilities for children to enact agency in formal education.

Understanding play in early childhood language education

In multilingual early childhood settings, play has been recognised as a vital component for stimulating child engagement and generating inclusive practices in which children can draw on their existing linguistic repertoires (Kultti, 2022), which may not yet include the majority language or language of instruction. As Kultti (2022) argues, children should not be prevented from accessing learning opportunities or from expressing themselves if they lack knowledge of the language of instruction. On the contrary, a rich early childhood setting will be founded on the principle that 'expressing oneself can also be contingent on non-verbal communication opportunities and opportunities to choose the content for communication' (Kultti, 2022, p. 3043). Play scenarios can provide such opportunities, facilitating target language learning, while simultaneously promoting attitudes of openness and respect for each other's diverse linguistic repertoires (García, 2018).

In relation to foreign language education, researchers have highlighted the need to take play seriously (Mourão, 2014; Prošic´-Santovac & Savic, 2022), underscoring the need to provide balanced opportunities for adult-led and child-initiated play activities in pre-primary education. Discussing the benefits of setting up an English language area in a pre-primary setting, Mourão (2014) suggests that this emulates approaches used in general education, thereby normalising EFL activities and supporting target language development. This suggestion is confirmed in studies analysing the effect of introducing English language areas in pre-primary classrooms (Robinson et al., 2015; Waddington et al., 2018), which show strong correlations between the language introduced in teacher-led sessions and children's language use and interactions with each other during free play. The learning area created and implemented in Waddington et al's study (2018) was designed following recommended guidelines on the pedagogical deployment of such areas in pre-primary settings (Field, 1980; Conn-Powers, 2010), and in consultation with the children themselves. This consultation process provided a platform for children to enact agency in a directly visible way, encouraging them to select the material they wanted to be included in the area and to decide on important questions concerning its layout and organisation. Evaluating the play that took place within the area, the findings of the study confirm that the provision of such an area stimulates agency enactment, encouraging children to play and engage with language learning activities individually, with their peers, or with their teacher (Waddington et al., 2018).

This paper aims to contribute to the debates highlighted above by considering play as a site for child agency in foreign language education. A study is presented that builds on previous work on child agency in multilingual settings (Schwartz at al., 2020), and previous research promoting a better understanding of the role of play in early childhood learning and development (Wood, 2014; Hedges, 2022).

The study

Context and participants

A sample of in-service EFL educators working in early childhood settings (3-5) was selected from schools collaborating with the University of xxx student internship programme. In the first instance, due care was taken to ensure a representative sample of different types of schools with a track record of introducing EFL in the pre-primary sector. Although not compulsory at the time of writing, English is becoming more widespread across the pre-primary sector, which is the first formal stage of state-funded education in Catalonia. Catalan schools provide preschool (3-5) and primary (6-11) education within the same centre, with specialist English teachers often being assigned to teach children from both educational stages. Having identified suitable schools, the aims of the study were discussed with the principle or head of studies before obtaining their approval to contact teachers assigned to deliver English provision in their pre-primary classrooms. Preliminary discussions with schools included all ethical considerations related to the participants' involvement in the study. Six schools had been selected in this initial process and all but one agreed to participate: one school declined since their pre-primary English teacher had only just joined the school and was adjusting to the new environment (the data collection period coincided with the beginning of the school year). In the next phase, conversations were held directly with the teachers to invite them to participate and to explain the method that would be followed. As a result, all teachers signed an informed consent form and agreed to take part. One teacher agreed to participate but had to withdraw during the process due to unforeseen circumstances. Ultimately, the sample included four teachers who provided us with a varied sample of the target population of pre-primary EFL teachers.

A detailed overview of the participants' profiles is provided in Appendix 1, using pseudonyms to protect anonymity. The information has been collated from self-reporting questionnaires as

well as discussions held during online meetings. All participants are qualified teachers: two trained as primary teachers with a specialization in foreign language teaching (primary school focus), and the other two participants were trained as early childhood educators. One primary trained teacher and one early childhood trained teacher report having received some additional Ministry of Education-funded training in ELT in the early years (intense courses lasting around 45h). They have worked as teachers for varying lengths of time: the least experienced teacher has been practicing for 7 years while the most experienced has been teaching for almost 20 years. All of them have spent at least half of their professional career teaching English in pre-primary classes. Regarding language competence, three of the participants hold the minimum level required by current Ministry of Education standards (B2), while one holds a C1. All participants demonstrate high levels of interest and enthusiasm for their profession. According to the researcher's experience working with schools as action researcher and practicum supervisor, this profile is representative of the target population of this study (pre-primary English teachers in the Girona region of Catalonia).

Study

The study was carried out in three distinct phases – study design, data collection, and data analysis - which are explained below:

Study design and creation of instruments

During the initial study design phase, an activity was created to explore participants' views of different play scenarios, showing children playing together, playing with teacher, or playing alone (see Appendix 2, Play scenario evaluation activity). The purpose of this elicitation strategy was to encourage participants to talk in-depth about their ideas by responding to the stimulus provided by the activity (Barton, 2015), rather than asking them directly about their thoughts on child agency or other theoretical issues related to the study focus. The strategy also intended to reduce any potential power imbalances between the interviewer and interviewees by exploring participants' attitudes and knowledge in a tacit way, providing ample opportunities for them to elaborate on their own ideas (Barton, 2015). The play scenarios included in the activity were extracted from a previous study exploring the results of creating and evaluating a foreign language area in an early childhood setting (Waddington et al., 2018). The scenarios had been analysed previously to note ways in which they illustrate the different

types of agentic behaviour identified by Schwartz et al. (2020). According to this prior analysis, the different scenarios offered multiple affordances for promoting different types of agentic behaviour, as summarised in Table 2, and were therefore considered appropriate scenarios to ask participants to evaluate. Two additional types of agentic behaviour were identified, and are proposed here as complementary to the list elaborated by Schwartz et al (2020):

1. Enjoying playing with the language
2. Remaining engaged despite not recalling the target language

Table 2. Agentic behaviour identified in the different scenarios presented in the Play Scenario Evaluation Activity

Theme & content of learning area	Social interaction	Types of agentic behaviour identified*
1. Weather routine. Pictures of vocabulary previously introduced in class	Playing with teacher	a, c, d, h, i
2. Feelings. Masks illustrating vocabulary previously introduced in class	Playing in pairs	a, b, c, d, h, i
3. Storytime. Picturebooks previously told in class + related activities	Playing alone	a, c, d, f, h, i
4. Songtime. Song books with songs sung previously in class	Playing in small groups	b, d, e, h, i
*See Table 1 for a full description of the agentic behaviours identified.		

Data collection

In the first stage of data collection, participants were asked to complete self-reporting questionnaires asking for basic information about their teaching experience (see Appendix 3). In the second stage, participants were sent instructions asking them to carry out the Play Scenario Evaluation Activity (see Appendix 2). Clarifications were provided by email if participants had any doubts during the process. Once participants had completed the activity in written form, online (individual) interviews were conducted to discuss the activity and to reflect
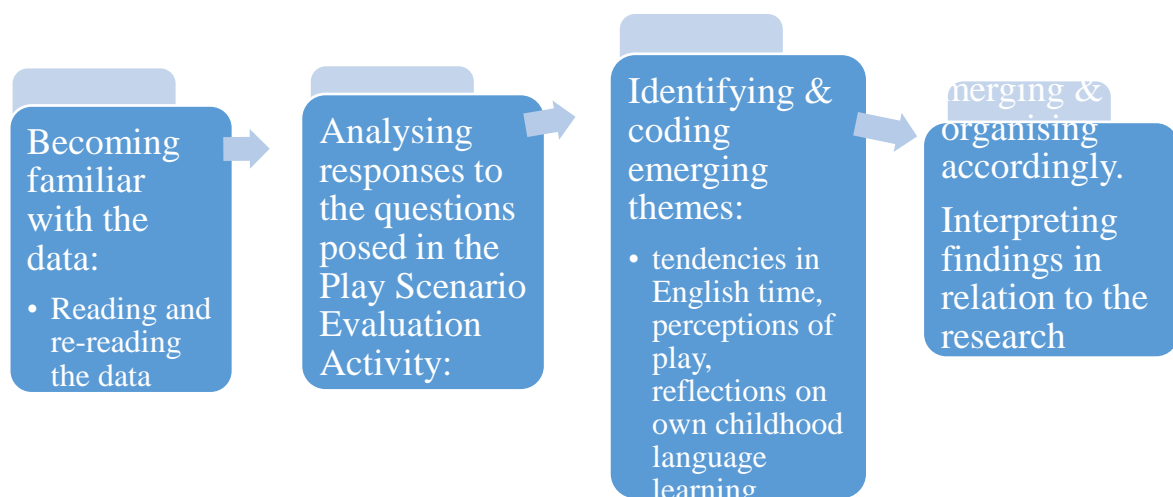
on their own practice. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on the points they had written in the evaluation activity, commenting on each play scenario in more depth and also linking their evaluations with their own practice. The researcher guided the discussion by asking them to focus their attention on the questions provided at the beginning of the evaluation activity regarding: the children's behaviour (what they are/are not doing); the teacher's behaviour; if they think the activity has any potential for stimulating language development; if they can offer any ideas for improvement. The online interviews lasted around 45 minutes and were conducted in the participants' first language (Catalan). All interviews were recorded for subsequent analysis. Transcriptions were translated into English and verified by a professional translator to ensure accuracy when reporting the findings.

Data analysis

Data from self-reporting questionnaires were collated and analysed to gain a full picture of the participant profiles and their varying experiences teaching English in the pre-primary sector. These profiles have been summarised above (Context and participants) and are taken into account when discussing the Findings of the study. After establishing participant profiles, all data were anonymized, changing real names to pseudonyms in line with the confidentiality clause included in the informed consent form signed by participants. Data obtained from the Play Scenario Evaluation Activity, online interviews, and email correspondence with participants were then triangulated and analysed in depth following a three-step process which combined deductive and inductive approaches.

Firstly, within a deductive approach, the dataset was analysed on the basis of Schwartz's (2020) classification of agentic behaviour (see Table 1). Secondly, the dataset was analysed again in relation to Wood's (2014) model for identifying different modes of play. This deductive approach was predicated on and driven by the theoretical framework discussed earlier. The third stage of this process adopted an inductive or 'data driven' approach to explore the extent to which participants' recognised the affordances of play scenarios. In this instance, data was not coded to fit a pre-existing coding framework, but rather 'open-coded' to best represent the meanings communicated by participants in the study (Byrne, 2022). The process was carried out manually drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidelines for using reflexive thematic analysis appropriately (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Data analysis process

Becoming familiar with the data:
- Reading and re-reading the data

Analysing responses to the questions posed in the Play Scenario Evaluation Activity:

Identifying & coding emerging themes:
- tendencies in English time, perceptions of play, reflections on own childhood language learning

merging & organising accordingly. Interpreting findings in relation to the research

Avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022), this combination of deductive and inductive methods was considered to be the most appropriate way to emphasise respondent/data-based meanings that were relevant to the research questions (Byrne, 2021) within an interpretative framework that draws on the theoretical developments discussed earlier.

Findings & discussion

This section is organised into two parts in which findings corresponding to the two research questions are presented and discussed. Concentrating on the first research question, which explores the extent to which pre-primary EFL teachers recognise child agency and take it into account in foreign language education, we consider: i) the predominant types of agentic

behaviour identified in the analysis; ii) teachers' perceptions of play; and iii) the modes of play which appear to dominate within their understandings of best practice. Turning to the second research question, which explores the extent to which pre-primary EFL teachers recognise the affordances of play scenarios for enacting child agency, we focus on five key themes that emerged from the reflexive thematic analysis process: cooperative learning; autonomy and the teacher's role; reducing the home-school gap; enjoyment; and children's capacities.

Recognizing child agency in foreign language education

Predominant types of agentic behaviour

Analysis of the participants' reflections on their own practice suggests that the main type of agentic behaviour consciously activated and encouraged by teachers corresponds to type b of the model provided by Schwartz et al (2020) (see Table 1), 'engaging in repetition after teacher'. Another high priority corresponds to the first additional type proposed here as complementary to Schwartz et al's model: 'enjoying playing with language'. On the one hand, the fact that participants repeatedly refer to children enjoying or having fun in their classrooms reveals a strong awareness of the need to ensure that early learning experiences are positive and enjoyable (Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar Sota, 2018). On the other hand, the predominance of teacher-centred strategies suggests that opportunities for children to enact agency may be considerably limited. The main pedagogical approaches reported frame teachers as all-knowing and children as subjects (Kinard et al., 2018), leaving little room for children to make choices and experiment with the languages they are learning or to draw on their existing linguistic repertoires (García, 2018; Kultti, 2022). The extent to which teachers promote or restrict child agency appears to be intrinsically connected to their perceptions of play, as discussed in detail below.

Perceptions of play

Discussing their evaluations of the play scenarios presented (Appendix 2), all participants express surprise at the idea of introducing such a space in the pre-primary English language classroom. The area encouraged children to move around freely and to spend time playing with different materials related to language they had previously encountered and practiced in their English classes. Surprised at the free nature of this activity, one participant offers the following reflection:

> Clara: We're not at all used to working with learning areas here, and least of all me, as I'm not a pre-primary teacher. And so it's like 'wow', I mean I find it essential that the

teacher be there at this age, unless they've worked on it a lot beforehand and the children know how to do it alone; I mean that they can ask each other 'what's the weather like today'. I think it's too complicated for 4-year-olds. I can see it working more if the teacher's there.

As discussed previously, learning areas are considered to be a vital element of the pre-primary day, addressing the need to provide balanced opportunities for adult-led and child-initiated play activities (Field, 1980; Conn-Powers, 2010; Mourão, 2014; Prošić´-Santovac & Savic, 2022; Waddington et al., 2018), which is key for promoting an environment which respects and nurtures child agency. Yet, as Clara and the other participants report, not only are they not contemplated within 'English time', but, furthermore, their function is not understood. Clara's comment that this kind of activity would only work if the children can formulate the question about the weather correctly overlooks the potential that such activities have for stimulating agentic engagement (Reeve & Tseng, 2011) and generating inclusive practices in which they can draw on their existing linguistic repertoires and choose the content for communication (Kultti 2022, p. 3043), thus helping to stimulate their communicative potential (García, 2018).

In response to the researcher's question asking if play was important, Paula replied that it was, and that she always included some playful parts in her classes because 'at this age they won't listen to you for 20 minutes, you have to keep changing the dynamic, and you have to change quickly'. Again, this indicates a teacher-centred focus in which the children are directed at every moment, as opposed to a conception of play which offers children opportunities to enact agency by engaging with the activity on their own terms, making choices, and interacting with their peers. Commenting positively on Scenario 3, which shows a girl reading alone, Paula counteracts this tendency by talking favourably about giving children time to themselves: 'I like this example and I think it would be good to have the picturebooks there, as an extra, just as a bit of free time without the teacher, just for fun'. While favouring the idea in principle, Paula's comment reveals a conception of play and learning as two different constructs, as reported in Pyle and Danniels' study (2016). Rather than recognising the interwoven nature of play and learning (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019), the fun part is seen more as a treat and as something set apart from the learning process. This suggests that more training is needed to raise awareness of the benefits of free play for increasing agency enactment and stimulating learning and development in a novel language.

Predominant modes of play

Participants' evaluations of play scenarios reveal a tendency to oscillate between Mode B conceptions of play (Wood, 2014), which emphasise the mediating role of the adult/educator in advancing children's learning/development, and Mode C, in which play is seen as a vehicle for achieving pre-established academic learning outcomes. Regarding the mediating role of the educator, all participants reiterate the need for more teacher intervention in all the scenarios. Commenting on Scenario 2, where two boys are playing with the feelings masks, Jana suggests that:

> Yes, they do understand the material, but they don't always use it correctly and so I think the teacher could intervene here to model the structure or give them the proper example, until they're able to produce it themselves, or till they realise and say it again without using their first language.

The issue here is that, without mediation, the boys are indeed carrying out the activity successfully: putting on different masks, asking how they look, and answering each other accordingly, using the words they remember in English. The perception that intervention is needed is underpinned by the belief that language development in the target language requires the exclusion of other languages, and a lack of appreciation of the other essential capacities being developed during this activity (physical dexterity, turn-taking in communicative situations, identification of feelings, selection of appropriate linguistic codes to match concepts). The boys may not be reproducing the question structure which they have been exposed to in their English class (they may not even have been required to repeat this structure), but they are actively engaged in a meaningful activity where they successfully deploy three languages (Catalan, Spanish and English) and develop their ability to identify feelings. The fact that the value of such multilingual interactions is not recognised within the English classroom is made evident in the following reflection by Jana:

> I understand from this (Scenario 2) that they've been allowed to use their mother tongue in a lot of situations or that, maybe, the teacher has translated these things for them when she saw that they weren't sure. And what happens is that they reproduce that, they're not thinking that they're in the English class or in 'English time'. Instead, they're acting as they would at any other time, such as playtime, or in any other situation.

From this perspective, the teacher's role as mediator is significantly reduced to the function of language policing, leaving little room to recognise and promote the other capacities which are

being developed. Participants' responses reveal conceptions that correspond closely with Mode C of Wood's model, in which play is understood as a mere vehicle for achieving or consolidating academic learning outcomes pre-established by the teacher.

All participants speak enthusiastically about play activities, seeing them as an essential part of their classrooms, but in virtually all instances play is conceived as a tool to develop specific learning content. This observation is in line with suggestions made in early childhood education research that shifts in policy and practice are moving towards technicist and didactic uses of play (Mode C), in ways which are inconsistent with best practice for early years learning and development and which may reduce opportunities for children to enact agency (Hedges et al., 2018; Hedges, 2022).

Recognising the affordances of play scenarios for enacting child agency

The suggestion highlighted above that technicist and didactic uses of play may reduce opportunities for children to enact agency is explored further below, considering participants' views on the affordances offered by the play scenarios evaluated.

Cooperative learning

Reflecting on Scenario 4, all participants highlight the positive benefits of using strategies that encourage children to work together. As Clara stresses:

> This is really positive because they're doing it together and this promotes cooperative work: 'she can't remember the word but I can, and together we can carry on with the song'. As an idea for improvement, with songs you can add movements and make connections and end up reproducing complex structures or vocabulary.

Although Clara recognises the importance of cooperative learning, her focus shifts almost immediately to the potential role that the teacher could play within this scenario, even though the example has demonstrated the children's capacity to sing in the target language without assistance. The teacher's instinct to intervene demonstrates a clear tendency to perceive play as a vehicle for achieving or consolidating pre-established academic learning outcomes and to overlook its affordances for supporting children's exploration and discovery of their world *together,* in ways in which they are able to mutually construct meanings (Chesworth, 2016). By intervening in this scenario, the teacher may have inadvertently reduced the opportunities

for children to enact their agency, confirming Hedges' (2022) concerns that the increasing predominance of didactic conceptions of play (Mode C) are inconsistent with best practice for early years learning and development.

Autonomy, & the teacher's role

In the next excerpt, Clara showed uncertainty when answering a question about the benefits of learning areas, since it seemed to her that that she was going 'off topic'. The researcher encouraged her to share her thoughts and assured her they were relevant to the study:

> Well, the thing is that I see more advantages related to autonomy than to language. Obviously for language as well, and maybe they'd feel more comfortable. They wouldn't have that pressure of knowing they're being listened to. I mean I'm not correcting them all day, but they'd probably let themselves go more, don't you think? They'd feel more comfortable, I think.

Clara's uncertainty is manifested in the way she repeats the point about children potentially feeling more comfortable and in the way she asks the researcher to corroborate her view. There was a clear sense that talking about an aspect such as autonomy was incidental, or not really within her remit as an English teacher. This raises concerns about how teachers conceive their own roles, and about the prevailing tendency to see the specialist as responsible only for language, and the generalist teacher as responsible for educating the whole child (Mourao & Ellis, 2020; Waddington, 2022b). This prevailing tendency is problematic if we consider that 'a successful encounter with a novel language is inevitably connected to such ecological conditions as creating a low-anxiety and secure atmosphere that will be conducive to target language perception and production' (Schwartz, 2018, p. 3).

Once the specialist teacher is encouraged to reflect further, she adopts a more holistic perspective and is quickly able to identify fundamental aspects that are crucial not only to language development, but to the child's overall wellbeing: feeling more comfortable, not feeling under pressure, letting themselves go. The fact that this perspective emerges amidst uncertainty points to something of a contradiction. Clara's reflections suggest that despite her underlying awareness of the need to promote child autonomy, there is little time to prioritize or even think about this within the foreign language classroom. Prevailing tendencies appear to restrict the possibilities for whole-child approaches which place the child (not language) at

the centre of the process (Waddington, 2022a) and recognise children as competent and active learners with agency (Schwartz et al., 2019).

Reducing the home-school gap

Clara's reflection that children would probably 'let themselves go' and feel more comfortable if given the space to play in learning areas without the teacher's intervention developed further, leading to a discussion about natural language use. She considers that this kind of activity could help replicate the way in which children usually learn languages in their home environment, 'in a totally natural way'. Jordina also uses the term 'natural' to describe the way in which the boys switch languages in Scenario 2:

> I think they're using all the languages they're learning: Catalan, Spanish, and English. And because they're interacting together, they start with the language they feel most comfortable with and, little by little, they start bringing in English with the words they remember.

On this account, the children are stimulated to engage and persist in the play activity *precisely* because they are given a space in which they are able to draw on their existing linguistic repertoires (Kultti, 2022) and 'play around with language' in ways that resemble practices found in the home, thus reducing discontinuities between home and school which have been identified as a source of low engagement in school life and predictor of low academic performance (Waddington et al. 2020; Estaban-Guitart & Vila, 2013; Moll & González, 2004).

Enjoyment

Participants in the study are clearly aware of the need to create a stimulating environment in which children enjoy what they are doing. This awareness is conveyed strongly in their evaluations of the play scenarios when they report that children tend to love or enjoy certain kinds of play activities. When asked to reflect on the importance of enjoyment, participants' responses centre around the idea that enjoyment helps facilitate learning. On these accounts, enjoyment is interpreted as a facilitator of learning rather than as a fundamental and essential aspect of a child's everyday life. Enjoyment is contained, in other words, within a technicist or didactic view of play in which it is regarded as a vehicle for achieving pre-established learning outcomes: Mode C according to Wood's (2014) model. Concerned by this tendency, Hedges (2022) alerts us to the need to recognise playfulness and joy as basic conditions for healthy

child development. Although the promotion of positive dispositions for learning is fundamental in early childhood education, it cannot be the sole focus of attention:

> In addition to narrowing the possibilities for children's learning to those prescribed by the curriculum, Mode C carries the risk of children becoming disengaged in learning, and losing – amongst many possibilities besides positive dispositions for learning – playfulness and joy in their everyday life interactions, and the creative and critical thinking capacities needed in contemporary societies."
>
> <div align="right">(Hedges, 2022, p. 38)</div>

Children's capabilities

Despite evaluating the play scenarios positively, and commenting that they would like to implement ideas like this if they had time, participants' revealed doubts about whether this would be feasible within their own contexts, as Clara explains:

> It's something I've sometimes wondered about, I've thought about doing English through learning areas, but since I'm not used to working like that, and then having to do it in English… I find it difficult to imagine that they'd be really capable of using the language. Obviously, they wouldn't do it 100% and at all times, but as much as possible. And then thinking about other scenarios, it makes me think that it's complicated to expect them to do it all in English.

This excerpt contrasts with the views she expressed earlier about children feeling more comfortable and letting themselves go when activities replicate practices found in the home, thus encouraging more natural language use. The suggestion that 'it's complicated to expect them to do it all in English' reveals a deep-seated assumption that target language usage should be the ultimate goal within the early childhood foreign language classroom. This assumption overlooks the insights offered by the play scenarios, which demonstrate that children are stimulated to engage in and persist with language-related play activities *precisely* when they are able to draw on their existing linguistic repertoires.

Paula also expresses her doubts about the children's capabilities in the following excerpt:

> I mean they're only 4. Here in our school the children don't have this kind of vocabulary [referring to the vocabulary used in Scenario 4]. I think 'sleepy' is quite a complicated word for them. I don't know. I mean I don't think they'd use that word if they hadn't learned it beforehand. Ah yes, look, in Scenario 4 it appears in the song. They must have got it from there, because if not…sleepy is not really a word I tend to use.

What Paula describes as a 'complicated word' is, in fact, one of the first words that young children learn in their first language. Her surprise that they know this word in English is

explained more by her own tendency not to use the word within her own repertoire, than by any hierarchy of easier or more complicated words, as her reflection suggests. In other words, and as her comment that they probably would not use the word unless they had already learned it beforehand indicates, children's capacities are socioculturally mediated (Ahearn, 2001) and facilitated (or not) by the adults mediating their opportunities for learning and development. This supports the results of previous studies showing that children's language use and active engagement depends on practitioners' pedagogies and language-supportive strategies (Kirsch & Mortini, 2021).

Reflecting further on whether she would create spaces for children to interact together without her, Paula says that she cannot see how this would work:

> More than anything, they don't interact with each other yet because they don't know how to, they don't have the capacity to relate to each other like this yet. I'm the one doing… I just get on with it, singing, we do some dancing, I encourage them, and they imitate me and follow. We often repeat the same things: colours, vocabulary and also questions, I try to get them to ask each other, 'your name', 'how are you today'...

Again, we observe a tendency to underestimate children's capabilities, despite the evidence provided in the scenarios evaluated, which suggest that 4-year-old children are more than capable of interacting with each other without teacher intervention. The different excerpts highlighted here suggest that decisions not to implement alternative child-centred approaches in the EFL classroom are attributed to perceived lacks in children's capabilities, as opposed to the real reasons impeding such changes, such as lack of time to design and implement them, attitudes and beliefs about language learning, and beliefs concerning what constitutes effective EFL teaching.

Conclusion

The study presented in this paper explored the extent to which teachers recognise child agency and take it into account in foreign language education. The Play Scenario Evaluation Activity proved to be an effective elicitation strategy, stimulating discussion around the focus of study, while avoiding asking direct questions about child agency which could have generated social-desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985) in participant responses or left little room for the extended reflections proffered. While a larger sample size would extend the range of perspectives and experiences shared, the sample used provided insight into the experiences of a group of teachers

who were deemed representative of the target population in terms of their years of experience, level of English, and pedagogical training.

In response to the first research question focusing on the extent to which teachers recognise child agency and take it into account in their practice, findings suggest that there is a need for considerable training in this area, with current (teacher-centred) methodologies and target-only language policies leaving little scope for children to enact the full range of agentic behaviours that could maximise their engagement and development in the foreign language classroom. The Play Scenario Evaluation Activity could be exploited further as a training activity, together with the list of agentic behaviours provided by Schwarz et al (Table 1), to increase teachers' understandings of child agency and encourage them to promote it within their classrooms.
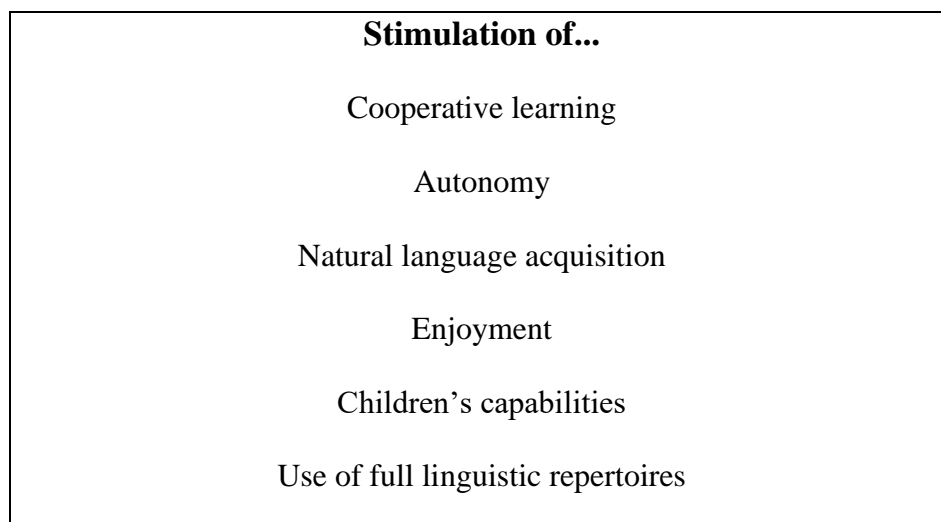
Understanding agency as a 'socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112), findings of the study highlight the mediating role played by the teacher and the fact that mediation, or intervention, can sometimes serve to limit child agency rather than to stimulate it. The teacher participants in this study showed high levels of enthusiasm for their profession and absolute commitment to providing the best possible education for the children they work with. The conditions in which they teach (timetables, groupings, frequency in which they see each group, expectations, goals of foreign language education in the early years) mediate their own actions. Teachers' capacities to act are limited by structural factors as well as deep-rooted assumptions about what might be best for children and what represents best practice in the foreign language classroom. Further research and direct action within schools could help challenge these assumptions, particularly in relation to the use of children's full linguistic repertoires and the need for balanced opportunities for adult-led instruction and the kind of play activities presented in the Play Scenario Evaluation Activity (Waddington et al., 2018).

In response to the second research question, exploring the extent to which teachers recognise the affordances that play scenarios offer for children to enact agency, findings highlight the considerable gap that exists between how play is understood and incorporated in general pre-primary education and the tendencies observed in foreign language classes. This is in line with findings from previous studies across the globe observing a tendency to replicate language teaching methodologies applied in primary education (see Flores & Corcoll, 2008; Ng, 2013; Lau & Rao, 2013; Cernà, 2015; Cortina-Peréz & Andúgar Soto, 2018), rather than developing holistic practice in line with ECE recommendations (Waddington, 2022a) and recognising the

crucial intersections between early childhood education and care and language education (Schwartz, 2022). Participants' views suggest an urgent need to re-evaluate the goals of foreign language education in the early years and to question the over-emphasis on school readiness (Ibrahim, 2022). Regarding participants' perceptions of play, findings are in line with previous studies in general education which find that some teachers see play and learning as two different constructs (Pyle & Danniels, 2016). Overall, findings show a disproportionate leaning towards instruction and enculturation which reduce opportunities for children to exercise agency and to engage actively in the constructive processes which are essential for their development (Wood, 2014).

While participants did recognise many of the affordances offered by the play scenarios (see Figure 2 for a summary of the affordances identified), their potential for stimulating child agency was minimised or negated by the tendency for teachers to want to intervene and take charge of the activity.

Figure 2 Affordances of play scenarios for enacting child agency

Stimulation of...
Cooperative learning
Autonomy
Natural language acquisition
Enjoyment
Children's capabilities
Use of full linguistic repertoires

In this sense, and as suggested above, play is perceived as a vehicle for achieving or consolidating pre-established learning outcomes and not recognised as a site for promoting child agency. These perceptions could be modified given more quality training in foreign language teaching in the early years. While considerable debate centres around the minimum language level required to teach English in pre-primary settings (currently set at B2 in Spain), more rigorous attention needs to be paid to the specific pedagogical training required to

incorporate foreign language education effectively within current ECE practice (Robinson et al., 2015; Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar Sota, 2021; Waddington, 2022b). Foreign language itineraries within ECE university programmes could contribute to developing a skilled workforce (Andúgar et al., 2019; Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Waddington et al., 2018; Waddington, 2022b), which is the prerequisite for creating settings in which children not only learn, but are also provided with the conditions in which they can enact their agency and take an active role in their own development.

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Carla

Carla is a qualified teacher (3-year Diploma in Primary School Teacher Education with a specialisation in Foreign Language Teaching and Physical Education). She has a C1 certificate in English from the Official School of Languages. She has worked as an English teacher for 13 years, 10 of these also within the pre-primary classroom. She explains that additional training from the Ministry of Education on foreign language teaching (2008 - 2011), and specifically on how to teach English in pre-primary (45 hours in 2010-2011), helped her adapt her practice to be able to teach pre-primary children. Carla considers herself to be privileged to work in a small rural school with only 100 students and a supportive educational community (she speaks particularly fondly of the responsive and participative families). The downside, however, is that she is the only English teacher and is therefore responsible for planning and delivering classes for every single level: each separate group of pre-primary (I3, I4 & I5 = 3-4, 4-5, and 5-6 years old) and each group of primary (6–11 years).

Jordina

Jordina is a qualified teacher (4-year BA in Early Childhood Education) with an MA in Speech and Learning Difficulties. She has worked as a generalist teacher for 7 years and has been teaching in the pre-primary class for the last 4 years. She reports a level of B2 in English, which is consistent with Ministry of Education requirements for teaching English in pre-primary and primary education. She has participated in further online training on how to teach English in pre-primary and, more specifically, on psychomotor activities in English. She works in a very large school with around 800 children, of which around 200 are in pre-primary. There has been a particularly high influx of children from Ukraine this year, and the school is accustomed to receiving families from immigrant backgrounds. Jordina teaches English to all the pre-primary groups (three separate groups for each of the 3 years of pre-primary). I3 have a session of 1

hour per week, while I4 and I5 have one class lasting 1 hour and a half. In addition, Jordina enjoys taking the I5 class in smaller groups (approx. 14 children) to do 25 minutes of psychomotor activities in English every week.

Jana

Jana is a qualified teacher (3-year Diploma in Primary School Teacher Education with a specialisation in Foreign Language Teaching). She has worked as an English teacher for 19 years. Jana is also the school principle and has combined her management role with teaching English to the pre-primary children. She has been teaching in pre-primary for 8 years and reports a medium-high (minimum B2) level of English. Her school is a large state school serving around 360 students. Jana reflects on her own childhood experiences and regrets the fact that it was dominated by grammar lessons and formulaic language learning. Reflecting on this, she explains that one of her main goals as an English teacher is to make language learning more meaningful and real for her students.

Paula

Paula is a qualified teacher (3-year Diploma in Early Childhood Education) who has been working in the pre-primary sector for 14 years, and teaching English within this sector for the last 7 years. She reports a B2 level of English and no specific training in foreign language teaching in the early years. She works in a large school with around 400 students. She sometimes feels restricted due to the large class sizes (approximately 25 students) as she explains that this makes it difficult for all the children to take turns when it's their turn to speak. She uses lots of repetition of basic formulas and sees her role as an animator, getting them to sing, dance, repeat what she says, and follow her lead. She is happier this year that they have been able to split the groups in half as this allows for more participation.

Note

The three-year Diploma in Teacher Education was the main route into teaching in Spain prior to the implementation of the current four-year BA programmes which were introduced as a result of the Bologna Agreement.

Appendix 2

Play scenario evaluation activity

The four scenarios presented below took place in a newly created English learning area in a pre-primary classroom. The (4-year-old) children moved freely from one area to another, sometimes playing with their teacher (Scenario 1), sometimes in pairs (Scenario 2), sometimes alone (Scenario 3), and sometimes in small groups (Scenario 4). All the activities offered in the area are related to language work previously introduced and practiced in their English classes.

You are invited to evaluate these scenarios, focusing your attention on the following questions:

1) The children's behaviour (what do the children do, not do, etc…)
2) The teacher's behaviour (what does the teacher do, not do, etc…)
3) What do you think of this activity and its potential for stimulating language development?
4) Would you offer any ideas for improvement?

Please write your evaluations in the write hand column in whichever language you feel most comfortable.

Scenario 1	Evaluation
Area: pictures related to weather routine **Social interaction:** one child interacting with teacher S: Mira, snowy! (*Look*, snowy!) T: Is it snowy today?	

S: Yes! (*laughing*) T: Are you sure? S: Yes! (*laughing*) T: No it isn't! S: Rainy! T: Is it rainy today? S. Yes! (*laughing*) T: No it isn't! S: Sunny! T: Is it sunny today? S: Yes!! I també cloudy! (And *also* cloudy) T: Yes, it is!	

Scenario 2	**Evaluation**
Area: masks illustrating feelings **Social interaction:** two children playing together Two students were playing with the feelings masks and one student asked the other: *¿Cómo me ves? (How do I look?).* His partner answered in Spanish: *contento ¿y tú, cómo me ves? (happy, and me, how do I look?).* This time, the other child replied in Catalan: *amb por, i a mi? (scared, and me?).* His partner continued answering him in Spanish: *tú llorando, y a mi? (you crying, and me?).* Finally, one of the children answered the question in English: *sleepy!* This changed the pattern of the sequence. Once English had been introduced in this way, they continued to ask the questions in their first language, but the answers were now given in English.	

Scenario 3	**Evaluation**

Area: Picturebooks told in class and related games **Social interaction:** One child playing alone A girl was playing alone with *The very hungry caterpillar* storybook and game, saying aloud what she was reading in the tale: *one apple; two pears; one, two three…* At this moment she stopped, she did not say the name of the next fruit and continued counting the following ones: one, two three, four… She stopped again and did not say the name of the next fruit but went on, instead, to say the next one that she remembered the name for: *five oranges* […]	

Scenario 4	**Evaluation**
Area: songbooks with songs sung in class **Social interaction:** 3 children playing together Three girls were singing with the songbook: […] 'If you're sleepy, sleepy, sleepy…' One girl stopped because she did not know how to continue, and the others said: 'Take a nap!'. After this brief pause, the three girls continued singing together: 'If you're sleepy, sleepy, sleepy take a nap […]'.	

Appendix 3

Study on teaching and learning English in pre-primary education

Brief participant questionnaire

Name:

School:

Type of school/number of students:

Years working as a teacher:

Years working as an English teacher:

Years working as an English teacher in pre-primary:

Training/qualifications:

Level of English:
(According to official certificates and/or according to current self-evaluation)

Participation in research projects/ongoing training related to English in pre-primary:

Participation in Ministry of Education training courses